



## India, China to resume direct flights, issue visas

### INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

**CONTEXT:** India and China agreed to resume direct flights, visa issuance, people-to-people exchanges, Mansarovar Yatra for pilgrims, restart discussions on trans-border rivers and hydrological data sharing, which China had withheld for years and the, three months after resolving the military stand-off at the Line of Actual Control (LAC).



Both sides committed to marking the 75th year of establishment of ties with a number of celebratory events this year, as Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi called for an end to the “mutual suspicion and estrangement” between the two countries. The decisions on reviving various measures were taken during a meeting between Foreign Secretary Vikram Misri and Chinese Vice Foreign Minister Sun Weidong in Beijing.

#### Modi-Xi meeting

In October, during a meeting in Kazan, Prime Minister Modi and President Xi Jinping agreed to take steps to stabilize and rebuild India-China relations. The two sides decided to resume direct flights between the countries and facilitate the

Mansarovar Pilgrimage in the summer of 2025. Technical officials will also discuss the resumption of hydrological data sharing and cooperation on trans-border rivers. Additionally, people-to-people exchanges, including media and think tank interactions, will be promoted. Despite concerns over a hydropower project on the Brahmaputra in South Tibet, discussions also focused on economic and trade relations, which have been affected by tensions along the Line of Actual Control (LAC).

#### Trade curbs

In 2020, China raised concerns over India’s restrictions on Chinese investments, business visas, and telecom companies. Meanwhile, India expressed concerns over China's restrictions on pharmaceutical ingredients, high-tech exports, and key equipment like Tunnel Boring Machines (TBMs). During Mr. Misri's recent visit to China, discussions were held to address these economic issues and promote policy transparency. The visit marked the resumption of regular bilateral dialogue between India and China, following earlier meetings between their leaders and officials. However, officials did not comment on the possibility of an informal summit between Modi and Xi this year. Mr. Misri also met senior Chinese officials and offered India's support for China's 2025 Shanghai Cooperation Organisation chairmanship. Modi is expected to attend the SCO Head of State Summit in June.

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## Uttarakhand adopts Uniform Civil Code

### POLITY & GOVERNANCE

**CONTEXT:** Uttarakhand has become the first Indian State to implement the Uniform Civil Code (UCC) post-Independence for all residents of the State, except the Scheduled Tribes and natives who have migrated out of the State.

The Uniform Civil Code (UCC) Bill, passed by the State Assembly last February, bans practices such as halala, iddat, and talaq (customs related to marriage and divorce in Muslim Personal Law). It also ensures that women are given equal rights in matters related to property and inheritance.

The UCC mandates online registration of marriages, divorce and live-in relationships. A government portal — [ucc.uk.gov.in](http://ucc.uk.gov.in) — has been formed for the purpose. People can access records, register complaints and also upload their will on the portal. Mr. Dhami also registered his marriage on the portal.

#### Beginning of new era

According to a communique from the State government, the online portal created for the UCC registration has Aadhaar-based verification. An AI-based translation service will translate the content into 22 languages, including English. The portal has integrated data from across more than 13 government departments, including civic bodies, police and courts. In view of the UCC roll-out, the marriages that have taken place in Uttarakhand since March 26, 2010, will have to be registered in the government portal within the next six months. Marriages that have taken place after the implementation of the law should be registered within 60 days from the date of marriage.

While registering divorce or marriage annulment, people should enter details of marriage registration, decree of divorce or marriage annulment, court case number, date of final order, details of children, and copy of final order of the court. The UCC portal allows people to register their will in three ways — by filling the form on the portal, by uploading handwritten or typed will, or by recording it in a three-minute video and uploading it.

## Indonesian naval delegation visits BrahMos office in Delhi, apprised of weapon system

### INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS



**CONTEXT:** Chief of Staff of the Indonesian Navy, Admiral Muhammad Ali, visited BrahMos Aerospace Private Ltd. and “exchanged ideas and insights on further strengthening bilateral cooperation in the area of defence and strategy” amid negotiations between India and Indonesia for the sale of BrahMos supersonic cruise missile systems.

The delegation was apprised of supersonic BrahMos weapon system and its formidable capabilities. During their interaction, the two sides exchanged ideas and insights on further strengthening bilateral cooperation in the area of defence and strategy. During his visit, Admiral Ali held bilateral interactions with Indian Navy chief Admiral Dinesh K. Tripathi to deepen maritime cooperation and strengthen ties between the two close maritime neighbours, the Indian Navy said in a statement.

The \$ 450-million deal for the BrahMos systems is in advanced stages of negotiations, and Indonesia will become the second export market of the missile system after the Philippines, which has signed a \$ 375-million deal in 2022 for three regiments of the anti-ship variant of the missile.

#### Key points of discussion

The key areas of discussion between the two naval leaders included advancing joint initiatives like ‘Exercise Samudra Shakti’, strengthening operational collaboration, and addressing shared maritime challenges, including piracy and other illegal activities at sea. Mr. Ali visited several naval establishments, including the Information Fusion Centre-Indian Ocean Region (IFC-IOR) and the Weapons and Electronics Systems and Engineering Establishment.

He is on an official visit as part of the high-level delegation accompanying Indonesian President Prabowo Subianto, who was the chief guest at the Republic Day parade on Sunday.

## Getting drunk, on homoeopathy

### POLITY & GOVERNANCE

**CONTEXT:** A recent Supreme Court judgment in \*Bhagwati Medical Hall vs Central Drugs Standard Control Organization & Ors.\* highlights the challenges faced by State governments in regulating the public health risks of alcoholic tinctures marketed as homoeopathic remedies in India. Efforts by the Union Government to address the issue have been thwarted by strong resistance from the powerful homoeopathic industry.

#### The regulatory maze

The regulation of alcoholic tinctures in India is complicated by constitutional provisions. While States control public health and alcohol taxation under Schedule VII, the Union can tax alcohol for medicinal purposes under Entry 84 of List I. Before GST, medicinal alcohol was taxed at 4% under the now-repealed Medicinal and Toilet Preparations (Excise Duties) Act, 1955. Post-GST, the taxation of medicinal alcohol remains unclear, as Entry 84 no longer specifies this exception. However, the Union has set an 18% GST rate for medicinal alcohol, much lower than State taxes on alcoholic beverages.

Drugs fall under the Concurrent List, allowing both the Union and States to legislate, but the Drugs and Cosmetics Act, 1940, as a Union law, limits States' ability to regulate homoeopathic products without presidential approval. This regulatory complexity has shielded manufacturers of homoeopathic alcoholic tinctures from State-level quality control or taxation, despite their public health impact. The lower taxation of tinctures compared to alcoholic beverages makes them a cheaper alternative, appealing to consumers seeking intoxication, as many tinctures contain high alcohol content—up to 12%, surpassing the 7% typically found in strong beer.

State governments view homoeopathic alcoholic tinctures as a source of revenue loss since they are often used as substitutes for higher-taxed alcoholic beverages. This concern prompted the Uttar Pradesh government to take action under Section 22 of the Drugs and Cosmetics Act, 1940, in the Bhagwati Medical Hall case. However, the Supreme Court clarified that only the Union government has the authority to regulate the sale of such tinctures.

#### Health concerns, industry lawfare

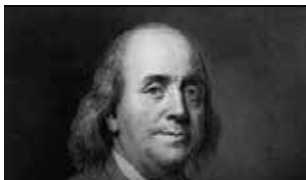
The public health risks of homoeopathic alcoholic tinctures far outweigh taxation concerns. States cannot regulate these tinctures, even in alcohol-prohibited regions like Gujarat and Bihar, leading to deaths from spurious alcohol in such remedies. While States can amend the Drugs and Cosmetics Act, 1940, this requires presidential assent. A larger issue is unsuspecting consumers using these tinctures as remedies without knowing their high alcohol content, which can lead to severe health issues like alcoholic hepatitis. Indian doctors have reported a rise in cases resembling alcoholism among such consumers.

The Union government introduced Rule 106B of the Drugs and Cosmetics Rules, 1945, in 1994 to address public health risks from homoeopathic alcoholic tinctures. The rule limited retail sales to 30 ml bottles with 12% alcohol, allowing 100 ml bottles only for hospitals. The homoeopathy industry opposed the rule, initiating prolonged litigation. It first challenged the rule's constitutionality, losing in five High Courts and the Supreme Court by 2014. In 2015, the industry filed fresh lawsuits in seven High Courts, arguing the rule's invalidity due to non-compliance with the Drugs and Cosmetics Act's parliamentary procedure. Multiple courts stayed the rule's enforcement.

Instead of resolving the legal challenge to Rule 106B by laying it before Parliament for 30 days, the Union Government chose to pursue further litigation. In 2017, it filed a transfer petition to consolidate 13 cases in the Supreme Court, which agreed but has left the matter unresolved since. Such delays in public health regulations are common and have serious consequences, including loss of lives.

#### Key question

The central question is whether alcohol should be allowed in homoeopathic and ayurvedic products, particularly as other countries consider mandatory cancer warnings on alcoholic beverages. While these products may not cure ailments as claimed, their potential to harm poorly informed consumers raises serious concerns.



*“If you invest more in your education, then you are likely to get more interest in it.”*

—Benjamin Franklin



# The Union Budget as a turning point for climate action

## ECONOMICS & RELATIONST

**CONTEXT:** As the nation grapples with increasingly frequent extreme weather events and mounting pressure to meet its climate commitments, the FY26 Budget carries the weight of both urgency and opportunity. With just five years left to achieve India's first interim Net-Zero target, the Budget must take decisive steps to protect those on the frontlines of climate change.

Previous Budgets have demonstrated the government's commitment to climate action, notably through initiatives such as the PM Surya Ghar Muft Bijlee Yojana, support for electric vehicle charging infrastructure, viability gap funding for offshore wind energy, and increased allocations for the National Green Hydrogen Mission. Yet, with a total renewable energy installed capacity of 203.18 GW, far short of the 2030 target of 500 GW, accelerated investment and policy support are imperative.

### There is much work to be done

The Budget should focus on strengthening India's climate response by addressing key policy measures for both adaptation and mitigation. First, it should review the PM Surya Ghar Muft Bijli Yojana, aiming to improve implementation through fiscal allocations that support the Renewable Energy Service Company (RESCO) model for lower-income households. Second, it should expand production-linked incentives (PLI) across the solar module supply chain to boost domestic manufacturing and reduce cost disparities. Lastly, the Budget should encourage public-private partnerships to harness the renewable energy potential of India's railway network, which could host up to 5 GW of solar and wind installations.

### EU mechanism and India

The Budget must address India's export competitiveness in light of the EU's Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM), set to take effect in 2026. With India's MSMEs facing potential carbon levies on \$8.22 billion in exports, the Budget should create a 'Climate Action Fund', modelled after successful initiatives such as Japan's Green Transformation (GX) Fund for industrial decarbonisation, particularly across the most vulnerable export sectors to support industrial decarbonization and MSME compliance with CBAM. Additionally, the Budget should prioritize India's transition to a circular economy, which could generate significant profits and reduce emissions. This could be achieved by offering incentives for recycling infrastructure, depreciation benefits for circular economy assets, and establishing a sovereign green bond framework for funding such initiatives. The Fund can also support the capacity-building initiatives for MSMEs to ensure proper compliance and reporting under CBAM. A recent study by the Council on Energy, Environment and Water estimates that the benefit of adopting a circular economy can yield an annual profit of ₹ 40 lakh crore (\$ 624 billion) for India by 2050 while reducing greenhouse gas emissions by about 44 %. A weighted deduction of 150 % on investments in recycling infrastructure and refurbishment technologies, complemented by accelerated depreciation benefits for circular economy assets, can encourage businesses to invest in recycling and refurbishment technologies.

### On insurance products, green finance

To strengthen climate resilience, the Budget should address India's low insurance penetration, which has declined from 4% in FY23 to 3.7% in FY24. It could offer tax deductions to insurance companies on income from climate-linked policies and reduce GST rates on premiums for insurance products focused on climate resilience and disaster protection.

The Budget should allocate funds to develop the infrastructure for implementing a climate finance taxonomy, which could help attract part of the ₹162.5 trillion needed for India's Nationally Determined Contributions by 2030. It should also introduce differential tax treatment for taxonomy-aligned investments and classify government expenditure based on green criteria. Climate-linked policies are now crucial for maintaining international trade and investment competitiveness, and the Budget should reflect the government's commitment to integrating climate competitiveness into its fiscal framework.



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# Navigating growth challenges in Sri Lanka

## INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

**CONTEXT:** Sri Lanka's new National Peoples Power (NPP) government, led by the charismatic President, Anura Kumara Dissanayake, entered office in late 2024 at a turning point in the country's economic history.

Sri Lanka, after its worst post-independence economic crisis in 2022-2023 following a default on external debt, is now experiencing cautious optimism as its economy stabilizes. Prudent monetary policies, a \$3 billion IMF programme, \$4 billion of Indian aid, and a \$17.5 billion debt restructuring deal have helped restore stability. Tourism inflows are boosting foreign exchange reserves, though growth is expected to slow from 4.4% in 2024 to 3.5% in 2025. The government faces the challenge of balancing growth with debt sustainability moving forward.

### Internal challenges

Sri Lanka faces significant challenges, including a brain drain of around 300,000 people in 2024, particularly educated professionals in IT, banking, marketing, and healthcare, which threatens growth. Additionally, the government's Parliament has limited experience, with about 150 first-time MPs, mostly from the NPP, raising concerns about the legislative capacity for economic reforms. To address these issues, the government must improve public sector service delivery, retain key talent, and create policies for governance and public administration development. Training MPs, digitizing public services, and establishing a public policy school for civil servants are essential steps forward.

Tourism has significant potential to boost Sri Lanka's foreign exchange reserves and growth, with over 2 million visitors in 2024, a 38% increase from 2023. However, sustainable tourism development is needed, focusing on marketing Sri Lanka as a multi-cultural destination and developing less-visited regions. Supporting small businesses and addressing gang-related violence should also be prioritized. On fiscal sustainability, while revenue has increased, government spending remains high due to the state's large role in the economy. The government plans to improve state-owned enterprises (SOEs) but should consider privatizing or restructuring major loss-making SOEs to ensure long-term fiscal stability.

### External factors

Sri Lanka's foreign policy will be crucial, especially with changing Indo-Pacific geopolitics following Donald Trump's re-election. India, a key player in Sri Lanka's economic future, requires strengthened ties, with an emphasis on Indian investments and collaborations. The President must also honour commitments to non-interference in India's security concerns, including halting visits from Chinese spy ships. His 2024 visit to India provides a foundation for stronger relations, and the government must focus on progress in areas like business-to-business links, cross-border energy projects, digital identity systems, and a deeper bilateral free trade agreement.

Sri Lanka faces limited fiscal space for social spending and the risk of external debt repayments starting in mid-2027 unless it can generate sufficient foreign exchange through trade-led growth. India, in partnership with the IMF and World Bank, should be ready to assist if Sri Lanka faces another setback. The Sri Lankan government must create a comprehensive growth plan that addresses both immediate challenges and long-term opportunities. Pragmatic leadership, bold policies, and a clear vision for the country's future prosperity are essential, with the National Budget in February serving as a key starting point.

## Will the FY26 Budget reverse the decline in social sector spending?

### ECONOMICS & DEVELOPMENT

Data show that the outlays to most schemes under the rural development, education, health, and social welfare heads have either declined or stagnated. The share of the total Budget allocated to the Ministry of Rural Development did not cross the 6%-mark in the last three years, which was the case for many years prior.

Similarly, allocations for higher education as a share of the total Budget declined from the 1.57%-1.37% range in FY17-20 to 1.27%-0.88% in FY21-25. Allocations for school education declined from the 2.18%-1.96% range to 1.61%-1.23% and allocations for social welfare schemes declined from the 1.89%-1.61% range to 1.17%-0.97% in the same period.

The allocations for various social sector schemes as a share of the total Budget. Notably, allocations for schemes such as the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS), introduced under the United Progressive Alliance government, have declined significantly over time. The ₹86,000 crore (Budget Estimates) allocated for

MGNREGS for 2024-25 formed only 1.78% of the total Budget, a 10-year low. Allocation for the national social assistance programme, which includes old age pension, widow pension, and disability pension, has declined as a share of the total Budget from the range of 1.21%-0.36% in the years FY19-21 to about 0.2% in the last four years.

The allocations for the Pradhan Mantri Poshan Shakti Nirman (PM-POSHAN) scheme as a share of the total Budget declined to 0.26% in FY25 (Budget Estimates) — the lowest in the last nine years — except FY24 (Revised Estimates). The primary objective of the scheme is to improve the nutritional status of children studying in Classes 1 to 8 in eligible schools. It was earlier known as the National Programme of Mid-Day Meals in Schools.

There were some exceptions to this trend: allocations under the Ayushman Bharat-Pradhan Mantri Jan Arogya Yojana (PMJAY), the Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojna (PMAY)-Rural, and PM Schools for Rising India (PM SHRI) as a share of the total Budget were on an increasing trend or at least stagnating.

## Shrinking social sector pie

The data for the charts were sourced from the Union Budget documents

**Table 1:** Allocations for social sectors as a share of Budget (in %)

Year	Health	Rural Development	Higher Education	School Education	Social Welfare
FY18	2.47	6.3	1.57	2.18	1.75
FY19	2.35	5.74	1.38	2.09	1.89
FY20	2.36	5.3	1.37	1.96	1.66
FY21	2.28	6.1	0.92	1.48	1.07
FY22	2.22	6.03	0.88	1.23	1.07
FY23	1.75	5.69	0.92	1.4	0.97
FY24	1.76	5.32	1.27	1.61	1.04
FY25	1.85	5.51	0.99	1.51	1.17



**Table 2:** The table shows the allocations for select social sector schemes as a share of India's total Budget each year

Total	FY19	FY20	FY21	FY22	FY23	FY24(RE)	FY25(BE)
<b>Rural development</b>							
National social assistance programme	0.36	0.32	1.21	0.21	0.23	0.21	0.20
MGNREGS	2.67	2.67	3.17	2.60	2.17	1.92	1.78
Pradhan Mantri Gram Sadak Yojna	0.67	0.52	0.39	0.37	0.45	0.38	0.25
DAY-NRLM	0.25	0.34	0.26	0.25	0.28	0.31	0.31
Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojna (PMAY)-Rural	0.83	0.67	0.55	0.79	1.07	0.71	1.13
<b>Health</b>							
Pradhan Mantri Jan Arogya Yojana (PMJAY)	0.09	0.12	0.08	0.08	0.15	0.15	0.15
<b>School education</b>							
Samagra Shiksha		1.21	0.79	0.66	0.78	0.73	0.77
PM POSHAN	0.41	0.36	0.37	0.27	0.30	0.22	0.26
PM Schools for Rising India (PM SHRI)						0.06	0.13
<b>Higher education</b>							
University Grants Commission	0.20	0.17	0.11	0.12	0.12	0.14	0.05
Grants to Central Universities (CUs)	0.29	0.30	0.24	0.23	0.26	0.28	0.33
IITs	0.24	0.25	0.19	0.21	0.21	0.23	0.21
IIMs	0.015	0.018	0.013	0.017	0.014	0.007	0.004
NITs and IEST	0.15	0.13	0.09	0.09	0.10	0.11	0.10

**Table 3:** The table shows major schemes/expenditure heads as a share of each social sector's total allocations in FY25BE (in %)

Health	Rural development	School education	Higher education
Flexible pool for States	MGNREGS	Samagra Shiksha	Central Univs.
Autonomous bodies	PMAY-Rural	Autonomous bodies	IITs
PMJAY	DAY-NRLM	PM-POSHAN	NITs, IEST
Infrastructure maintenance	PMGSY	PM-SHRI	UGC
Medical treatment of pensioners	Social assistance		Student aid



## Is the Guillain-Barré Syndrome life-threatening?

### SCIENCE & TECHNOLOGY

**CONTEXT:** The Union Health Ministry has dispatched a team to assess the situation, while the Maharashtra government has established a Rapid Response Team to investigate the sudden rise in infections. The affected individuals include 47 men and 26 women, with 14 patients requiring ventilator support as of January 25, 2025.

#### What is Guillain-Barré Syndrome?

Guillain-Barré Syndrome (GBS) is a rare autoimmune neurological disorder where the immune system attacks peripheral nerves, causing muscle weakness that can lead to paralysis. It primarily affects adults and males, with an incidence of 1-2 cases per 100,000 people. GBS often follows a viral or bacterial infection, with *Campylobacter jejuni* (causing gastroenteritis) being a common trigger. Other infections, such as the flu, cytomegalovirus, Epstein-Barr virus, and Zika virus, can also lead to GBS.

#### How does it affect the body?

In Guillain-Barré Syndrome (GBS), the immune system attacks the myelin sheath around nerve cells, impairing nerve function and causing muscle weakness. GBS affects the peripheral nervous system, controlling movement, sensation, and temperature. Initial symptoms include tingling and weakness, typically starting in the feet and legs, and may spread to the upper body, arms, and face. Other symptoms include pain, difficulty walking, facial movement issues, and double vision. In severe cases, GBS can lead to paralysis, breathing problems, and difficulties with speaking or swallowing. It can also cause life-threatening complications if it affects the autonomic nervous system.

#### How is it treated?

Guillain-Barré Syndrome (GBS) has no cure, but treatments like plasma exchange and intravenous immunoglobulin therapy can aid recovery by reducing the immune system's attack on nerves. Supportive care and rehabilitation may also be necessary. Recovery can be slow, and GBS can be life-threatening, requiring quick treatment and possibly intensive care. Immediate medical attention is recommended if muscle weakness worsens.

## SEBI: Govt. kicks off hunt for Madhabi Puri Buch successor

### POIITY & GOVERNANCE

**CONTEXT:** The Centre on Monday initiated the process to find a successor for market regulator SEBI chief Madhabi Puri Buch, who was involved in an alleged conflict of interest row.

The three-year term of Ms. Buch as Securities and Exchange Board of India (SEBI) chairperson ends on February 28. The Department of Economic Affairs under the Finance Ministry said the appointment would be for five years or till the candidate attains 65 years of age.

Although, Ms. Buch made significant strides in areas like faster settlements in equities, enhanced FPI disclosures and increasing mutual fund penetration, the last year of her tenure saw heightened controversy, when she battled a series of allegations by short-seller Hindenburg and the Congress party, while simultaneously dealing with in-house employee protests against "toxic work culture". The new SEBI chairperson will receive a pay equivalent to a secretary to the Government of India.

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## Federal Reserve expected to stand pat on rates even as Trump demands cuts

### POIITY & GOVERNANCE

**CONTEXT:** The Federal Reserve is almost certain to keep its key interest rate unchanged at its policy meeting this week, just a few days after President Donald Trump said he would soon demand lower rates.

Fed officials, led by Jerome Powell, have reduced interest rates to 4.3% from 5.3% after three consecutive cuts. However, with positive economic indicators, including healthy hiring and progress on inflation, the pace of rate cuts is expected to slow. The upcoming two-day meeting may be uneventful, but it marks the start of a potentially turbulent year for the Fed. Officials face the challenge of managing borrowing costs to control inflation without risking a recession. Meanwhile, former President Trump has expressed his intention to comment on interest-rate policy.

#### Trump hired Powell

Annual inflation was just 2.4% in November, according to the Fed's preferred gauge, only modestly above its goal, but it has been stuck there for about six months. Still, there are signs that prices should cool later this year. A spurt of apartment construction is bringing down the growth in rental costs, and car insurance inflation has also slowed.

#### Hiring rebounds

Hiring rebounded in December, reversing a downshift in the fall that had unnerved the Fed. Policymakers had agreed to cut the Fed's key rate by a half-point in September, partly because they worried that a then-weakening job market could lead to a recession. Yet the jobless rate ticked down to a low 4.1% last month. A sharp slowdown in hiring would likely spur the Fed to cut rates more quickly. Fed officials in December indicated they expected to reduce rates just twice this year.

#### Tariffs uncertainty

Most economists forecast that wide spread tariffs will likely lift inflation by roughly several-tenths of a percentage point — not a large amount, but potentially enough for the Fed to postpone rate cuts. It could take months for the tariffs to be formally imposed and then to evaluate their impact on the economy. Some economists don't think the impact will be apparent until next year.

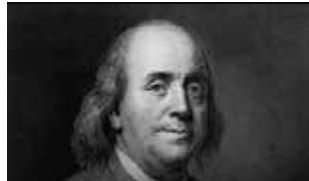




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