

## ● POLITY

## ● ECONOMICS

## ● TECHNOLOGY

## ● ECOLOGY

## INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

## U.S., U.K. HIT HOUTHİ TARGETS IN YEMEN

**CONTEXT:** The United States and Britain launched strikes against 36 Houthi targets in Yemen, in the second day of major U.S. operations against Iran-linked groups following a deadly drone strike in Jordan that killed three American soldier's last weekend.



On Saturday, the western coalition carried out the second wave of retaliation targeting 13 locations across the country striking buried weapons storage facilities, missile systems, launchers and other capabilities the Houthis have used to attack Red Sea shipping. The Houthis did not announce any casualties.

On Friday, the U.S. carried out the first wave of that retaliation, striking in Iraq and Syria more than 85 targets linked to Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and militias it backs, reportedly killing nearly 40.

Since October 7, when the Palestinian militant group Hamas stormed Israel from the Gaza Strip, igniting a war that has drawn Tehran-backed groups into attacks on U.S. and Israeli targets on several fronts. The Yemen strikes are the latest blows in a conflict that has spread into West Asia.

Iran's Foreign Ministry termed the latest attacks on Yemen were "a flagrant violation of international law by the United States and Britain", warning the continuation of such attacks was a "worrying threat to international peace and security".

U.S. Republicans have been putting pressure on President Joe Biden, a Democrat, to deal a blow to Iran directly. The violence has added to concerns of the potential for further escalation. Iran, a supporter of Hamas, has so far avoided any direct role in the conflict, even as groups it backs have entered the fray from Syria, Iraq, Yemen and Lebanon.

## POLITY &amp; GOVERNANCE

## ON UTTARAKHAND'S UNIFORM CIVIL CODE

**CONTEXT:** The Uttarakhand Assembly is likely to pass the State's Uniform Civil Code (UCC) Bill during its four-day-long session this week. A State-appointed panel constituted to draft the UCC submitted its final report to Chief Minister Pushkar Singh Dhama on February 2.

### What does a UCC aim to do?

A UCC seeks to create a uniform set of laws to replace the distinct personal laws of every religion pertaining to subjects such as marriage, divorce, adoption, and inheritance. This stems from Article 44 of the Constitution which mandates that the state "shall endeavour to secure for the citizens a uniform civil code throughout the territory of India." The provision is a part of the Directive Principles of State Policy, which although not enforceable, play a pivotal role in governance.

Whether the provision should be included as a fundamental right or a directive principle was the subject of intense debate in India's Constituent Assembly. Opponents feared that it would dilute the rights of religious minorities in India and destroy its diversity. Member Naziruddin Ahmad from Bengal argued that it would come in the way of Article 19 of the draft Constitution (now Article 25) which guarantees the fundamental right to freedom of religion subject to reasonable restrictions such as public order, morality, and health. He also emphasised that such a uniform set of laws could not be implemented without securing the consent of the concerned communities. On the other hand, member K.M. Munshi contended that a UCC would not defeat the principle of freedom of religion since the state is empowered to make laws related to religious practices if they were intended for social reform. He highlighted various benefits such as promoting equality for women, since personal laws often prevent the elimination of discriminatory practices against women.

Taking a more ambivalent stance, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar said that although a UCC was desirable, it should remain "purely voluntary" during the initial stages. He stated that since the provision was merely recommendatory, it should not be imposed upon all citizens. The matter was settled by a 5:4 majority vote, with the sub-committee on fundamental rights headed by Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel deciding that establishing a UCC should not fall within fundamental rights.

### What about the Uttarakhand UCC?

In June 2022, the Uttarakhand government constituted an expert committee headed by former Supreme Court judge Justice Ranjana Prakash Desai to examine ways for the implementation of a UCC. The move followed Mr. Dhama's promise that he would implement a UCC in the State if re-elected. The committee was supposed to submit its report in November 2022 but the deadline was extended multiple times despite the Chief Minister announcing in June last year that a draft UCC was ready.



*"Education is the ability to listen to almost anything without losing your temper or your self-confidence." - Robert Frost*

The opposition political parties from the State have alleged that the move is BJP's poll plank and that it wants to keep the pot simmering to polarise voters ahead of the general elections. Pritam Singh, one of the two Scheduled Tribe (ST) MLAs of the State, pointed out earlier that the tribal community which comprises 2.9% of the State's population had not consented to the UCC. The Van Gujjar tribe, a Muslim nomadic tribe with a population of around 60,000, has also expressed apprehensions over the law.

#### What changes can be expected?

The draft UCC is set to focus on gender equality by introducing provisions that treat men and women equally, especially in matters pertaining to inheritance. It will also revoke practices governing marriage and divorce such as polygamy, iddat (mandatory period of waiting to be observed by women following the dissolution of a Muslim marriage) and triple talaq. The Code is also likely to extend an equal property share to Muslim women against the existing 25% share accorded under Muslim personal law. However, the minimum age for marriage for men and women is set to remain the same — 18 years for women and 21 years for men. Other issues such as divorce, marriage registrations, adoption, and social security for ageing parents will also be covered under the law. The committee has reportedly also prescribed the mandatory registration of live-in relationships.

#### What has the Supreme Court said?

Over the years, the Supreme Court has deliberated upon the UCC in several judgments, but refused to issue any directive to the government since law-making falls within the exclusive domain of Parliament. In its 1985 judgment in the Shah Bano Begum case, the Court observed that "it is a matter of regret that Article 44 has remained a dead letter" and called for its implementation. Such a demand was reiterated in subsequent cases such as Sarla Mudgal versus Union of India (1995), and John Vallamattom versus Union of India (2003) among others.

Reviving the push for a UCC, six petitions were filed in the Supreme Court between 2021-2022 seeking uniformity in divorce, maintenance, and alimony laws on the ground that they discriminated against women, thereby violating Article 14 (right to equality) and Article 15 (right against discrimination based on religion and gender) of the Constitution. Some of the petitioners included BJP leader and advocate Ashwini Upadhyay and former Chancellor of Maulana Azad National Urdu University Firoz Ahmed Bakht, among others. However, in March last year, a Bench headed by CJI D.Y. Chandrachud dismissed these petitions by observing that such issues fall within the exclusive domain of Parliament.

In January last year, the Court dismissed a petition challenging the Uttarakhand government's move to set up an expert committee on the UCC by highlighting that Article 162 permits the exercise of such powers. "Article 162 of the Constitution indicates that the executive power of a State extends to matters with respect to which the Legislature of the State has power to make laws. In view of the provisions of Entry 5 of the Concurrent List of the Seventh Schedule, the constitution of a Committee per se cannot be challenged as ultra vires," the order read. Entry 5 of the Concurrent List deals with "marriage and divorce; infants and minors; adoption; wills, intestacy, and succession; joint family and partition; all matters in respect of which parties in judicial proceedings were immediately before the commencement of this Constitution subject to their personal law."

#### What has the Law Commission said?

In 2016, the BJP government requested the Law

Commission of India to determine how to formulate a uniform code given the existence of "thousands of personal laws" in the country. In August 2018, the 21st Law Commission headed by former Supreme Court judge Justice Balbir Singh Chauhan submitted a 185-page consultation paper on "Reforms of family law" wherein it observed that the "formulation of a Uniform Civil Code is neither necessary nor desirable at this stage". The report stated that a unified nation did not necessarily need "uniformity," adding that secularism could not contradict the plurality prevalent in the country. It, however, recommended that discriminatory practices and stereotypes within existing personal laws should be amended.

However, on June 14 last year, the 22nd Law Commission headed by Justice (Retd) Rituraj Awasthi issued a notification to elicit views from various stakeholders — including public and religious organisations — on the UCC. As Chief Justice of the Karnataka High Court, Justice Awasthi had ruled in favour of the Karnataka government's order prohibiting hijab in educational institutions.

#### What happens next?

Following Uttarakhand's footsteps, two other BJP-ruled States — Madhya Pradesh and Gujarat — have appointed committees to initiate the formulation of a UCC. A similar proposal was also a part of BJP's election manifesto for the Karnataka Assembly polls where the Congress eventually secured a landslide victory.

Whether the Centre is likely to propose a UCC at a pan-India level is debatable. It will perhaps tread cautiously and await the outcome of the exercise undertaken by individual States first. The anticipated report of the 22nd Law Commission is also likely to be of persuasive value. However, in the recent past, there has been strong advocacy for the UCC by both Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Home Minister Amit Shah.

This renewed vigour towards a UCC is also likely to be affected by a pending query before the Supreme Court related to the "scope and ambit of the right to freedom of religion under Article 25 of the Constitution". The question was framed by a Constitution Bench of the Supreme Court in the Sabarimala case for reference to a larger bench. Despite the passage of three years, no progress has been made on it.

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## INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

## FRENCH ELECTRONICS MAJOR THALES TO EXPAND STRATEGIC COLLABORATIONS WITH INDIA

**CONTEXT:** French electronics major Thales is significantly expanding its investments as well as sourcing from India.

A joint venture, Thales Reliance Defence Systems Ltd., in Nagpur is now the Group's global production centre for airport navigational aids, while Bharat Electronics Limited-Thales Systems in Bangalore manufactures high-tech products such as low-band receivers for the electronic warfare suite of Rafale jets. Thales is also further building on defence foothold by developing local services capacity to better support our Indian defence customers to achieve their operational readiness as well as provide all integrated logistics support in India, including maintenance, spare parts, and training" in the spirit of 'Make in India'.

India is a strategic country for Thales with immense potential across our key markets including defence, aerospace as well as digital identity and security solutions. India is currently negotiating the purchase of 26 Rafale-M jets for the Navy.

In addition, Thales will be establishing a maintenance, repair and overhaul (MRO) facility in the Delhi-National Capital Region with "multi-million-Euro" investment for its Indian airline customers focused towards. Combining the strengths of Indian civil aviation market with Thales's prowess in avionics", an MRO set-up in India can provide "world-class service efficiency" to their airline customers."

Thales have steadily built advanced in-country capabilities across manufacturing, critical systems, and services in India through local teams and collaborations. The objective has been "Make in India for India and for the world", enabling the local industry to play a greater role in worldwide markets, investing in the larger supply chain ecosystem in India. This supply chain ecosystem has led to creation of close to 2,000 indirect jobs in India.

## ECONOMICS AND DEVELOPMENT

## A SUNSHINE INITIATIVE

Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman's interim Budget Day speech reiterated a plan by Prime Minister Narendra Modi to supply power to 1 Cr. households in the country using rooftop solar panels. The mid-sized system (1-2 kilowatt) Solar Roof Top Household with minimum outlay of ₹ 1 lakh crore help households save ₹ 15,000 annually. About 80 % to 85 % of 25 crore to 30 crore households in India use between 100 units and 120 units of power a month on average. As of today, rooftop solar systems are subsidised up to 40%, with the remainder having to be borne by the consumer. Under the proposed policy, the subsidy will increase to 60% and the rest will be financed by a private developer who is affiliated to a public sector enterprise connected to the Power Ministry.

The Solar Roof Top Household will ensure quality in installation and also reliable service. The 'net-metering' would allow surplus electricity produced by households can be sold back to the grid to make good the loan, though the actual way in which this is implemented can be quite complex.

So far, only 12 Giga Watt (GW) out of an intended 40 GW of rooftop solar panels has been installed. Here too, household rooftops account for only 2.7 GW with the rest being commercial or building units.

The Centre's move can thus galvanise a subsidiary domestic industry of solar panels — the subsidies will not be available for imported panels — and must be tweaked in a way to be more accommodative to States.

## POLITY AND GOVERNANCE

## UNENDING WOES

**CONTEXT:** The continuing arrests of fishermen from Tamil Nadu and Puducherry by the Sri Lankan Navy in the Palk Bay, despite diplomatic interventions at the highest level, and the attacks on them mid-sea by armed civilians are a matter of serious concern.

Sri Lanka has detained 23 fishermen and the seized two trawlers on Saturday, off Delft Island on charges of "poaching", taking the number of those arrested so far this year to 69, compared to 240 the whole of last year. Since 2013, Sri Lankan authorities have also remanded some fishermen in judicial custody for several months. This year, 34 fishermen, including 12 who were arrested last year, have been released, while over 45 men remain in custody. What is distressing for the community is the confiscation of their expensive fishing nets and vessels — this year, 10 boats were seized.

Sri Lanka is under pressure from its northern province fishermen to act against Tamil Nadu fishermen, who they accuse of resorting to destructive bottom trawling, a practice banned by the country since July 2017. While India promised to end bottom trawling in the Palk Bay and incentivise fishermen to take to deep-sea fishing under the Blue Revolution Scheme, bottom trawlers are still active. Fishermen also face a practical problem as under the Tamil Nadu Marine Fishing Regulation Act 1983, mechanised fishing boats are permitted to fish only beyond three nautical

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miles from the coast. Since the distance between Dhanushkodi and the International Maritime Boundary Line is only nine nautical miles, breaches do occur.

As Prime Minister Narendra Modi emphasised in 2015, the tensions over fishing must be handled as a “humanitarian concern”. Unfortunately, neither side has demonstrated consistency in the handling of the issue. In November 2016, the countries had agreed upon a Joint Working Group (JWG) on Fisheries that would meet every three months, and also have a bi-annual meeting of the Ministers of Fisheries. But the JWG has held just five sittings, the last one being in 2022. Tangible and targeted action is needed to encourage deep-sea fishing, bottom trawling being given up and the issue resolved with mutual compassion and periodic talks.

## POLITY AND GOVERNANCE

# MICRO-CREDENTIALS, THE NEXT CHAPTER IN HIGHER EDUCATION

**CONTEXT:** Higher education institutes (HEIs) in India must play a much more active role in ensuring that students become employable by connecting them with the careers and job opportunities of tomorrow. There is a gap between the knowledge that students acquire in HEIs and the knowledge they must have in order to become employable.

Micro-credentials are emerging as a disruptive way of bridging this gap to acquire ‘just-in-time’ modern skills and competencies. Micro-credentials are evolving as the new normal in higher education due to their flexibility, accessibility, and advantages with a tendency to prioritise skills over degrees.

### The essence of micro-credentials

Micro-credentials are short-duration learning activities with proof of specific learning outcomes that are validated through a standard and reliable assessment process. Micro-credentials are offered in online, physical, or hybrid modes at various levels, such as beginning, intermediate, or advanced. In contrast to micro-credentials, students must study for several years to obtain macro-credentials such as undergraduate degrees. In addition, micro-credentials can also be designed for life-long learners, i.e., working professionals who may not be able to attend a formal degree programme in a university.

Micro-credentials, as a path to life-long learning, are still developing. An obvious sign of this is how assorted terminologies, such as digital badges, micro-master degrees, nano-degrees, and online certificates, are being used for this short-duration learning.

Multiple players such as Atingi, Alison.com, Credly, Coursera, edX, FutureLearn, Google, LinkedIn, Microsoft, PwC and Udacity offer micro-credentials. Many universities in Australia, Canada, Europe, the United Kingdom and the United States are also engaged in providing micro-credentials. More organisations are expected to join this growing club.

In formal degree programmes conducted by HEIs, ‘credits’ are used to assign value to different forms of learning — lectures, tutorials, laboratory work, seminars, projects, internships and so on. In such macro-credential programmes, courses are generally designed to be of three to four credits, and one credit corresponds to one hour of lecture or two hours of lab work per week. Therefore, in conventional educational programmes, ‘credit’ is associated with the time spent in a classroom or a lab.

However, in micro-credentials, the trend is to associate the credit with the notional hours spent acquiring a defined minimum competency. As this makes micro-credential credits consistent with those in conventional higher education, they can be universally validated and recognised.

A clear quality benchmarking and a regulation of these micro-credentials to prevent significant divergences in learning outcomes and facilitate their easy endorsement in the workplace and higher education institutes.

India now has a National Credit Framework (NCrF), which spells out learning outcomes and corresponding credits a student should accumulate in order to progress to the next level of learning. One of the primary benefits of micro-credentials is that they are portable and stackable on a digital platform such as the Academic Bank of Credits (ABC).

### Fostering trust is a key step

To ensure that micro-credentials denote a genuine acquisition of skills, they must be aligned with higher education standards in the areas of delivery, assessment, grading and the awarding of qualifications. Our capacity to devise reliable assessment methods is critical in fostering trust in micro-credentials, and in this task, the association of HEIs is of great importance.

For students in Indian universities, micro-credentials can open up opportunities in integrating diverse skills as a part of their regular education, or they can store the credits on the ABC platform for redemption later or to get a separate certificate or diploma in addition to their macro-credentials. Depending on the duration and learning outcomes, micro-credentials can be given as between one to five credit short modules. Or, learners can accumulate multiple short modules to earn the total number of credits required to obtain a degree as specified in the NCrF.

### There is much potential

As the NCrF is being implemented across the country, it is the right time for Indian HEIs to plan to develop micro-credentials in partnership with industry. The NCrF offers an opportunity for HEIs to examine the development of credit-based micro-credentials as a part of regular degree programmes. Broader deliberations must take place on the potential impact of micro-credentials and the additional value they can create in the tertiary education system.

Is there enough demand for micro-credentials in India? With the focus of the National Education Policy 2020 on providing skilled education to students right from school to the higher levels, and with employers looking for young employees with adequate skills and competencies to boost productivity, learners are increasingly viewing micro-credentials as a value-added advantage. Therefore,

millions of students could be looking to earn micro-credentials either as stand-alone credits or as a component of their standard higher education.

Indian HEIs must serve as agents of transformation and consider introducing micro-credentials a vital element of their strategic institutional objectives. Further to this, regulators and HEIs must work towards harmonising micro-credentials with existing academic programmes by coming up with clear validation metrics.

## INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

# HOLDING ISRAEL ACCOUNTABLE

**CONTEXT:** South Africa moved the ICJ, alleging that Israel's offensive military action in Gaza had resulted in the genocide of the Palestinian people, as defined in Article II of the Genocide Convention, 1948.

The ICJ, yet to rule on whether Israel is committing or has committed genocide in Gaza issued an interim order to protect the rights of the parties under the Genocide Convention till the time it decides the issue on merits. At this stage, the ICJ has ruled that it was plausible that Israel was committing genocide in Gaza. Echoing how precarious things are, the ICJ said that the humanitarian situation in Gaza is "catastrophic", with more than 25,000 Palestinians dead.

### Conditions to be satisfied

Under Article 41 of the ICJ Statute, the court will indicate provisional measures if the following conditions are satisfied. First, the ICJ should have prima facie jurisdiction, that is, the act complained of should fall within the purview of the Convention under which the claim has been made. Second, there must be a link between the measures that the applicant requests and the rights to be protected. Third, the rights that the applicant wants to protect are plausible. Fourth, there should be a risk of irreparable prejudice if the plausible right is not protected. Fifth, prejudice should be capable of materialising before the final determination or adjudication of the dispute.

All these conditions, in this case, are satisfied. The ICJ held that prima facie, it has jurisdiction over the dispute under Article IX of the Genocide Convention. It is vital to remember that the ICJ's jurisdiction, in this case, is restricted to issues under the Genocide Convention. It has no jurisdiction over war crimes or crimes against humanity allegedly committed by Israel in Gaza. The court also held that South Africa has the standing to bring this claim against Israel because all countries that are parties to the Genocide Convention have a common interest in ensuring the prevention, suppression, and punishment of genocide.

The ICJ held that Palestinians appear to constitute a distinct national, ethnic, racial, or religious group and, therefore, are a protected entity within Article II of the Genocide Convention. Proving the crime of genocide requires establishing two elements: physical or actus reus and mental or mens rea. While the physical element focuses on aspects like killing or causing bodily harm to a particular group, the

mental element, which is difficult to prove, is related to the intent to destroy at least a substantial part of the particular group. In the current case, given the massive death and destruction that the Israeli actions since October 7, 2023 have caused to Palestinians, the physical aspect is quite evident. On the intent part, the ICJ noted statements of several Israeli senior officials. For instance, the court took cognisance of the statement of the Israeli defence minister talking of a "complete siege" of Gaza with no electricity, food, and fuel. These dehumanising statements were sufficient to be plausibly read as implying the intent to commit genocide, as international lawyer Marko Milanovic has also argued.

Thus, the court found that some of the rights South Africa claims, and which it is seeking to protect under the Genocide Convention, are plausible. Subsequently, the ICJ held that there was a real and imminent risk of irreparable prejudice if it did not order provisional measures. This irreparable prejudice would be caused to the rights found plausible under the extant proceedings, namely the right of Palestinians in the Gaza Strip to be protected from acts of genocide and the right of South Africa to seek Israel's compliance with the Genocide Convention.

### Provisional measures

While the ICJ, unlike the Ukraine v. Russia case, did not order the ceasing of the military operations in Gaza, it did indicate six significant provisional measures. These measures require Israel and its military to take all measures not just to prevent the commission of genocide but also public incitement to commit genocide; ensure humanitarian assistance to Palestinians in Gaza; prevent the destruction of evidence related to allegations of genocide; and submit a report to the court on all the measures adopted within a month. As an obiter, the ICJ also said that all parties involved in the Gaza Strip conflict are bound by international humanitarian law.

The ICJ's decision is binding on Israel and constitutes part of its international legal obligations. If Israel continues its calamitous military actions, ignoring its obligations under the Genocide Convention, it will be a brazen violation of international law. Cynics might argue that none of this matters because the remedy for not complying with ICJ rulings lies with the United Nations Security Council, which has Israel's all-weather friend, the United States. But the ICJ's decision is momentous because it raises serious questions about how Israel has carried out its military operations, which Tel Aviv will have to answer. The decision also sends a clear message to several other world leaders craving for hot pursuit who often employ dehumanising rhetoric against their opponents. Israel must be careful of not just the courts of law but also the court of public opinion. Finally, South Africa deserves all accolades for showing the courage to bell the cat.



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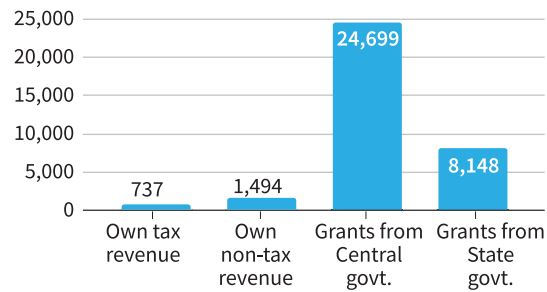
# PANCHAYATS EARN ONLY 1% OF THEIR REVENUE THROUGH TAXES

## Too top heavy

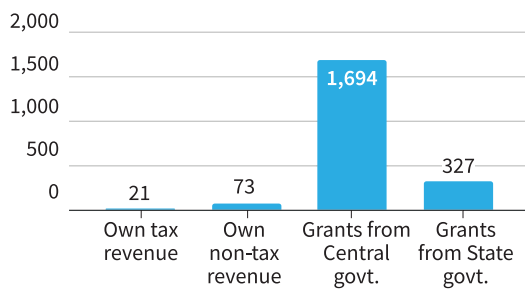
The charts are based on data collated from the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) report titled, 'Finances of Panchayati Raj Institutions'



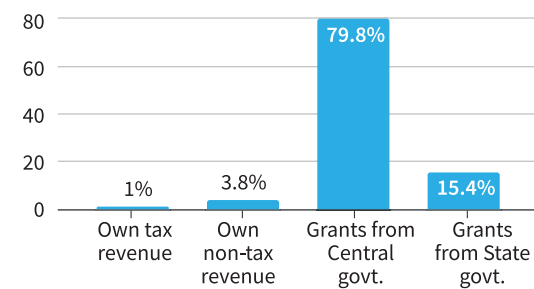
**Chart 1:** The chart shows the revenue receipts of panchayats in 2022-23. Figures in ₹ crore



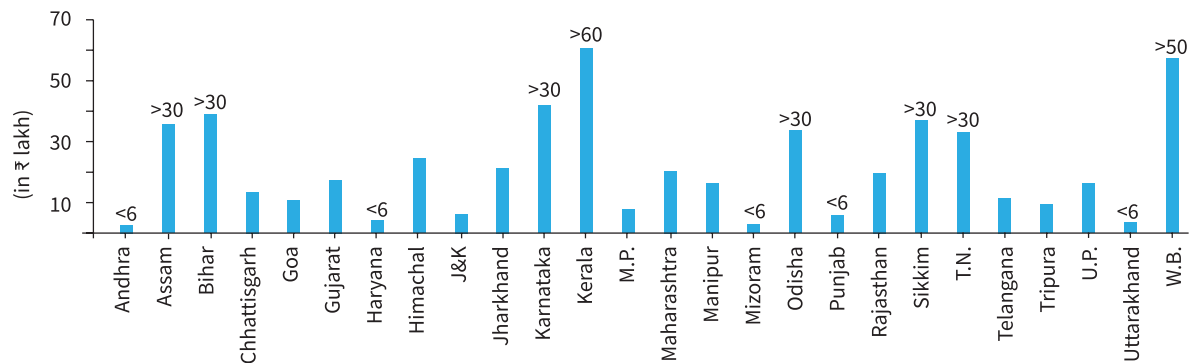
**Chart 2:** The chart shows the average revenue per panchayat in 2022-23. Figures in ₹ thousand



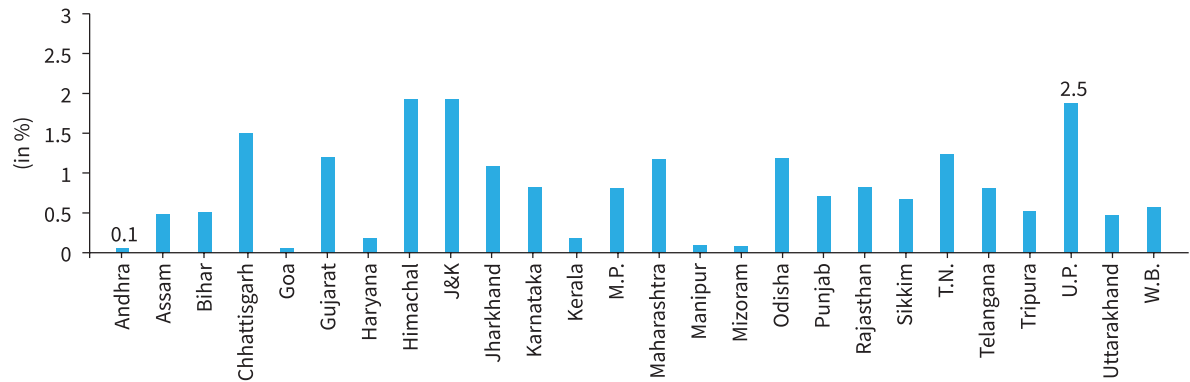
**Chart 3:** The chart shows revenue per Panchayat in percentage terms in 2022-23



**Chart 4:** The chart shows the average revenue per panchayat across States in 2022-23. Figures in ₹ lakh



**Chart 5:** The chart shows the revenue of panchayats as a share of State's own revenue in 2022-2023. Figures in %





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