

● POLITY

● ECONOMICS

● TECHNOLOGY

● ECOLOGY

INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

## U.S. NAVY SINKS THREE HOUTHİ VESSELS

### Bab-el-Mandeb Strait: Trade route between East and West narrows amid Houthi threat

Concerns grow as major maritime transportation companies alter their ship routes in response to the increasing Houthi threats in the Red Sea. This has raised concerns that other companies may also suspend sailings through the Bab-el-Mandeb Strait.

#### CURRENT INCIDENTS AT THE BAB-EL MANDEB STRAIT

- NOV. 19**  
Reports in the Israeli media claim that the Houthis had seized a cargo ship belonging to the UK
- DEC. 3**  
Houthis target two Israeli ships in the Bab-el-Mandeb Strait
- DEC. 12**  
Houthis claim an attack on a Norwegian ship heading to Israel
- DEC. 15**  
Houthis claim missile attacks on 2 Israel-bound cargo ships  
Maersk, the world's second-largest container shipping company, stopped Red Sea routes
- DEC. 16**  
CENTCOM reports shooting down 14 UAVs in the Red Sea  
Mediterranean Shipping Company (MSC), Hapag-Lloyd and CMA CGM, suspended all sailings in the region

#### BAB-EL MANDEB STRAIT

- Approximately 32 km in length
- Links the Red Sea to the Gulf of Aden and Indian Ocean
- Transits about 10% of global seaborne oil flows
- Shortens maritime journeys by an average of 14 days

December 16, 2023

**CONTEXT:** US Navy helicopters sank three vessels operated by Yemen's Iran-backed Houthi rebels that had attacked a container ship in the Red Sea on Sunday.

The U.S. Navy responded to a request for assistance from the ship Maersk Hangzhou, a Singapore-flagged and Denmark-owned and -operated container ship, that came under attack for a second time in 24 hours while transiting the Red Sea. Maersk suspended the passage of vessels through the Bab al-Mandab Strait in the Red Sea for 48 hours.

Who are Houthis?

The Houthis are a Shiite sect of Islam called Zaydi Muslims, a minority in mostly-Sunni Yemen whose roots there go back hundreds of years. They emerged as a political and militant organization in the 1990s, opposing Yemeni government over issues like corruption, U.S. influence and perceived mistreatment of their group. After carrying out insurgencies against the state from the early 2000s onward, the

Houthis capitalized on the instability that followed the 2011 Arab Spring to increase their following.

In 2014, Houthi rebels took over the capital Sanaa, setting off a war with the Saudi and Western-backed Yemeni government. A Saudi-led Arab coalition in 2015 launched an offensive against Yemen which went on to create what the U.N. called one of the worst humanitarian crises in the world.

POLITY AND GOVERNANCE

## AADHAAR-LINKED PAY MADE MANDATORY FOR MGNREGS WORKERS



**CONTEXT:** From January 01 onwards, wages under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS) will be paid only through an Aadhaar-based payment system (ABPS), which requires the Aadhaar details of workers to be seeded to their job cards.

The first order to enforce the system was issued on January 30, 2023, followed by extensions till February 1, March 31, June 30, August 31, and December 31. Approximately, 34.8 % of the job card holders remain ineligible for this mode of payment as on December 27. Since the first push in this direction, the rate at which MGNREGS job cards are deleted has significantly risen, which activists working in the field say is directly linked to the mandatory imposition of this payment method.

Active workers are those who have worked for at least one day over the past three financial years. Till December 27, 12.7 % of these active workers are still not eligible for the new system. Of the 25.25 crore registered workers, 14.35 crore are categorised as active workers.

Deletion of cards

The States have deleted a number of cards ineligible for

Aadhaar payments. These includes cases where there were discrepancies between Aadhaar and the job card, due to issues such as different spellings of names. The cards have been deleted citing various reasons, including that the worker was “not willing to work”.

The new systems use the workers’ 12-digit Aadhaar as their financial address. To get payment, a worker’s Aadhaar details must be seeded to their job card; their Aadhaar details must be seeded to their bank account; their Aadhaar must be mapped with the National Payments Corporation of India database; and finally, the bank’s institutional identification number must itself be mapped with that database. The government contends that ABPS implementation will plug leaks, ensure speedy payments, and reduce rejection.

#### INTERNAL SECURITY

## GEELANI-FOUNDED OUTFIT DECLARED ‘UNLAWFUL BODY’

**CONTEXT:** The Union Home Ministry on Sunday declared Tehreek-e-Hurriyat, Jammu and Kashmir (TeH) an “unlawful association” under Section 3 of the anti-terror law, the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act (UAPA).

The TeH is one of the constituents of the All Party Hurriyat Conference (APHC) and was founded by separatist Syed Ali Shah Geelani, who died in 2021. The outfit is involved in forbidden activities to separate J&K from India and establish Islamic rule. The group is found spreading anti-India propaganda and continuing terror activities to fuel secessionism in J&K. Under Prime Minister Narendra Modiji’s zero-tolerance policy against terrorism, any individual or organisation found involved in anti-India activities will be thwarted forthwith. Many criminal cases had been registered against this organisation under various Sections of the UAPA, the Arms Act, the Ranbir Penal Code, and the Indian Penal Code.

The notification said the TeH was known for its involvement in fomenting terrorism and anti-India propaganda for fuelling the secessionist activities in Jammu and Kashmir and the leaders and members of the outfit had been involved in raising funds through various sources, including Pakistan and its proxy organisations for perpetrating unlawful activities, including supporting terrorist activities, sustained stone pelting on security forces in Jammu and Kashmir. The Home Ministry said the TeH indulged in unlawful activities, which are prejudicial to the integrity, sovereignty, security, and communal harmony of the country and the outfit never believed in a democratic system of governance and the TeH leadership gave repeated calls to boycott Assembly elections on multiple occasions.

The Union government directed that this notification shall, subject to any order that may be made under Section 4 of the UAPA, has effect for a period of five years from the date of its publication in the official gazette.



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

#### INTERNAL SECURITY

## NAVY DEPLOYS FRIGATES, DESTROYERS TO ASSIST COMMERCIAL VESSELS



**CONTEXT:** Against the backdrop of the increasing attacks on commercial ships transiting the Red Sea, the Gulf of Aden, and the Arabian Sea, the Indian Navy said on Sunday that it had substantially enhanced maritime surveillance efforts in the central and north Arabian Sea and “augmented force levels”.

Task Groups comprising destroyers and frigates have been deployed to undertake maritime security operations and render assistance to merchant vessels in case of any incident. Aerial surveillance by long-range maritime patrol aircraft and Remotely Piloted Aircraft (RPA) has been enhanced to have a complete maritime domain awareness.

With Coast Guard

Towards effective surveillance of the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) of India, the Navy is operating in close coordination with the Coast Guard. The hijacking of m.v. Ruen approximately 700 nautical miles off the Indian coast and the drone attack on m.v. Chem Pluto approximately 220 nautical miles south west of Porbandar indicated a “shift” in maritime incidents closer to the Indian EEZ.

A multi-agency investigation is under way into the drone attack on m.v. Chem Pluto on December 23. Another vessel, the Gabon-flagged m.v. Sai Baba with an Indian crew, was hit by a drone in the South Red Sea on the same day.

**ECONOMICS AND DEVELOPMENT****PROPOSALS SOUGHT FOR FINAL SUPPLEMENTARY DEMANDS FOR GRANTS**

**CONTEXT:** The Finance Ministry has sought expenditure proposals for the second and final batch of Supplementary Demands for Grants from various Ministries and departments ahead of the Budget Session that is likely to commence in the last week of January.

At the last session of the 17th Lok Sabha before the General Elections and the government would seek expenditure approvals of Parliament for four months till July 2024 through a vote on account. The second batch of Supplementary Demands for Grants for 2023-24 is proposed to be placed before Parliament in the ensuing Budget session.

The cases that would be eligible to be incorporated under such demands include those where advances from the Contingency Fund have been granted. Besides, payments against court decree would be included as well as cases where the Finance Ministry has specifically advised moving the supplementary demand in the winter session. According to the memorandum, the ministries are required to submit their proposals by January 8. The interim Budget 2024-25 is likely to be presented on February 1.

**INTERNAL SECURITY****4G SERVICES WILL BE PROVIDED AT 1,117 BORDER OUTPOSTS IN SIX YEARS: CENTRE**

**CONTEXT:** The Union Home Ministry has approved 4G mobile services for more than 1,100 border outposts along India's international borders, including the border with China, at a cost of ₹ 1,545.66 crore.

The Ministry signed a tripartite agreement with the Department of Telecommunications and Bharat Sanchar Nigam Limited to execute the project over the next six-and-a-half years. The project will cover 1,117 border outposts and intelligence posts of the armed forces and the Intelligence Bureau.

However, out of the 379 villages and hamlets approved under the 4G saturation project for the Union Territory of Ladakh, mobile phone towers have been established at only nine sites, with the foundation work completed at 34 sites.

Since 2020, India and China have been engaged in a stand-off at multiple locations along the undemarcated Line of Actual Control (LAC) in eastern Ladakh.

**Border road projects**

The Union Home Ministry informed of construction of 48.03 kilometres of roads along the China border, while four border outposts and three helipads. After the June 2020 incident at Galwan in Ladakh, when 20 Indian soldiers were killed in violent clashes with Chinese forces, the Union

government sanctioned 32 roads along the China border. The report said that 32 helipads were being constructed and upgraded along the China border.

The first phase of the India-China border road project (ICBR) was initiated in 2005 when it was decided that the Home Ministry would construct 27 priority roads with a total length of 608 km along the border with China. The second phase of the ICBR project was approved on September 21, 2020.

The Ministry added that 184.39 km of roads had been constructed along the Bangladesh border, and 120.06 km along the Nepal border. In all, 88 border outposts were constructed in 2023. The Ministry said that 2.4 km of the border with Myanmar and 18 km of the border with Pakistan had been fenced.

**POLITY AND GOVERNANCE****PANAGARIYA TO HEAD 16TH FINANCE COMMISSION**

**CONTEXT:** The government on Sunday appointed former NITI Aayog Vice-Chairman Arvind Panagariya Chairman of the 16th Finance Commission, which will recommend the tax revenue sharing formula between the Centre and States for the five-year period beginning April 2026.

The Finance Ministry on Sunday notified President Droupadi Murmu's order for Mr. Panagariya's appointment. The terms of reference for the panel were approved by the Cabinet on November 29. Mr. Panagariya, a Columbia University Professor and trade economist, had served as the first Vice-Chairman of the NITI Aayog, which replaced the Planning Commission, from 2015 to 2017. The names of the members of the commission will be notified separately, says the order, which appointed Ritvik Ranjanam Pandey, who was earlier a Joint Secretary in the Department of Revenue, as the panel's secretary.

The Chairman and other members of the Commission shall hold office from the date on which they respectively assume office upto the date of the submission of report or October 31, 2025, whichever is earlier. October 2025 is the deadline set for the commission to submit its recommendations, so that they can be incorporated in the Budget exercise.

*"Intelligence plus character-that is the goal of true education. — Martin Luther King Jr.*



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**INTERNAL SECURITY**

**ENDGAME**

**CONTEXT:** The pro-talks faction of the United Liberation Front of Asom, the Union government and the Assam State government signed a tripartite agreement, in New Delhi, marking the end of a process that began in 2009.

**Origins of ULFA (1979):** Formed in 1979, the United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA) aimed to establish a sovereign Assamese nation. Grievances such as perceived marginalization of indigenous Assamese people, influx of migrants, and economic disparities fuelled the movement.

**Armed Insurgency (1980s-2000s):** ULFA resorted to armed struggle, employing tactics like kidnappings, extortions, and bombings. The Indian government responded with counter-insurgency operations, leading to a cycle of violence and instability in Assam. This period saw countless lives lost and significant economic damage.

**Early Attempts at Peace Talks (1990s-2000s):** Sporadic attempts at peace talks occurred throughout the 1990s and 2000s, but disagreements over ULFA's demand for independence made reaching an agreement difficult. Military operations by Bhutan in the early 2000s broke its insurgent might and, later, the Sheikh Hasina-led Awami League government in Bangladesh handed over most of the outfit's leaders. Internal factions within ULFA also complicated the process. The "commander-in-chief" of the outfit, Paresh Baruah, had opposed the dialogue process in 2009, insisting that the "sovereignty issue" be a part of it, and since then his faction, the ULFA (Independent) has remained hostile to the peace process.

**Shifting Tides (2010s-present):** The 2010s saw fatigue from the violence and economic strain, alongside internal leadership changes within ULFA, creating a more conducive environment for negotiations. The pro-talks faction of ULFA led by Arabinda Rajkhowa gained prominence, expressing willingness to explore solutions within the Indian constitution. Nearly 15 years ago, the "chairman" of ULFA, Arabinda Rajkhowa, who went on to become the face of the pro-talks faction, was "arrested", even as other key leaders of the insurgent outfit surrendered. By 2011, following a unilateral ceasefire by the group, the ULFA's pro-talks faction had already signed a "suspension of operations" agreement, with several cadres staying put at special camps called "Nabanirman Kendras", putting an end to the then 32-year-old insurgency. The pro-talks faction gave up the demand for sovereignty and revised its charter of demands to accommodate the interests of the "indigenous people" of Assam, while seeking an honourable exit.

**Path to the Tripartite Agreement (2014-2020):** Back-channel talks through intermediaries facilitated communication between ULFA and the government. A series of meetings and concessions from both sides paved the way for a formal agreement. The Tripartite Agreement (2020) was signed in September 2020, the agreement marked a significant milestone.

**Rehabilitation and Reintegration of ULFA Cadres:**

1. The government committed to a comprehensive rehabilitation and reintegration program for surrendered ULFA cadres.

2. This includes financial assistance, skill development training, educational opportunities, and assistance in finding employment.
3. The aim is to facilitate their smooth transition back into civilian life and prevent recidivism.

**Ongoing Challenges and Uncertainties:**

1. Implementing the agreement requires time, dedication, and continuous trust-building.
2. Rehabilitation of former militants, addressing economic disparities, and protecting indigenous rights remain key concerns.
3. Internal dissent within ULFA and opposition from other factions pose potential risks.

The tripartite agreement offers a chance to heal the wounds of the past and usher in a new era of peace and prosperity for Assam. It's too early to predict the ultimate success, but the agreement represents a significant step towards a brighter future for the region.

**SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY**

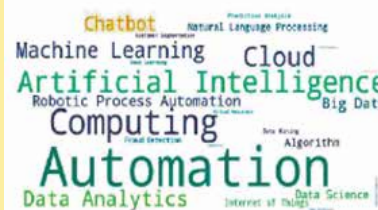
**THE RISE OF AI CHATBOTS IN INDIA'S BANKING SECTOR**

**Banking on bots**

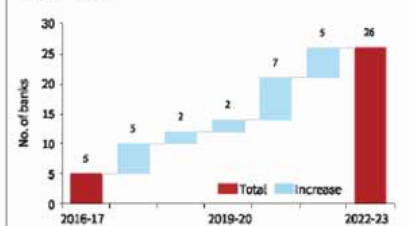
The text and the graphs were sourced from an article titled 'Adoption of Artificial Intelligence in Indian Banks', published in the Report on Trends and Progress of Banking in India 2022-23 produced by the RBI



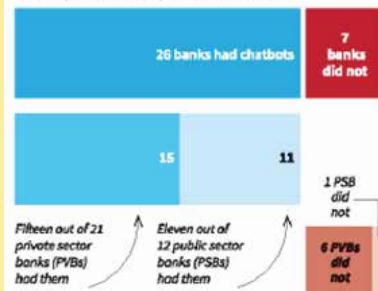
**Chart 1:** A word cloud showing a textual analysis of AI-related keywords in banks' annual reports



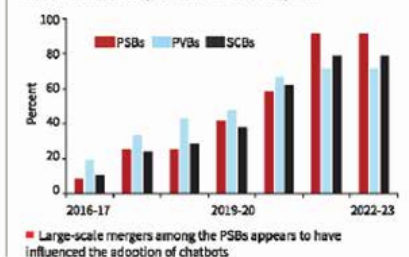
**Chart 2:** The chart shows the number of banks in India which adopted chatbots. In total, 33 scheduled commercial banks were analysed



**Chart 3:** The chart shows the share of banks in India which had adopted chatbots by the end of June 2023



**Chart 4:** The chart shows the growth in the share of PSBs and PVBs which adopted chatbots over the years



**CONTEXT:** The 2022-23 report on the trends in, and progress of, banking in India, which was released on Wednesday by the Reserve Bank of India (RBI), studies the use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in banks and how it has grown over time. To assess the level of awareness and readiness for adopting AI in Indian banks, an analytical study was conducted on banks' annual reports by the RBI staff between 2015-16 and 2021-22.

This study employed a textual analysis method by matching keywords specific to the domain and utilising named entity recognition techniques. It leveraged widely recognised AI and Machine Learning (ML) dictionaries and glossaries from sources such as Google Vertex AI, Google Developers, IBM, NHS AI Lab, and the Council of Europe. Additionally, insights from Large Language Models such as ChatGPT and Bard were integrated into the analysis.

## POLITY AND GOVERNANCE

# THE GOVERNMENT'S OTT OVERSIGHT

**CONTEXT:** The new Broadcasting Services (Regulation) Bill, 2023, that aims to replace the Cable Television Networks (Regulation) Act, proposing mandatory registration, content evaluation committees for self-regulation, and a three-tier regulatory system expands regulatory oversight to include OTT platforms and digital content. The government claims it will modernise regulations and enhance business ease but the move raises concerns over potential censorship and impacts on freedom of speech due to increased scrutiny of digital media for "obscene and vulgar" content.

### Salient features

- All cable and satellite broadcasting network operators must register to operate, while broadcasters should get approval from the registering authority for transmitting programmes, with the exception of a few authorised bodies like Prasar Bharati or Parliament channels. Similar provisions apply to terrestrial and radio broadcasting networks. They are also required to maintain subscriber data.
- Expands the purview of broadcasting rules to networks that use the internet to broadcast services and programmes, such as Internet Protocol Television (IPTV) and OTT broadcasting services (classified as broadcasting network operators in the draft) if they have the required number of subscribers or viewers. The Bill leaves it to the Union government to prescribe limits later.
- OTT broadcasting services will, however, not include a social media intermediary or a user of such intermediary, as defined under the Information Technology Act, 2000.

### Content quality and accessibility

Any programme or advertisement broadcasted through TV, radio, or other broadcasting services must adhere to the Programme Code and Advertisement Code, which are yet to be defined. These Codes will also apply to individuals and organisations broadcasting news and current affairs programmes online through e-newspapers, news portals, websites and other similar social media platforms that

operate as a "systematic business" or "professional" entity. Digital copies of newspapers and publishers of commercial newspapers, however, will be exempted.

Broadcasters will have to classify their programmes into different categories based on context, theme, tone, impact and target audience. The classification must be prominently displayed at the beginning of the show so that viewers can make "informed decisions." The Bill requires network operators to implement access control measures for shows that are classified for restricted viewing, such as those with adult content.

Additionally, the Bill provides accessibility guidelines to address the needs of persons with disabilities, calling for broadcasting network operators and broadcasters to make their platform, equipment and programmes more accessible. Suggested measures include audio descriptions for the blind, sign language translations, adding subtitles in different fonts, sizes and colours, and using accessible applications.

It further asks broadcasters to make a certain percentage of content accessible within a specified period in accordance with the accessibility guidelines. A disability grievance redressal officer will be appointed by the Centre to address complaints pertaining to the accessibility guidelines, and a broadcaster or broadcasting network operator could be penalised in case of a violation.

### Self-regulation

One of the highlights of the draft is a proposed self-regulation regime to ensure compliance with the programme and advertisement codes and to address other complaints.

Every broadcaster or broadcasting network operator must establish a Content Evaluation Committee (CEC) with members from various social groups, including women, child welfare, Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and minorities. Broadcasters will be allowed to air only those programmes certified by the CEC, except for specific shows exempted by the government.

The Centre, meanwhile, will have the authority to define the size, quorum, and other operational details of the committee. The details of the committee members, including their names and credentials, should be published by the broadcaster or network operator on their website.

### The three-tier broad regulatory structure:

#### Self-regulation by operators

Broadcasters and broadcasting network operators will have to establish and maintain mechanisms for the filing and redressal of complaints. A grievance redressal officer will be appointed to handle complaints related to content and contravention of the programme and advertisement codes. In case the official is unable to decide in the prescribed period or the complainant is not satisfied with their decision, it can approach the self-regulatory organisation.

#### Self-regulatory organisations

It is a proposed body of broadcasters, broadcasting network operators or their associations, which will guide their members to ensure compliance with the broadcasting rules and deal with grievances related to content violations not resolved within a specific time frame. They can also take up appeals against the decisions of broadcasters or network operators.

If a broadcaster is found guilty of any wrongdoing, the self-regulatory organisation to which it belongs has the authority to expel, suspend, or impose penalties in the form of advisories, censures, warnings, or monetary fines, not exceeding ₹5 lakh for each violation.

### Broadcast Advisory Council

The Centre will establish an advisory council, consisting of independent experts and government representatives, to oversee the implementation of the regulations. It will hear content violations complaints and accordingly make recommendations to the government.

The government will then, after due consideration, issue appropriate orders and directions. The Council can also form review panels to assist with its functions. These panels are assigned specific cases or appeals and provide their recommendations, considered as recommendations of the Broadcast Advisory Council as per the text of the Bill.

### Provision for inspection, seizure of equipment

The Broadcasting Services (Regulation) Bill allows inspections by the government without prior notice. Operators must facilitate monitoring at their own cost and can face equipment seizure if violations are suspected. Companies are liable unless they prove a lack of knowledge or due diligence. The equipment seized shall be liable to confiscation unless the operator of broadcasting network or broadcasting services demonstrates compliance with the provisions of the rules or guidelines, within 30 days from the date of seizure of the said equipment. There is, however, a provision of a written notice to the operator informing it of the grounds for such confiscation to provide the opportunity of making a representation. In case no such notice is given within 10 days from the date of the seizure of the equipment, it has to be returned to the operator.

### What are the penalties for non-compliance?

The Bill includes provisions for penalties such as removal of objectionable shows, orders, apologies, off-air periods, or even cancellation of registration in case of non-compliance with the programme and advertisement codes.

The Centre may prohibit the transmission of a programme, or operation of broadcaster or broadcasting network by citing public interest or national security reasons. If the programme or channel is “likely to promote disharmony or feelings of enmity, hatred, or ill-will between different religious, racial, linguistic, or regional groups or castes or communities or if it is likely to disturb public tranquillity on grounds of religion, race, language, caste, or community,” then it can be prohibited by order, the draft reads.

### What are the main concerns?

The broad scope of the Bill for traditional broadcasters, such as cable TV, and the evolving OTT space, which essentially has a different business model and content delivery mechanism, has drawn a mixed response from legal experts and advocates for digital freedom.

Digital rights organisation Internet Freedom Foundation (IFF) has called for a cautious examination of the Bill due to the proposed codes’ similarity to the Code applicable to cable TV and the increased censorship of TV programmes as a consequence. “This may affect the publisher’s online free speech, freedom of journalistic expression and artistic creativity, & the citizen’s right to access differing points of view because publishers will be compelled to only produce content which is palatable to the Union Government,” it says.

The group claims that exerting executive control over OTT content will lead to “over-compliance and self-censorship” because platforms would aim to avoid the government’s broad discretion when it comes to punishments.



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