

**The Hindu Important News Articles & Editorial For UPSC CSE**

**Wednesday, 19 Feb, 2025**

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**Page 01: GS 2 : International Relations**

Russia and the U.S. agreed to work towards ending the war in Ukraine and improving diplomatic and economic ties.

- ➔ This shift in U.S. policy under President Donald Trump marks a significant change in foreign policy.

**Key Agreements Between Russia and the U.S.**

- ➔ The U.S. and Russia have agreed to work towards ending the war in Ukraine and improving diplomatic and economic ties.
- ➔ U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio outlined three goals: restoring embassy staffing, creating a high-level team for Ukraine peace talks, and exploring economic cooperation.

**Exclusion of Ukraine in Talks**

- ➔ No Ukrainian officials were present at the meeting, raising concerns from Ukraine and European allies.
- ➔ President Volodymyr Zelensky insisted that Ukraine must be included in any negotiation outcome.
- ➔ European leaders expressed worries about being sidelined and emphasized that Europe must be part of the discussions.

**U.S. and European Reactions**

- ➔ The U.S. acknowledged that ending the conflict would require concessions from all sides, including European involvement.
- ➔ European leaders vowed to increase defense spending and consider deploying troops in

**In landmark talks, Russia, U.S. agree to work towards ending the war in Ukraine**

**Associated Press**  
RIYADH

Russia and the U.S. on Tuesday agreed to start working towards ending the war in Ukraine and improving their diplomatic and economic ties, America's top diplomat said after talks that reflected an extraordinary about-face in U.S. foreign policy under President Donald Trump.

U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio said the two sides agreed broadly to pursue three goals: to restore staffing at their respective embassies in Washington and Moscow, to create a high-level team to support Ukraine peace talks, and to explore closer relations and economic cooperation. He stressed, however, that the talks — which were also attended by his Russian counterpart, Sergey Lavrov — marked the beginning of a conversation.

**Ukraine absent**

Speaking to presspersons, Mr. Lavrov said that in his view, "the conversation was very useful". He mentioned the same three goals as Mr. Rubio.

No Ukrainian officials were present at the meeting, which came as the beleaguered country is slowly but steadily losing ground against Russian troops in a grinding war that began nearly three years ago.

President Volodymyr Zelensky said his country would not accept any outcome from the talks if Kyiv does not take part. European allies have expressed concern they are being sidelined.

"Should this conflict come to an acceptable end, the incredible opportunities that exist to part-



**Peace bid:** Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov with U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio in Riyadh on Tuesday. AFP

ner with the Russians geopolitically on issues of common interest and frankly, economically on issues that hopefully will be good for the world and also improve our relations in the long term," Mr. Rubio said.

"We not only listened, but also heard each other," said Mr. Lavrov. "And I have reason to believe that the American side has started to better understand our position, which we have once again outlined in detail, using specific examples, based on President Putin's repeated speeches."

Tuesday's meeting was also meant to pave the way for a summit between Mr. Trump and Russian President Vladimir Putin. After the talks wrapped, Mr. Putin's foreign affairs advisor, Yuri Ushakov, told Russia's Channel One that no date has been set yet for that summit but that it was "un-

likely" to take place next week.

Mr. Rubio said on Tuesday that ending the conflict would require concessions from all sides and that Europe would be a part of talks. In talking about sanctions against Russia, Mr. Rubio noted that the measures have come from the U.S.'s allies as well. "The European Union is going to have to be at the table at some point because they have sanctions as well that have been imposed," he said.

Kremlin spokesperson Dmitry Peskov on Tuesday said that Mr. Putin has repeatedly expressed readiness for peace talks, and noted that a durable settlement of the conflict in Ukraine would be impossible without "a comprehensive consideration of security issues" in Europe.

**FRACTURED ALLIANCE**  
» PAGE 15

Ukraine.

- ➡ French President Macron called for emergency talks, revealing tensions within Europe on the issue.
- ➡ German Chancellor Scholz opposed troop deployment, while British PM Keir Starmer supported it.

## Russia's Standpoint

- ➡ Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov emphasized that the U.S. has begun to better understand Russia's position.
- ➡ Kremlin spokesperson Peskov reiterated Russia's readiness for peace talks, highlighting the need for a comprehensive security framework in Europe.

## Implications for U.S.-Russia Relations.

- ➡ The meeting aimed to pave the way for a summit between Trump and Putin, though no date was set.
- ➡ The U.S. acknowledged that any settlement requires European involvement due to existing sanctions.

## Changing Geopolitical Landscape

- ➡ NATO and the EU are reconsidering their defense strategies in response to shifting U.S. policies.
- ➡ NATO chief Mark Rutte emphasized Europe's willingness to step up.
- ➡ EU Commission chief Ursula von der Leyen called for increased defense spending.

## Internal Divisions in Europe

- ➡ Some leaders, like Italian PM Meloni, opposed troop deployment, calling it ineffective.
- ➡ Latvian President Rinkevics warned against complacency in strengthening defense.

## Broader Strategic Concerns

- ➡ European analysts view the shift in U.S. policy as a "make or break" moment for transatlantic security.
- ➡ Some experts believe Europe must increase its defense capabilities independently as the U.S. reassesses its global role.

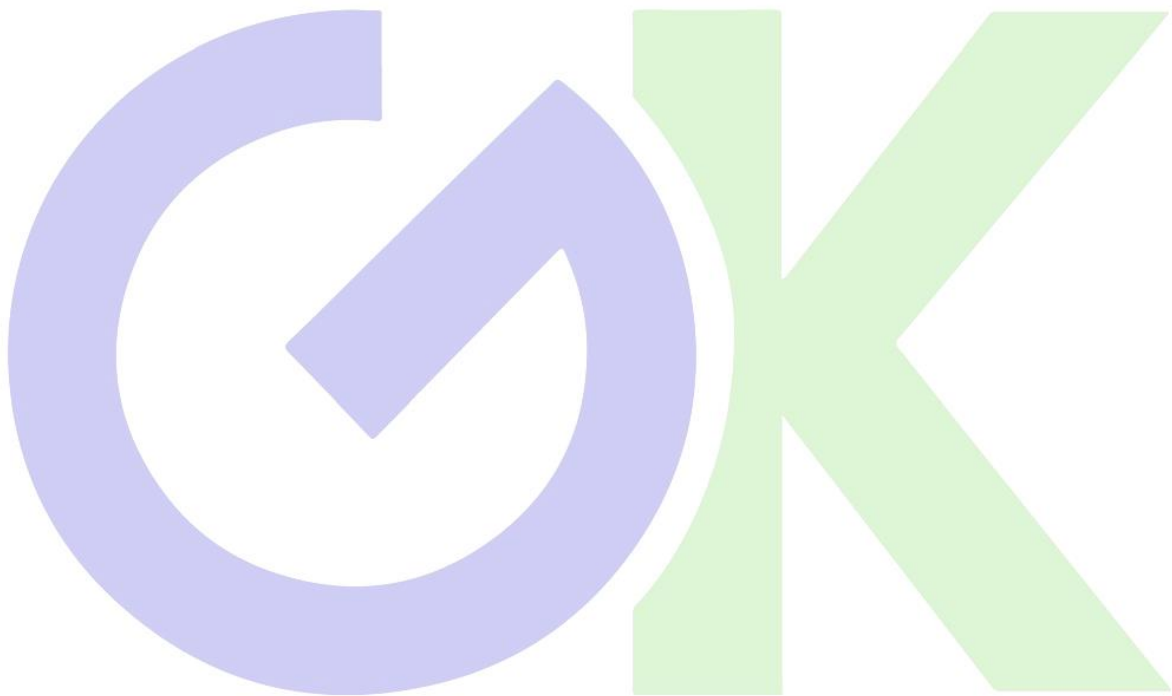
## Conclusion

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## Daily News Analysis

- ➔ The diplomatic shift signifies a potential realignment in global power dynamics. While discussions have started, challenges remain in achieving a united European stance and resolving the Ukraine crisis.



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The case pertains to Nimisha Priya, an Indian nurse from Kerala, who is on death row in Yemen for killing her Yemeni business partner, Talal Abdo Mahdi, in 2017.

➔ She was sentenced to death by the Supreme Court in Sana'a in 2020.

## Iran FM, Houthi envoy discuss Nimisha case

A day after meeting Jaishankar, Iran's Araghchi says he discussed a legal way out with Abdul Salam for the former-nurse on death row in Yemen; 37-year-old Nimisha Priya from Kerala was convicted in 2020 for killing her Yemeni business partner; her family is campaigning for clemency

**Suhasini Haidar**  
MUSCAT

A day after meeting External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar in Muscat, Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi on Monday said he had made an appeal on behalf of Nimisha Priya, the Indian nurse on death row in Yemen, with a senior Houthi envoy.

In an interview to *The Hindu* here, Mr. Araghchi, who met Mr. Jaishankar on the sidelines of the Indian Ocean Conference in Muscat on Sunday, said he subsequently met Mohammed Abdul Salam, special envoy of Ansar Allah, also known as the Houthi group that controls significant parts of Yemen.

"We are hopeful. I just

spoke to Mr. Abdul Salam, the Ansar Allah envoy, who is here in Muscat. I told him about this case, and he assured me that he will try to find a way forward," Mr. Araghchi said.

According to reports in the Houthi-run Al-Masirah TV, Mr. Araghchi and Mr. Abdul Salam met in Muscat on Monday for official talks to discuss "recent regional developments, including the enforcement of the Gaza ceasefire".

### 'Assaulted for years'

The 37-year old Ms. Priya, a former nurse from Kerala, was convicted in 2020 for killing her Yemeni business partner, Talal Abdo Mahdi, in 2017.

Her family launched an international campaign for clemency for Ms. Priya,



**Way forward:** External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar with Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi in Muscat on Sunday. ANI

who said that she had been assaulted and abused by Mahdi for years. Ms. Priya's family and other groups also collected contributions towards reparations or "blood money" which could allow her to be pardoned by the family

of the man killed according to the Islamic legal system.

After she was sentenced to death by the Supreme Court in Yemen's capital Sana'a this year, the External Affairs Ministry said the Indian government "is providing all possible assis-

tance in the case". "The matter regarding any consideration towards the release of Ms. Nimisha Priya is between the family of the deceased and Ms. Nimisha Priya's family," the Ministry said in response to a question by MP John Brittas in the Rajya Sabha.

The response led to accusations by civil society organisations in Kerala that the government had "washed its hands off the matter".

### Diplomatic efforts

Mr. Araghchi's comments indicate that diplomatic efforts are still ongoing in the case, particularly given Iran's considerable influence over the Houthi group in Yemen.

In January, *The Hindu* had reported that a senior

Iranian official visiting Delhi had also assured support from Tehran to India's case.

Mr. Araghchi, however, said that the case would not be resolved unless an alternative legal argument could be presented before the courts.

"It is purely a legal case, and has nothing to do with politics," the Iranian Foreign Minister said. "It is a case about a crime which the lady [Ms. Priya] has unfortunately committed. So they are trying to find a way... to another legal way out to address this issue and prevent her execution," he added.

Ms. Priya is reportedly being held at the Central Prison in Sana'a.

(With inputs from Kallol Bhattacharjee)

### Recent Developments

- ➔ Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi intervened in the case after meeting Indian External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar in Muscat.
- ➔ Araghchi later discussed the matter with Mohammed Abdul Salam, a senior envoy of the Houthi group (Ansar Allah), which controls parts of Yemen.
- ➔ The Iranian minister expressed hope for a resolution, stating that Abdul Salam assured him of efforts to find a way forward.

### Family's Efforts

- ➔ Ms. Priya's family claims she was assaulted and abused by Mahdi for years.

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## Daily News Analysis

- ▶ They have launched an international clemency campaign and started collecting reparations or “blood money” as per Islamic law, which could allow for a pardon.

### Indian Government's Position

- ▶ The Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) stated that the Indian government is providing all possible assistance but emphasized that the final decision rests between the victim's family and Ms. Priya's family.
- ▶ Civil society organizations in Kerala have criticized the government for not doing enough to secure her release.

### Diplomatic Significance

- ▶ Iran holds considerable influence over the Houthis, which could help in negotiating clemency.
- ▶ Earlier this year, a senior Iranian official visiting Delhi had assured support to India's efforts in the case.

### Legal Challenges

- ▶ Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi emphasized that this is a legal case, not a political one.
- ▶ He stated that finding an alternative legal argument is essential to preventing her execution.

### Conclusion

- ▶ The case of Nimisha Priya remains a complex legal issue, with diplomatic efforts ongoing and Iran's intervention offering a potential path toward clemency, but a resolution depends on legal negotiations and reparations under Yemeni law.



# Centre revamps websites, creates multilingual AI hub for better scheme outreach

**The Hindu Bureau**  
NEW DELHI

The Union government has begun revamping its official websites and is working on an artificial intelligence hub to distribute information on government initiatives. The Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology (MeitY) released a Digital Brand Identity Manual on Tuesday, seeking to create a standard design language for government websites.

The initiative, to “harmonise the government’s digital footprint”, was encouraged by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who asked Ministry Secretaries to improve their websites at a recent meeting, according to MeitY Secretary S. Krishnan. As digital platforms emerge as a “first



The revamp aims to ‘harmonise digital footprint’ and create a cohesive brand.

point of contact”, the new manual says that “a cohesive and compelling brand presence is essential to engage with the national and global audiences effectively”.

## Multilingual AI hub

The Information and Broadcasting Ministry, meanwhile, is developing

an AI hub to enable effective and efficient dissemination of information on various government initiatives. “The platform will also have the facility for multilingual translation of contents for an effective outreach to the masses across the country,” said a senior government official. The hub has not yet been formally inaugurated.

Other initiatives include: Digital India Bhashini, a language translation platform; BharatGen, the world’s first government-funded multimodal large language model (LLM) initiative launched in 2024; the Sarvam-1 AI LLM; Chitrlekha, an open-source video transcreation platform; and the multilingual AI system Everest 1.0, which caters to various Indian languages.

The Union government is revamping its official websites and developing an AI hub to standardize digital branding and enhance multilingual dissemination of government initiatives.

- ➡ Digital Brand Identity Manual: The Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology (MeitY) has released a manual to create a standard design language for government websites.

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## Daily News Analysis

- ➡ **Objective:** The initiative aims to harmonize the government's digital presence, as emphasized by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who urged officials to improve their websites.
- ➡ **Importance of Digital Presence:** With digital platforms being the first point of contact, a uniform and strong brand presence is seen as crucial for engaging national and global audiences.
- ➡ **AI Hub Development:** The Ministry of Information and Broadcasting is developing an AI hub to facilitate efficient dissemination of government information.
- ➡ **Multilingual Support:** The AI hub will include multilingual translation capabilities to ensure effective outreach across India.
- ➡ **AI & Digital Initiatives: Other key projects include:**
  - Digital India Bhashini: A language translation platform.
  - BharatGen: The world's first government-funded multimodal large language model (LLM) initiative, launched in 2024.
  - Sarvam-1: An AI-based LLM.
  - Chitrlekha: An open-source video transcreation platform.
  - Everest 1.0: A multilingual AI system supporting various Indian languages.

**Conclusion:** The government's digital revamp and AI-driven initiatives aim to enhance accessibility, streamline information dissemination, and strengthen India's digital presence both nationally and globally.



**In News : India-Qatar Relations Elevated to Strategic Partnership**

India and Qatar elevated their bilateral ties to a strategic partnership, aiming to double trade to USD 28 billion by 2030 and secure USD 10 billion Qatari investment in India.

# India, Qatar elevate ties to strategic partnership

Modi, visiting Emir of Qatar discuss possibility of a bilateral FTA, and West Asian developments; both sides sign double taxation avoidance pact, agree to deepen relations in trade and security; the two sides resolved to double trade; the visit also presented a challenge, as Purnendu Tiwary, an ex-Indian Navy commander, remains in Qatari custody

**Kallol Bhattacharjee**  
NEW DELHI

Qatar, a major energy supplier to India, on Tuesday signed an agreement to elevate India-Qatar relationship to the level of a strategic partnership, officials here said.

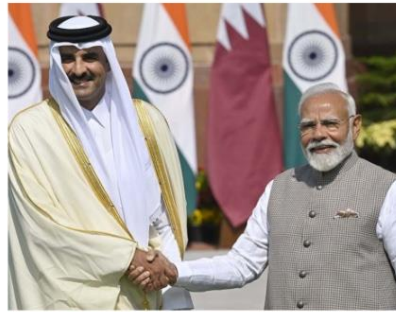
The Ministry of External Affairs announced that Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the visiting Emir, Sheikh Tamim Bin Hamad Al-Thani, discussed multiple issues, including the ongoing Israel-Palestine conflict in the Gaza Strip. Both sides are also exploring the possibility of finalising a Free Trade Agreement (FTA).

"Strategic partnership elevates the present state of bilateral relation to the strategic level. We are look-

ing at deepening cooperation in the fields of trade, investment, energy, security as well as in the regional and international fora," said Arun Kumar Chatterjee, Secretary (CPV&OIA), while briefing the media following the bilateral discussion. The two sides also signed a double taxation avoidance treaty.

"India and GCC are negotiating about having an FTA. Both India and Qatar are [also] exploring the signing of a FTA in the future," said Mr. Chatterjee, announcing that India is considering going ahead with a bilateral FTA with Qatar as discussion for an India-GCC FTA continues.

The Indian side also said that the strategic partnership would have a security component, though a clear timeline for such a process



**Warmer ties:** Narendra Modi with the Emir of Qatar, Sheikh Tamim Bin Hamad Al-Thani, in New Delhi on Tuesday. SHIV KUMAR PUSHPAKAR

was not articulated.

### Bilateral trade

A total of 38 Qatari entities representing retail, finance, and energy sector participated in the deliberations where the two sides

resolved to double bilateral trade to \$28 billion.

The visit also presented a challenge for both sides, as Purnendu Tiwary, an ex-Indian Navy commander, remains in Qatari custody, even though seven other

detainees from the same 2022 case were repatriated in February 2024. "His matter still remains sub-judice in the local courts," said Mr. Chatterjee elaborating on the condition of Commander Tiwary. The Hindu had reported on Monday that the seven former Indian navy officials who returned in February 2024 has written to the Qatari authorities seek repatriation of Commander Tiwary.

Mr. Chatterjee informed that the Indian diaspora is the largest working force in Qatar and that at present around 600 Indians are in Qatari prisons. "About 85 Indians have received such pardons during 2024," he said, highlighting that Qatar has the provision of granting pardon.

India already has now

signed strategic partnerships with Kuwait, Oman, United Arab Emirates, and Saudi Arabia within the Gulf Cooperation Council member states.

The official also confirmed that the situation in the West Asian region featured in the official talks saying, "both sides conveyed their mutual positions on Israel-Hamas issue. India conveyed its own position, the Qatari side conveyed their own position."

The visit of the Qatari Emir has drawn attention as it is being held just two days prior to the five Arab states summit in the Saudi capital Riyadh which will take up the new proposals from the United States following the arrival of President Donald Trump. Mr. Trump's proposal that the

Palestinians of the region should be shifted out to neighbouring countries like Egypt and Jordan has drawn attention. India has not so far made its position on this new approach. MEA officials also avoided giving a clear answer to this approach which has drawn criticism as it would tantamount to ethnic cleansing.

India supports two-state solution in bringing an end to the Israel-Palestinian crisis and had welcomed the ceasefire that currently holds that was announced shortly before the swearing-in ceremony of President Trump on January 20.

The Qatari side also participated in a Joint Business Forum which drew participation of top business entities of Qatari and Indian sides.

## Analysis of the news:

### Strategic Partnership and Trade Expansion

- ➡ India and Qatar have upgraded their relationship to a strategic partnership, reecting deeper cooperation in trade, investment, and energy.
- ➡ The two countries set a target to double bilateral trade from USD 14 billion to USD 28 billion by 2030.
- ➡ Qatar also committed to invest USD 10 billion in India, focusing on infrastructure, ports, renewable energy, smart cities, start-ups, and advanced technologies like artificial intelligence and robotics.

### Energy Cooperation and Long-term LNG Supply

- ➡ Energy remains a crucial pillar of India-Qatar relations. Qatar, a significant supplier of Liqueed Natural Gas (LNG) to India, will supply 7.5 million metric tonnes per annum for 20 years starting 2028, ensuring India's long-term energy security.

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## Exploring Free Trade Agreements (FTA)

- ➔ Both nations discussed the potential for a Free Trade Agreement (FTA) between India and Qatar, complementing India's ongoing FTA negotiations with the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC).
- ➔ This could further enhance economic ties and streamline trade regulations.

## Security and Counterterrorism Cooperation

- ➔ The leaders unequivocally condemned terrorism in all forms, agreeing to bolster cooperation in intelligence sharing, cybersecurity, anti-money laundering, and combating transnational crimes.
- ➔ Regular meetings of the Joint Committee on Security and Law Enforcement were emphasized to strengthen these efforts.

## Diplomatic and People-to-People Relations

- ➔ Acknowledging the Indian diaspora's contribution to Qatar's development, both sides expressed appreciation for the welfare measures provided to the Indian community.
- ➔ Additionally, two agreements and two MoUs were signed, covering economic cooperation, youth affairs, investment, and a double taxation avoidance agreement.

## Regional Stability and Pending Diplomatic Issues

- ➔ The leaders exchanged views on West Asia's evolving situation, including the Israel-Hamas conflict, highlighting regional peace and security concerns.
- ➔ The pending case of a former Indian Navy officer in Qatar was also discussed, with India appreciating Qatar's cooperation in ensuring the welfare of Indian nationals.

## Conclusion

- ➔ The elevation of India-Qatar ties to a strategic partnership marks a significant step towards deeper cooperation in trade, energy, security, and regional stability, paving the way for strengthened economic growth and diplomatic relations in the coming years.

## What is the significance of India-Qatar Relations?

- ➔ Political Significance- Qatar's membership in Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) is politically significant for India, especially concerning issues like Kashmir. Also, India needs support of Qatar for UNSC permanent membership.

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## Daily News Analysis

- ▶ **Energy Security-** Qatar is the largest supplier of LNG to India. LNG makes up almost 50% of our LNG imports.
- ▶ **Strong economic and trade ties-** India is among the top four largest export destinations for Qatar (Qatar exports to India LNG, LPG, chemicals and petrochemicals, fertilisers, plastics). India is also among the top three sources of Qatar's imports (India's key exports to Qatar include cereals, copper articles, iron and steel articles, vegetables, fruits).
- ▶ **Strong Business Presence of Indian Companies-** Several Indian Companies like L&T, Wipro, TCS and TechMahindra operate in Qatar.
- ▶ **Large Expatriate Community and Remittances-** Around 8 lakh Indian expatriate community live and work in Qatar. The flow of remittances (around 750 million dollars) and safety of Indian expatriate community, makes Qatar vital for India's interest.
- ▶ **Defence and strategic co-operation-** India and Qatar have signed a Defence Cooperation Agreement for stronger defence cooperation. The maritime relations are further strengthened by Exercise Zair-Al-Bahr.

### UPSC Mains Practice Question

**Ques :** How can the government ensure that the fertilizer subsidy program remains environmentally sustainable while supporting the economic needs of farmers? (150 Words /10 marks)



**In News : Humpback Whale**

On February 8, 23-year-old Venezuelan kayaker Adrián Simancas was briefly engulfed by a humpback whale while

▶ kayaking through the Strait of Magellan, off Chile's Patagonian coast.



Analysis of the news:

Types of Whales

▶ Whales are classified into two main families:

1. **Baleen Whales:** Includes humpbacks, blue whales, and grey whales. They lack teeth and instead possess baleen plates made of keratin to filter small prey like krill, plankton, and small fish from the water.
2. **Toothed Whales:** Comprising over 70 species such as sperm whales, killer whales, and dolphins. These whales have teeth used to grab prey, which they swallow whole, but do not chew their food.

Can Whales Swallow Humans?

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## Daily News Analysis

- ▶ Despite their large mouths, baleen whales like humpbacks have throats roughly the size of a human st, making it impossible for them to swallow humans.
- ▶ Toothed whales have larger oesophagi but are similarly incapable of swallowing an entire human.
- ▶ The only exception is the sperm whale, which has a throat large enough to swallow a human, though such an occurrence is extremely rare.

### Why Did the Whale Engulf the Kayaker?

- ▶ According to experts from Marine Conservation, humpback whales often charge to the surface with open mouths to capture prey.
- ▶ It is likely the whale did not detect the kayak due to cloudy conditions and the kayak's minimal noise.
- ▶ Humpbacks primarily rely on hearing, and small, motorless vessels like kayaks produce little sound, contributing to the accidental encounter.

## The danger of a digital censor board

**T**here is a moral panic over a show called India's Got Latent. Much of the furor centres around some crude remarks made by a YouTuber, Ranveer Allahabadi. His remarks have been condemned by Chief Ministers, a Parliamentary Standing Committee, and even the Supreme Court.

On India's Got Latent, which was conceptualised and hosted by comedian and YouTuber Samay Raina, judges attempt to critique the "latent" talents of aspiring performers. Dank humour defines the show. Both Mr. Allahabadi and Mr. Raina enjoy immense popularity as YouTubers, especially with young people. Mr. Raina is a rising sensation who shared the KBC stage with Amitabh Bachchan and Mr. Allahabadi was extolled by the Prime Minister himself as 'Creator of the Year'. While many may say that their online reach is the reason behind the moral panic, the two YouTubers are mere pawns in the great game for control of our digital media.

### Law on vulgarity

Notwithstanding the Supreme Court's curt remark that Mr. Allahabadi has "a very dirty mind," the law separates moral repugnancy from criminality. In *Apoorva Arora v. Govt. of NCT of Delhi* (2024), the Court quashed criminal prosecutions for foul language in an OTT show called College Romance. The Court demanded an objective test for obscenity, focusing on whether sexual or lustful thoughts were aroused and not on whether words were "decent". The Court further explained that coarse language, however distasteful or improper, does not automatically become obscene.

Its ruling is directly relevant here: Mr. Allahabadi's comments, at worst, constitute a risqué jest rather than actual obscenity. Yet fury and legal intimidation often eclipse constitutional principle.

The second legal provision



**Apar Gupta**

Advocate and the Founder-Director of the Internet Freedom Foundation

While many may argue that Allahabadi and Raina's online reach are responsible for this uproar, the fact is that the two of them are mere pawns in the great game for control of India's digital media

which has been invoked against India's Got Latent is Section 69A of the Information Technology Act, 2000, which provides the Indian government with the power to block access to a website, as revealed by Kanchan Gupta, a Senior Advisor, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting. Curiously, "decency and morality" do not fall under the grounds for blocking websites under Section 69A. This statutory limit was exposed as far back as 2010, when the government tried to block the pornographic website *Savita Bhabhi*. Legality, however, has not stood in the way of the Union government's expanding appetite for censorship, as seen in the surge of blocking orders, which has been aided by the Information Technology (Intermediary Guidelines and Digital Media Ethics Code) Rules, 2021. Blocking decisions remain shrouded in secrecy; courts typically avoid striking them down.

### Question of regulation

The Ministry of Information and Broadcasting's push for a sweeping Broadcasting Bill gathered steam before the general elections and then returned in a form that placed online creators in the same bracket as traditional broadcasters. Earlier, there was a public outcry against provisions of the Bill. Now, thanks to the recent clamour for stronger censorship, the Bill has received momentum. The Parliamentary Standing Committee of Information Technology, headed by BJP MP Nishikant Dubey, has now urged the Ministry to propose new regulations and amendments. The recent controversy has different actors playing to a familiar script: a public uproar leads to new rules which arm the government with sweeping powers.

On January 15, 2021, Amazon Prime's *Tandav* released, and was immediately accused of insulting religious sentiments. This led to criminal complaints, government intervention, and an apology from the creators, who cut supposedly

offensive scenes. Yet multiple FIRs persisted, targeting actors, producers, and Amazon Prime's India head. Amid calls for censorship, the government on February 25, 2021, introduced the Information Technology Rules. Part III now covers digital news media and OTT platforms, albeit under ambiguous jurisdiction. However, what is interesting is that to escape the clutches of criminal prosecution, OTT platforms have entered into a Faustian bargain. They now invite censorship powers of the Ministry to escape a visit to the police station or writ petitions before different High Courts. The price to pay is the discontinuation of any web series which, through its themes or dialogues, poses difficult questions to our society or political leadership. Hence, it should not come as a surprise if popular online creators, including those associated with India's Got Latent, plead for clemency in the coming weeks by pleading for "regulation" on digital platforms such as YouTube.

This present moment in time is not simply an outcome of a single controversy. Nor is it just an example of rising online vulgarity fuelled by cheap data and ubiquitous teleconnectivity. As Yamini Aiyar and Neelanjan Sircar have argued, the Indian state has undergone a fundamental change in its political economy where technology has enabled direct benefit transfers as a form of tribal allegiance rather than a right guaranteed by the constitution. Calling it techno-patrimonialism, they state that it has advanced within a framework of the Prime Minister's political appeal that relies on "a mix of cultural nationalism and welfarism populism". Hence, it should come as no surprise that political parties, after competing on direct benefit transfers, are now advocating for digital censor boards. This may explain why the entire state and large sections of society have been spurred into action by a distasteful joke.



## GS Paper 02 Indian Polity

**UPSC Mains Practice Question:** Examine the impact of increasing digital content regulation on freedom of speech in India. How can a balance be struck between creative expression and societal norms? (250 words, 15 marks)

### Context :

- A controversy has erupted over the show India's Got Latent, primarily due to crude remarks made by YouTuber Ranveer Allahabadi.
- Hosted by comedian Samay Raina, the show is dented by its use of dark humor and has gained immense popularity, particularly among young audiences.
- However, beyond the outrage over individual comments, the controversy highlights a broader struggle for control over digital media.

### Legal Perspective on Vulgarly

- The Supreme Court dismissed criminal cases for foul language in an OTT show in Apoorva Arora v. Govt. of NCT of Delhi (2024), stating that obscenity should be judged objectively.
- Allahabadi's remarks, though crude, do not legally qualify as obscene. Despite legal precedents, moral outrage often leads to intimidation and censorship.

### Use of Section 69A for Censorship

- The government has invoked Section 69A of the IT Act, 2000, to block content, though "decency and morality" are not grounds for blocking websites.
- The government has a history of using censorship, as seen in the blocking of Savita Bhabhi and increasing content restrictions through the IT Rules, 2021.

### Push for Stronger Digital Regulations

- The Ministry of Information and Broadcasting is advancing a new Broadcasting Bill, which seeks to regulate online creators like traditional broadcasters.
- The Parliamentary Standing Committee on IT is pushing for stricter digital regulations.
- Pattern of Government Crackdown on Content

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## Daily News Analysis

- ➡ Similar actions were taken against Tandav (2021), where government pressure led to scene cuts and multiple legal cases. OTT platforms have increasingly complied with government censorship to avoid legal troubles.

### Political and Economic Implications

- ➡ The controversy is not just about vulgarity but reflects a larger shift in governance, termed techno-patrimonialism.
- ➡ Political parties are competing not just on welfare but also on digital censorship, aligning with a mix of cultural nationalism and populist welfare policies.

### Future of Digital Freedom

- ➡ Given past trends, online creators may soon plead for "regulation" to avoid harsher crackdowns.
- ➡ The debate over digital content regulation is a symptom of a broader political shift rather than just a reaction to an offensive joke.