The Hindu Important News Articles & Editorial For UPSC CSE

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Senior Opposition members Derek O'Brien and Manoj Kumar Jha have proposed Bills to mandate a minimum of 100-120 parliamentary sittings annually.

Private Bills seek sitting of Parliament for 100 days a year

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

Senior Opposition members in the Rajya Sabha Derek O'Brien and Manoj Kumar Jha have moved separate Bills seeking to make the sitting of Parliament mandatory at least for 100 days in a year. The leaders said the move is to reform the Parliamentary system by ensuring that the working hours of the House are not lost due to disruptions.

While Mr. O'Brien has proposed a minimum sitting of 100 days, Mr. Jha has sought 120 days sitting of the House annually.

Mr. O'Brien said that while the idea of a fixed calendar was explored by the General Purposes Committee of the Lok Sabha in 1955, the importance of having a minimum number of sittings was highlighted by the National Commission to Review the Working of the Constitution in 2002.

Mr. Jha said his Bill is to provide a framework for enhancing the performance of Parliament through fixing a minimum number of days of sitting, introducing the provision for extending the hours of a sitting, bringing a short session in addition to the existing three sessions, instituting a mechanism to separately discuss Opposition business and compensating the hours not utilised due to disruptions.

Meanwhile, the Union Education Ministry opposed the introduction of the Coaching Institutes (Accountability and Regulation) Bill, moved by Nationalist Congress Party (Sharadchandra Pawar) MP Fauzia Khan saying that education is in the Concurrent List and the States would have to regulate the coaching centres.

But when Opposition members insisted that the Bill be introduced, the objection was withdrawn and the Bill introduced in the House.

Need for Such a Bill

➡ **Declining Parliamentary Sittings:** The number of parliamentary sittings has signicantly reduced over the years. In the
➡ 1950s, Parliament met for around 120-140 days annually, but this has now declined to around 60-70 days.

- ➡ **Ensuring Legislative Scrutiny:** More sittings would allow better examination of bills, policies, and government decisions.
- ➡ **Strengthening Democracy:** A more active Parliament ensures better representation of public issues and enhances accountability.
- ➡ **Preventing Disruptions:** Frequent disruptions lead to lost working hours; a xed calendar can ensure optimal legislative functioning.
- ➡ **Recommendations from Reports:** The National Commission to Review the Working of the Constitution (2002) and earlier parliamentary committees have recommended a minimum number of sittings.

Challenges

- ➡ **Executive Hesitation:** The government may resist due to administrative burden and fear of increased scrutiny.
- ➡ **Opposition Coordination:** Ensuring effective debates instead of mere disruptions remains a challenge.
- ➡ **Lack of Political Consensus:** Different political parties may have varying opinions on increasing parliamentary sittings, leading to delays in implementing such a reform.
- ➡ **Legislative Overload:** More sittings may not necessarily translate into better lawmaking if the focus remains on passing bills quickly rather than thorough debate and discussion.

Way Forward

- ➡ **Fixed Parliamentary Calendar:** A structured annual calendar with mandatory sittings can improve efciency.
- ➡ **Strengthening Parliamentary committee:** To ensure detailed examination of bills even during non-sitting periods
- ➡ **Compensating Lost Hours:** Introducing mechanisms to recover hours lost due to disruptions.
- ➡ **Multi-Session Model:** Adding a short session to discuss opposition business and policy review.
- ➡ **Incentivizing Constructive Participation:** Introduce mechanisms such as performance-based evaluations for MPs, ensuring productive discussions and reducing disruptions in parliamentary proceedings.

UPSC Mains PYQ : 2019

Ques : Individual Parliamentarian's role as the national lawmaker is on a decline, which in turn, has adversely impacted the quality of debates and their outcome. Discuss. **(250 words/15m)**

➡ TROPEX-25 Exercise involves 65 ships, 9 submarines, and 80 aircraft, along with joint participation from the Army, Air Force, and Coast Guard.

Theatre Level Operational Readiness Exercise (TROPEX)

➡ **Biennial Naval Exercise:** TROPEX is the Indian Navy's largest biennial operational exercise, conducted every two years in the Indian Ocean Region.

➡ **Duration:** The 2025 edition (TROPEX-25) is being held from January to March.

➡ **Objectives:** It aims to validate and rene the Indian Navy's Concept of Operations, testing its ability to respond to conventional, asymmetric, and hybrid threats in a contested maritime environment.

➡ **Participants:** The exercise involves approximately 65 Indian Navy ships, 9 submarines, and over 80 aircraft, along with substantial participation from the Indian Army, Air Force, and Coast Guard.

➡ **Exercise Phases:** It includes harbour and sea phases, covering combat operations, cyber and electronic warfare, live weapon rings, and amphibious operations.

➡ **Strategic Importance:** The exercise enhances joint operational readiness, ensuring a synchronized, integrated response to safeguard India's maritime security interests.

Indian Navy's TROPEX under way. ANI

9 submarines, 65 ships taking part in TROPEX exercise

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

Indian Navy's biennial capstone Theatre Level Operational Exercise (TROPEX) is under way in the Indian Ocean Region, from January to March, in which the combined fleet, comprising approximately 65 Indian Navy ships, nine submarines, and over 80 aircraft of different types are being "put through complex maritime operational scenarios to validate and refine the Navy's Concept of Operations".

This is conducted biennially with participation by all operational units of the Navy along with substantial participation of Army, Air Force, and Coast Guard assets.

'Maritime security'
"TROPEX-25 is aimed at validating Indian Navy's core warfighting skills, and ensuring a synchronised, integrated response to preserve and protect national maritime security interests in a contested maritime environment against conventional, asymmetric as well as hybrid threats," the Navy said in a statement.

The exercise is being conducted in various phases — both in harbour and at sea, integrating various facets of combat operations, cyber and electronic warfare operations, live weapon firings during the joint work-up phase, and amphibious exercise.

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INDIA'S NATIONAL NEWSPAPER SINCE 1878

Daily News Analysis

Page 06 : GS 2 : Social justice : Health

The Monetary Policy Committee (MPC) of the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) has reduced the repo rate by 25 basis points to 6.25%, marking the rst cut since May 2020.

Repo Rate Cut After 57 Months

➡ This decision aims to boost economic growth amid expectations of ination easing to 4.4% in this quarter and averaging 4.2% in 2025-26.

➡ The reduction in the repo rate may lead to lower borrowing costs for home, car, and other loans.

What is Repo Rate?

➡ The Repo Rate is the interest rate at which the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) lends money to commercial banks in exchange for government securities.

➡ It is a key monetary policy tool used to control ination and liquidity in the economy.

➡ A higher repo rate makes borrowing costlier, reducing ination, while a lower repo rate boosts lending and economic growth by making loans cheaper for businesses and consumers.

Monetary Policy Committee (MPC)

➡ The Monetary Policy Committee (MPC) is a six-member body of the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) responsible for setting the repo rate to control ination and economic growth.

➡ It was established in 2016 under the amended RBI Act, 1934, and follows an ination-targeting framework.

➡ The MPC has six Three members are from the RBI, including the Governor, and three are external members appointed by the government.

➡ The MPC meets at least four times a year, and decisions are made by majority vote, with the RBI Governor having a casting vote in case of a tie.

Economic Growth and Ination Projections

➡ The RBI has projected real GDP growth at 6.7% for 2025-26, an increase from the 6.4% estimated for this year.

➡ Assuming a normal monsoon, ination is expected to decline further and gradually align with the 4% target.

Mixed Demand Trends

➡ Rural demand is improving, while urban consumption remains weak.

Growth over inflation
The interest rate cut signals a shift in the RBI's immediate priorities

For the first time in nearly five years, the Monetary Policy Committee (MPC) of the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) pivoted on interest rates, unanimously deciding to cut the benchmark repo rate from 6.50% to 6.25%. This move, while maintaining a neutral stance, marks a significant departure from the previous bi-monthly review, where the committee had opted for the status quo with a 4:2 vote. At the time, the MPC was contending with inflation at a 15-month high of 6.2% in October and a sluggish second-quarter GDP growth of 5.4%. Now, with inflation moderating to 5.2% in December, still above the RBI's 4% target, and growth projections for 2024-25 slipping to a four-year low of 6.4%, the central bank appears to be prioritising economic expansion over inflation control. RBI Governor Sanjay Malhotra, in his first policy review, highlighted the challenges posed by global economic uncertainties, including stalled disinflation, diminishing prospects of rate cuts in the U.S., and a stronger dollar pressuring emerging markets and their currencies, including the rupee. These factors have complicated policy trade-offs for India, making the case for supporting growth even stronger. The MPC justified its decision to look past current inflationary concerns, citing expectations that price pressures will ease further, with inflation projected to average 4.2% in 2025-26 from 4.8% this year. This outlook hinges on assumptions of a favourable food inflation trajectory, a normal monsoon, and a bumper harvest of key vegetables such as tomato, onion, and potato, which are, historically, major contributors to price spikes. While inflation remains a concern, the panel has signalled that weak economic growth is more pressing, especially given the second-quarter slump and limited signs of recovery since then. The RBI's post-Budget policy stance also suggests closer alignment with fiscal policy, apparently heeding the government's call for monetary and fiscal measures to work in tandem rather than at cross-purposes. Whether the Budget's stimulus measures, combined with the rate cut, will revive consumption, attract private investment, and boost growth remains uncertain.

Interestingly, had the MPC met a week later, it might have had additional justification for the rate cut, given expectations that inflation in January could have cooled to around 4.5%. With a new Governor at the helm and an upcoming appointment for the Deputy Governor overseeing monetary policy, the RBI could consider adjusting the MPC's review schedule to incorporate the latest inflation data. A slight shift in the timing of its bi-monthly meetings could make monetary policy more responsive and data-driven, enhancing the committee's ability to justify its stance with real-time economic indicators.

➡ Higher employment, tax benets from the budget, and lower ination are expected to support household consumption.

Currency and External Sector Stability

➡ The RBI does not target a specic exchange rate but intervenes to reduce excessive market volatility.

➡ India's foreign exchange reserves are at $630.6 billion (as of January 31, 2025), covering over 10 months of imports.

➡ The current account decit is expected to remain at a sustainable level.

UPSC Prelims PYQ : 2017

Ques : Which of the following statements is/are correct regarding the Monetary Policy Committee (MPC)?

1. It decides the RBI's benchmark interest rates.

2. It is a 12-member body including the Governor of RBI and is reconstituted every year.

3. It functions under the chairmanship of the Union Finance Minister.

Select the correct answer using the code given below:

(a) 1 only

(b) 1 and 2 only

(c) 3 only

(d) 2 and 3 only

Ans:a)

The death toll of Olive Ridley turtles along Tamil Nadu's coast has surged dramatically, with 1,200 carcasses found by January 31.

Fisherfolk and people from the Tamil Nadu Forest Department bury a dead Olive Ridley turtle that was washed ashore. B. JOTHI RAMALINGAM

A surge of dead sea turtles in the sand

Hundreds of Olive Ridley sea turtle carcasses have been found since the first week of January in the Chennai and Chengalpattu districts. Conservationists say the number of deaths is three times the usual number during the mating season and have sounded alarm bells about bottom trawling, the widespread use of fishing gear, and plastic pollution. **Geetha Srimathi** reports on the tragedy along the coastline

On a sunny day in January, A. Prakash, 40, sits on a boat in Kovalam, off the East Coast Road (ECR) in Chengalpattu district of Tamil Nadu. He has just returned from a fishing trip where he saw 10 Olive Ridley sea turtle carcasses floating in the sea. "We (fisherfolk) have been seeing many such carcasses every day since the beginning of the year," he says, perturbed.

Prakash points to an elderly woman nearby, who comes to pick up a basket of tiger prawns from the boat, and says her son helps the Forest Department bury the carcasses. Placing the basket deftly on her head, Rani, 65, says, "My son just buried six and came home tired and hungry."

In the Chennai and Chengalpattu districts, located along the 1,076 kilometre-long coastline of Tamil Nadu, many people recall seeing dead Olive Ridley sea turtles washed ashore this year. C. Gnanasekar, 44, a fisherman from Uthandi, off ECR, spotted four of them in the first week of January. Rajiv Rai, 69, from Injambakkam in Chennai, says he has seen about 80 since the first week of the year. Maria, a nature enthusiast, says she saw 24 at Nemmeli Kuppam in Chengalpattu.

Olive Ridley turtles, which are found in warmer waters, such as the southern Atlantic, Pacific, and Indian Oceans, haul themselves up on to India's eastern shore every year by the tens of thousands and lay eggs in an event known as *arribada* (arrival by sea in Spanish). While Odisha is a mass nesting site for Olive Ridley turtles in India, thousands of these small wild animals come sporadically to nest between December and April along the Tamil Nadu coastline, a lifeline for millions who depend on fishing for their livelihood. The biodiverse and eco-sensitive Gulf of Mannar, located off the districts of Thoothukudi and Ramanathapuram in the south, is an essential feeding site for these turtles. The creatures then migrate to Odisha, West Bengal, and beyond.

Along the 34-km-long coast from the Marina Beach in Chennai to Kovalam in Chengalpattu, seeing dead sea turtles on the shore during mating season is not unusual – every year, an average of 350 dead turtles can be found, says Shravan Krishnan, a volunteer with the Students Sea Turtle Conservation Network (SSTCN). However, this year, until January 31, conservationists had counted 1,200 dead sea turtles, more than three times the normal figure. The Tamil Nadu Forest Department provided a more conservative estimate (706 turtles until January 23). The department has refused to provide numbers since then.

To make matters worse, the number of sea turtle nests along the shores has been unusually low. "Most turtles that were to nest have died. All the dead female turtles we bury have eggs in their bodies," says Gnanasekar, who has been working with the TREE Foundation, a marine conservation organisation, for two decades.

Guests from the sea

Olive Ridleys are the smallest of the seven sea turtle species. They weigh up to 45 kilogrammes

> The turtles are like the daughters of our village. They come back to their home to have children.
> **R. SANKARI**
> Resident of Nemmeli

and reach only about 2 feet in shell length. Their name comes from their olive-coloured carapaces (hard upper shells). Though their numbers have remained stable in recent years, Olive Ridleys remain a key species in global conservation efforts and are classified 'vulnerable' by the International Union for Conservation of Nature Red List.

Sea turtles play a crucial role in the marine ecosystem. By feeding on crustaceans that live on the seabed, they help release the oxygen that is trapped there. They maintain healthy seagrass levels by nibbling on seagrass and algae. They provide shelter for commercially important fish species and control jellyfish populations that could otherwise harm fish larvae.

In Tamil Nadu, conservationists and fisherfolk refer to Olive Ridley turtles as "guests" and even "god". For fishermen such as A. Palayam, 62, from Urur Kuppam in Besant Nagar in Chennai, sea turtles have a cultural and spiritual significance. "Our *kutti amma* (little mother) is important for us," he says. In addition to the creature's cultural significance, fisherfolk view sea turtles as a symbol of a healthy ecosystem.

Every year, Olive Ridleys pore out of the sea, crowd the shore, give birth, and then wait to be swept into the sea again. Referring to this, R. Sankari, 37, a resident of Nemmeli, says, "The turtles are like the daughters of our village. They come back to their home to have children." Sankari says she has been seeing an unusually high number of dead turtles this nesting season.

In Chennai, one of the few metropolitan cities in India where these sea turtles come to nest, it is not just fisherfolk who speak passionately about turtles; conservationists and students sport T-shirts urging people to save turtles and set off at midnight during the nesting season to scour dark

sands for eggs.

Abhishaek, 24, a volunteer with SSTCN, and his peers patrol two stretches of the coast between the Cooum estuary and Neelankarai every night in the nesting season. As they walk, they search for tracks left by the turtles and follow them. When they come across a distinctive clearing, they use a 'probe', a long hollow rod, to check for nests. If they find eggs, they carefully collect them and measure the nest's dimensions to recreate the conditions in hatcheries, before continuing their walk. "Working with a community that cares so much about sea turtles has shaped my interest in wildlife conservation. Sea turtles are a huge part of my life," he says.

Abhishaek, who has spent four years with SSTCN, says the team hardly found nests in the first three weeks of January. "Typically, we find about 30 nests. But this year, we could find only two," he says.

Nets of destruction

By the end of January, conservationists and authorities in Andhra Pradesh also began to notice that the number of dead turtles was higher than normal. C. Selvam, Conservator of Forests in the Tirupati Circle of the Andhra Pradesh Forest Department, says the problem is not confined to Tamil Nadu. Supraja Dharini, founder of the TREE Foundation who also works with the Andhra Pradesh Forest Department, says at least 2,032 turtles had died until January 26 in the State.

Dharini says one of the primary threats to sea turtles is bottom trawling and the widespread use of fishing gear, such as gill nets. The Tamil Nadu Marine Fishing Regulation Act, 1983, stipulates that trawl boats should operate beyond 5 nautical miles (approximately 9.26 km) from the shore. This zone is reserved for artisanal fishermen using smaller boats. "However, despite regulations, many commercial fishermen continue to violate these rules," Dharini says. "When trawl boats often encroach into restricted areas, it increases the risk of turtle entanglement and death."

R. Suresh Kumar, a wildlife biologist at the Wildlife Institute of India, explains that turtles don't just visit nesting beaches but congregate in specific areas before nesting. "Destructive fishing practices such as trawling and gill netting in these aggregation zones could be a significant factor in the rise in deaths," he says.

Acknowledging the harmful effects of trawling, K. Bharathi, president of the South Indian Fishermen Welfare Association, says those who violate the law should be penalised. However, the government has failed to provide any viable alternatives to commercial fishing, he adds.

After news reports of the high number of turtle

> When trawl boats often encroach into restricted areas, it increases the risk of turtle entanglement and death.
> **SUPRAJA DHARINI**
> Founder, TREE Foundation

deaths emerged, the Tamil Nadu government formed a task force headed by the Principal Chief Conservator of Forests and Chief Wildlife Warden, Rakesh Kumar Dogra. On January 27, the task force decided to strengthen regulations on trawl fishing, enforce the use of Turtle Excluder Devices (TEDs), and restrict the horsepower of boat engines.

TEDs are metal grids designed to allow turtles to escape from trawl nets. But fisherfolk have expressed concerns that these devices could reduce their catch. A fisherman working on a mechanised boat in Kasimedu explains that with dwindling resources in the ocean, even a small fall in the catch can have a significant impact on his profits. "There have been no efforts from the Fisheries Department to introduce improved TED models or compensate fishermen for the months they are required to use them," he says.

Kumar refutes this. He says TEDs do not result in significant catch loss. He explains that larger fish typically do not travel in schools and are not often caught in trawl nets.

The government has also increased joint patrols involving the Fisheries Department, Forest Department, Indian Coast Guard, and Marine Police. According to Dogra, long-term studies and monitoring, including telemetry research, will also begin soon. Plans have also been put in place to involve police authorities in monitoring and addressing trawler violations.

Meanwhile, the Southern Bench of the National Green Tribunal took suo motu notice of the issue on January 18 and criticised the Tamil Nadu government for failing to regulate trawlers and enforce the use of TEDs despite previous orders.

The surge in turtle deaths also coincided with an unusually rough monsoon season. Fishermen report that the seas have been particularly turbulent as the north-east monsoon of 2024 persisted well beyond its usual last date of December 31, as per the India Metereological Department.

Palayam argues that it's not fair to place the blame solely on fishermen. He has been tracking currents and wind patterns every day since 2018 and notes that this season has been unusual. "During the onset of the Tamil *Thai* month, the sea is typically calm. But that hasn't been the case this year. The *olini* (easterly) current could push objects back to the shore, which could explain how dead carcasses from Andhra Pradesh could be washing ashore in Chennai," he says.

A collaborative effort

Kartik Shanker, an ecologist and author of *From Soup to Superstar: The Story of Sea Turtle Conservation Along the Indian Coast*, believes that many of the regulations that are necessary to protect turtles are already covered by fisheries laws; the challenge lies in improving compliance with the engagement of all stakeholders, especially traditional fishermen.

Shanker also points out that a specific focus on turtle conservation can sometimes be counterproductive, leading to conflicts between sectors. "Sea turtle populations are increasing in many parts of the world, including on the east coast, but we need to make fishing regulations effective for the integrity of coastal ecosystems because bottom trawling is a destructive practice. Trawling tends to tear up the seafloor, causing damage to the entire habitat, not just turtles," he says.

Kumar says protecting critical turtle habitats can also benefit local fishermen. "When we secure areas for turtles, it's not just good for conservation, but also supports the livelihoods of artisanal fishermen, who do not go venture deep into the sea," he says.

This is not an easy task, he adds. "The Tamil Nadu Forest Department must collaborate closely with fishermen, while the Fisheries Department needs to take a more serious approach to understanding where and what type of fishing is occurring," he says.

The pressure on the marine industry is immense, with demands for both local consumption and exports. "We need to conduct tracking studies specific to this coast. We can't just replicate what works in other regions," Kumar insists.

Selvam calls for a more unified approach that includes identifying key mating and congregation areas in the sea. This strategy should involve the Fisheries Department and local communities more closely, he says. However, the department has limited resources and manpower, which makes it difficult to enforce regulations effectively. Monitoring such vast ocean areas is also a logistical challenge. "Collaboration between fishermen, conservation groups, and the use of technological tools like apps to track turtle activity will be crucial," he says.

Fishermen point out that in addition to trawlers, gill nets, and squid nets, the sea turtles face significant threats from the plastic waste that floods the ocean. "Why can't the government build a structure to prevent plastics from entering the sea," asks Gnanasekar.

Palayam also raises concerns about the growing number of hard structures, such as groynes, being built along Tamil Nadu's sandy beaches, which damage the nesting habitats.

"Over the years, we have noticed that when the turtles come to nest, they find the sand polluted and return without nesting," says Abhishaek.

Saving the turtles is about safeguarding the future of both the sea and the people who rely on it. Sankari says, "I remember my father offering prayers if a sea turtle accidentally got caught in his net. He wouldn't go out to sea for a day. If the turtles are in trouble, how will we survive!"

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Along the 34-kilometre-long coast from the Marina Beach in Chennai to Kovalam in Chengalpattu, seeing dead sea turtles on the shore during mating season is not an unusual phenomenon, but the numbers this year have been unprecedented. B. JOTHI RAMALINGAM

Analysis of the news:

➡ The death toll signicantly exceeds the usual annual average, raising alarms among conservationists and local sherfolk.

- Experts blame destructive shing practices such as bottom trawling and frequent violations of marine regulations for the increased mortality.
- Turbulent monsoon currents have also contributed to the crisis, worsening the situation for the endangered species.
- The alarming rise in deaths has prompted government action and legal scrutiny to enforce stricter marine conservation measures.
- Conservationists and stakeholders are urging sustainable shing solutions to protect Olive Ridley turtles and maintain marine ecosystem balance.

Olive Ridley Turtle

- The Olive Ridley turtle is the smallest and most abundant sea turtle species, found in warm tropical waters, including the Indian Ocean.
- It is famous for mass nesting events called arribadas, notably at Odisha's Gahirmatha and Rushikulya beaches.
- Listed as Vulnerable under the IUCN Red List and protected under Schedule I of the Wildlife Protection Act, 1972, its threats include accidental bycatch, habitat loss, and pollution.
- India enforces turtle conservation through the Marine Fisheries Regulation Act and seasonal shing bans.
- Conservation efforts like Turtle Excluder Devices (TEDs) and coastal monitoring are crucial for Olive Ridley protection.

Page 08 : Prelims Fact

The news explores Dashavatar, a traditional theatre form in Maharashtra's Sindhudurg district.

The men who play women under the stars

For centuries, men in Maharashtra's Sindhudurg region and parts of northern Goa have been playing women characters in Dashavatar performances that tell stories of Indian mythology. **Purnima Sah** talks to them to understand the complexities of their identities on and off stage, and their challenges in their roles and in society

Men apply make-up to transform themselves into mythological characters before a Dashavatar play at Zarap village of Sindhudurg district in Maharashtra. EMMANUAL YOGINI

Zarap village of Kudal taluka in Sindhudurg district, Maharashtra, is bustling. It's the evening, and the lanes are alive with Marathi devotional songs and stalls selling toys and *vada-pav, shakkarpara* and *khaja*. The village temple and its surroundings are lit up with twinkling lights. The fragrance of night jasmine and incense is in the air.

At 10.30 p.m., the Dashavatar artistes gather at Samir Tendolkar's house for dinner. Samir is the owner of the Tendolkar Paramparik Dashavatar Natya Mandal, a theatre company that has been conducting shows on stories of Indian mythology for the past 40 years. After eating chicken, rice, and sliced onion for dinner, the artistes head to the temple, a kilometre or so away. There, in the green room, behind the curtains of the concrete stage, they get ready for the show that will begin at midnight.

Artistes pray to a *petara*, a box where the props used in the show, including the Ganesha mask, are stored. Ganesha is the god of auspicious beginnings. Then, they sit in a row next to each other with a mirror placed over their iron trunks that hold costumes, hair, and make-up. Incandescent light bulbs hang over the boxes. A few children from the village squeeze themselves onto a cloth mat and watch two of the men transform into female characters.

Omprakash Chavan, 56, from Amdos village, is playing Rani Sukhanti, a character in her 20s, in a play from the *Shiva Purana*, a text considered sacred by the Hindus. Ganpat Ankush Manjarekar, 52, from Mochemad village is playing Ladkya, the wife of a drunk farmer. She's a comic in the play, who later saves the queen's life.

Dashavatar is a form of theatre that relies on improvisation around a mythological narrative, and practitioners claim it has a history of at least 800 years in Maharashtra's Sindhudurg district and northern Goa. Ever since it began, men have been playing women's roles. The men are usually farmers or small business owners or daily wage labourers for some part of the year.

Gender blender

Every year, the Dashavatar season begins after the paddy harvest, towards the end of the Navaratri fast in October and continues until May of the following year.

The plays are based on a clutch of stories of the 10 incarnations of the Hindu god Vishnu: Matsya (the fish), Kurma (the tortoise), Varaha (the boar), Narasimha (the lion-man), Vamana (the dwarf), Rama from the *Ramayana*, Parashurama (Rama with an axe), Krishna (or his brother Balarama) from the *Mahabharata*, Buddha, and Kalki (an avatar yet to come).

The temple authorities from villages offer contracts to Dashavatar theatre companies to perform during the annual fair, called *jatra*. The companies sign up Dashavatar artistes through a verbal contract that they will be touring and performing with them for the season.

In Sindhudurg, there are around 400 Dashavatar artistes, of which about 25 experienced men play women characters. Prashant Tendolkar, 48, who has been playing only male characters for two decades, says, "For a society that has placed men and women in two brackets with a certain identity, we have a long way to go before people see artistes as just artistes."

He recalls instances when men who play women have difficulty finding a woman to marry. "People question their gender identity which is hard to deal with. Most want to play male characters as they are seen as strong, powerful, and dominating." Prashant has a motorcycle seat cover shop in Tendoli village in Kudal taluka.

Dinesh Gore is an 11th generation practitioner, who claims his family started the Dashavatar in Sindhudurg. His house has what he claims is an

> **"For a society that has placed men and women in two brackets with a certain identity, we have a long way to go before people see artistes as just artistes."**
> **PRASHANT TENDOLKAR**
> Dashavatar artiste who only plays male roles

800-year-old Ganesha *mukhavata* (face masks) used by his ancestors. He says his forefathers saw Karnataka's Yakshagana performances and felt the need to promote mythological stories in Maharashtra.

Eight brothers split into different locations and formed Dashavatar companies. Gore, who runs Balkrishna Gore Dashavatar Natya Mandal, claims, "Those days Dashavatar was only performed by Brahmins, but after the death of the brothers, the Devli community (also known as Devadasi, considered low-caste people who clean temples) began performing to keep the tradition alive." Two years ago, Gore formed a women's Dashavatar group, but participation and acceptance have been low.

A woman on stage

The night grows deeper in Zarap. Omprakash, who says he has performed in over 8,000 renditions across 40 years, cleans his face with water, puts on moisturiser, then layers it with foundation, lipstick on his cheeks for blush, and powders the whole look into place. He carefully wears eyeliner, kajal, mascara, and shapes his eyebrows using a kajal pencil. He combs his shoulder-length black curly hair into place.

"When I performed the Dashavatar at Mumbai's J.J. Hospital 25 years ago, the organisers had hired professional make-up artistes. That is when I realised how make-up is done. Earlier, I would use powdered colours mixed with water to paint my face," Omprakash says, adding that the same colour is used to paint clay idols. "Many still use it." He was 10 when he first watched *Wahto he durvanchi judi*, a Marathi stage play, at a high school in his village. He dreamt of training as a professional actor, but the closest he could get was Dashavatar, because it required no trained acting. All it needed was knowledge of Hindu mythology and a sense of improvisation.

At 14, when his father passed away, his mother took up daily wage labour jobs and sculpted clay idols. Omprakash would draw science projects for his classmates to earn in stationery, to keep his schooling going. "I managed to study till class 10. At 19, I performed at the Dashavatar near our village. I had two reasons to join: one to fill my stomach and another, to act," he says.

Until about 30 years ago, artistes would pack a few cloths in a bedsheet and travel with theatre companies for six months, sleep in temples and move to the next location on foot. Omprakash's first performance was of Vatsala, the daughter of Balaram. The Walavalkar Dashavatar company, which is over 100 years old, liked his work and offered him a two-year contract.

Later, he joined Naik Mochemadkar Dashavatar company and performed with them for 29 years. Omprakash says he has played a 20-year-

old woman, a pregnant woman, a young bride, a queen, Draupadi and many more. He modulates his voice, pitching it higher, making movements that are fluid, to mimic a woman's voice.

Once he wears a blouse, Omprakash covers his chest with a piece of cloth to finish hair and jewellery, before draping the sari. "I grew up around my mother and have watched Pranali (his wife). By society's definition, men are supposed to be hot-tempered, strong. But women have layers of emotions that they use when required. I was very nervous when I performed first as I was aware how society perceives a man dressing as a woman," he says, as he slips on green glass bangles that represent fortune and fertility in a happy married life.

He has been married 32 years now, and Pranali is an ASHA (Accredited Social Health Activists) worker. They have two sons and a daughter. From being childhood friends to falling in love, Pranali has seen her husband's journey. "I have always loved watching him get dressed and perform. I tell people my husband is more beautiful than I am," she says at their home before he sets out for the performance.

Pranali has her own challenges. She is often bullied for loving a man who takes on women's characters. "My parents were against our marriage. Most women don't find a man who is sensitive and calm," she says. Omprakash sells homemade spices, sculpts clay idols and makes soft drinks under the brand name PO, the first letters of both their names, and a word that means 'drink' in Hindi.

"There are two theories about why only men perform in Dashavatar: one is based on the tale of Lord Vishnu assuming the form of a beautiful Mohini, a female avatar to outsmart the demons. The other is that menstruation restricts women from participating in any religious events," says Omprakash, as he gets up to drape *nauvari* (nine-yard) sari. It is almost time for the performance.

The stars shine bright

As the night gets darker and the stars get clearer in the open sky, residents of Zarap and nearby villages gather at the temple ground. They sit on plastic sheets and wrap themselves in shawls to watch the show.

This Dashavatar revolves around Dambhasur, a demon king, who wants to kill Raja Sukant, his

> **By society's definition, men are supposed to be hot-tempered, strong. But women have layers of emotions that they use when required**
> **OMPRAKASH CHAVAN**
> Dashavatar performer who plays women's roles

son-in-law. Shiva, the Hindu god of destruction, had promised Dambhasur that no one would be able to kill him except his son-in-law. So, the demon would kill every daughter born to him and his wife. However, his daughter, Rani Sukhanti, was rescued and she married Sukant. Each play has all the nine rasas, including anger, humour, and sorrow. There is music with a harmonium, a *pakhawaj* (a percussion instrument), and symbols. Musicians sit in a corner of the stage.

The bench on the stage changes its role depending on the requirement of the character and what they must do. At one point it is Mount Kailash, where Shiva resides; at another, it is the edge of a well that Rani Sukhanti climbs onto, to jump into the make-believe water. Ladiya, the comic, climbs up to rescue her and they both fall off the bench, behind the curtain that separates the green room and the stage.

The audience is so impressed by the performance that they offer cash (*bakshish*) ranging from ₹50 to ₹2,000. People walk up to hand over money to an actor, who stops for a second, collects it, and carries on.

The three-hour-long show runs without a break, and while the story line and movements are plotted, several aspects of it remain impromptu. Most actors get paid between ₹200 and ₹500, while senior artistes like Omprakash get ₹1,000 per show. Samir, the troupe head, distributes the *bakshish* after the show.

"People love Omprakash's performance and the mention of his name brings a good crowd," says Samir, who admits that there isn't enough money in the business to make it a full-time profession. "For one show we get around ₹8,000 to ₹10,000 from the temple authorities. I distribute some among the artistes and the rest is used for expenses. A company does at least 200 shows each season," says Samir, who is a mechanic and owns a garage.

The future

Ravi Bibhishan Chavare, Director of Maharashtra's Cultural Affairs Department, says that for the last 15 years, the State government has been organising Dashavatar festivals at different locations in the Konkan region. This year's festival is across January and February.

In March, at the Ek Bharat Shreshtha Bharat, a Central government programme aimed at fostering cultural exchanges, Dashavatar will be performed in Odisha. "Maharashtra has over 350 art forms and we can only select five for the league," Chavare says.

"There are more than 70 troupes who perform Dashavatar. Our aim is to preserve and promote the art form by organising such festivals that are completely funded by the government," he says. He adds that the government offers an honorarium of ₹60,000 per troupe along with lodging and travel expenses. "The State government also gives ₹5,000 monthly to artistes above 50."

Omprakash has never been a part of a government initiative. In fact, he worries that the art form may be dying. It began when television came to the village, about 30 years ago, he recounts. "Today there are several distractions. It is not the fault of the audience if they lose interest in Dashavatar. It is up to us to keep them coming back to our performances," says Omprakash, who refuses to join social media to promote Dashavatar. "Only those looking for validation need such tools."

In Omprakash and Pranali's home, set in the middle of open land, the walls are covered with photographs of performances. There are deities and awards next to each other on a table. In one of the wooden cupboards with a glass front are a few props. One is a baby wrapped in a cloth. "When I play the role of a mother, I carry this doll with me," Omprakash says.

Omprakash Chavan displays images of the women characters he has played; (right) he gets ready for a performance. THE HINDU

- ➡ Dashavatar is a traditional theatre form from Maharashtra's Sindhudurg district and northern Goa, rooted in Hindu mythology.
- ➡ It has been performed for over 800 years and depicts the ten avatars of Vishnu.
- ➡ The performances take place after the paddy harvest until May, coinciding with village fairs (jatras).

➡️ Only men traditionally perform, even in female roles, due to cultural beliefs.

➡️ The form involves improvisation, music, and symbolic props. Artistes, often farmers or small traders, rely on Dashavatar for supplementary income.

➡️ Despite evolving social norms, gender perceptions around the performances remain signicant, inuencing societal acceptance of actors playing female roles.

Technology and the challenge of equitable education

Madhav Chavan

is a co-founder of Pratham

In India, the 1990s and the early 2000s were a time of education activities on a mass scale. But results from the nationwide Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) surveys of that period indicated that while enrolment and infrastructure indicators showed a rush to schools, learning indicators pointed to no change. At the same time, computers, mobile phones, and digital technology were making waves. It was a time of many possibilities and promises with digital solutions and businesses. However, it was when the COVID-19 pandemic struck that the digital revolution hit the ground in rural India. This is reflected very well in ASER data.

Smartphone use and rural households

In 2018, nearly 90% of rural households had simple mobile phones and 36% had smartphones. In 2022, the proportion of households with smartphones had risen to over 74% and, according to ASER 2024, it has grown further to 84% this year. While the percentage of children who have access to a smartphone at home is nearing saturation, the proportion of children aged between 14 and 16 years who own a smartphone has risen from 19% to about 31% within a year.

It is not clear from the ASER data whether mothers of young children have their own phones. This ownership of smartphones is important when it comes to use in supporting young children's learning and their own learning.

The main use of smartphones during the pandemic period was that of a carrier of texts, worksheets, and videos, which were a substitute for textbooks. Virtual training sessions had become common too. As the pandemic faded away, the digital skills learned during the period sustained, although some of the practices became less important and a new excitement began to build around artificial intelligence (AI).

The best promise of the digital revolution was,

India lacks a road map in the field of education that allows the promise of technology to be harnessed for those who need it the most

to this writer, in the open and continuing education domain for the underprivileged. The need and the possibilities in India are tremendous. For example, at this time, over 40% mothers of schoolchildren are not schooled or have completed school less than class five. Nearly another 40% are schooled between class six and class 10, and the remaining have completed class 10. Educating mothers so that they can help children is an investment India should make to accelerate and strengthen the education of children.

Over the past 30 years, we have lived through the computer, the Internet, and mobile revolutions, and we are now looking at AI. With every new wave of technology, there is new hope and talk of revolutionising education. By the time the technology becomes affordable, something new and exciting for the privileged shows up on the horizon, but technology has not delivered on its promise where the education of the underprivileged is concerned. One of the biggest constraints is the availability of devices.

But, as ASER 2024 data show, availability of individually owned smartphones is going to be less and less of a constraint. Most rural households already have a smartphone. Getting a second phone may be easier for many families in times to come.

No language barrier

Hardware, without a doubt, is becoming easily available. Language used to be a major impediment. It is not so any more. Writing or dictation in local languages is now possible. Translation from one language to another is easy. All the tools needed for learning are accessible, if you know what to access, where, and how. But what if there was one place in a village – let us call it school – where questions of what, where, and how were answered by an intelligent device?

Access to schools is complete. But school attendance is still a problem. In a village or a community, some children go to a private school, some to a government school, others to private classes and some do not go to school at all. This is somewhat of a chaotic situation at the level of the village and also at the larger community level, which reflects in the quality of learning in schools.

During the pandemic, in many villages of Maharashtra, a learning programme was broadcast from a vantage point. It should be possible to work out a curriculum and broadcast schedule in villages so that group learning can be organised. Organising new schools in this manner should be possible, although, initially, there may not be many takers.

Every civilisation has created its own schooling system over the last 5,000 years. Teachers and methods in one education system did not work in another, the curriculum in one country was not a good fit in another. That was because civilisations were separated by time, space, culture, and technology. The age of empires and colonialism started integrating civilisations. Although separated by national boundaries, countries today are integrated by science and technology. Education too is an integrating factor. But so is profit. Every technological innovation, barring those promoted by philanthropists as public goods, has to look for a 'for-profit market'. Where profits cannot be made, innovations find limited use.

The prediction that hardware and devices would become inexpensive has come true but the need for a higher order and bigger hardware is growing with the innovations of AI. Will philanthropic investments be enough to help universalise the innovations that could revolutionise education? As a country, India needs to come up with a road map that allows the promise of technology to be harnessed for the benefit of those who need it the most.

GS Paper 02 : Social Justice - Education

UPSC Mains Practice Question: : Discuss the role of digital technology in enhancing education in rural India. What challenges remain in ensuring equitable access and learning outcomes? (250 Words /15 marks)

Context :

→ The expansion of digital technology in rural India, especially post-COVID-19, has improved education accessibility.
→ However, challenges remain in equitable learning and effective digital integration.

Education Trends in the 1990s and Early 2000s

→ The 1990s and early 2000s saw a large-scale expansion of education in India.
→ Reports from ASER surveys of that time showed increased enrolment and infrastructure development.
→ However, learning levels remained unchanged despite more children going to school.
→ Meanwhile, digital technology, mobile phones, and computers were gaining prominence.

Impact of COVID-19 on Digital Learning

→ The digital revolution in rural India truly gained momentum during the COVID-19 pandemic.
→ ASER data reects this shift, showing an increase in smartphone usage in rural households.
→ Before the pandemic, in 2018, about 36% of rural households had smartphones.
→ By 2022, this gure rose to 74%, and by 2024, it reached 84%.
→ The proportion of children aged 14 to 16 who personally own a smartphone increased from 19% to 31% in just one year.

Smartphone Usage for Education

→ Smartphones were mainly used during the pandemic to access worksheets, videos, and online classes.
→ Virtual training sessions became common for students and teachers.
→ Even after the pandemic, the digital skills learned during that time have continued to be useful.
→ However, it remains unclear whether mothers of young children own smartphones, which is important for supporting children's learning.

Opportunities for Digital Education in India

→ A signicant opportunity lies in open and continuing education for underprivileged communities.
→ Many mothers of schoolchildren have little formal education:
→ Over 40% have either no schooling or have studied less than Class 5.
→ Another 40% have completed between Class 6 and Class 10.
→ The remaining have nished Class 10.
→ Educating mothers would enhance their ability to support their children's learning, making this a valuable investment.

Challenges in Digital Learning for the Underprivileged

→ Despite multiple technological advancements, education for the underprivileged has not signicantly improved.
→ A major barrier has been the availability of personal devices.
→ However, ASER 2024 data suggests that smartphone ownership is increasing, reducing this limitation.
→ More families may nd it easier to purchase a second phone in the near future.

Breaking Language Barriers in Education

➡ Hardware has become more accessible, and language barriers are decreasing.
➡ Local language dictation and translation tools now make learning easier.
➡ The challenge remains in guiding students on what, where, and how to access learning resources.

Issues with School Attendance and Learning Quality

➡ While most children have access to schools, attendance remains inconsistent.
➡ Villages have a mix of children attending private schools, government schools, or private classes, while some do not attend school at all.
➡ This results in uneven learning outcomes.
➡ During the pandemic, villages in Maharashtra broadcast learning programs to students.
➡ A similar model could be used to organize group learning in rural communities.

Evolution of Education Systems

➡ Historically, each civilization developed its own education system.
➡ Colonialism and globalization integrated these systems.
➡ Today, technology and science further connect education systems across countries.
➡ However, technological advancements are often driven by prot, limiting their availability to underprivileged groups.

Conclusion

➡ While hardware has become cheaper, AI and new technologies require higher-order devices.
➡ Philanthropic investments might help expand access to educational technology.
➡ India needs a well-planned strategy to ensure that technology benets those who need it most.