● POLITY   ● ECONOMICS   ● TECHNOLOGY   ● ECOLOGY

INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

NAVY THWARTS HIJACKING ATTEMPT IN ARABIAN SEA

CONTEXT: Indian Navy's MARCOS successfully thwarted a hijacking attempt in the North Arabian Sea, rescuing 21 crew members, including 15 Indians, from the vessel Lila Norfolk.

Ships in distress

In the last month of 2023, India responded to three distress calls from ships in trouble

Dec 14: Malta-flagged vessel m.v. *Ruen*, with an 18-member crew, sent a mayday message indicating boarding by about six unknown persons around 700 nautical miles from the Indian coast

Dec 23: m.v. *Chem Pluto*, with 21 Indian and 1 Vietnamese crew members, reported a projectile attack around 217 nautical miles southwest of Porbandar. Initial investigation by the Navy indicated a drone attack

Dec 23: A Gabon-flagged crude oil tanker m.v. *Sai Baba* with an all-Indian crew heading to India was hit by a one-way attack drone in the Southern Red Sea; no injuries were reported

Safe and secure: The cargo ship Lila Norfolk, after the rescue, prepares to move to the next port of call. PTI

INDIAN NAVY IN SAVING SHIPPING VESSELS FROM SOMALIAN PIRATES

2019
MV Asphalt Princess: INS Teg liberates hijacked tanker, showcasing Indian Navy's success in rescuing vessels and freeing hostages.

2021
MV Albedo: INS Tarkash intervenes in Gulf of Aden, demonstrating Indian Navy's proactive approach against piracy.

2023
MV Horsburgh: Indian warship INS Chennai thwarts pirate attack in Arabian Sea, showcasing Indian Navy's swift response and vigilance.

2020
MV Vega: INS Betwa protects Greek bulk carrier, emphasizing Indian Navy's commitment to ensuring safe international trade routes.

2022
MV Anuket Harmony: INS Vikrant executes daring rescue off Somalia, highlighting Indian Navy's prowess in complex maritime operations.

BACKGROUND: Indian Navy's Marine Commandos (MARCOS) confirmed the absence of hijackers on the bulk carrier Lila Norfolk, thwarting a piracy attempt near the coast of Eyl, Somalia. The hijackers likely abandoned their efforts after a forceful warning from the Indian Navy's Maritime Patrol Aircraft and the interception by INS Chennai. The naval vessel is now providing support for power restoration and propulsion, enabling the carrier to proceed to its next port of call.
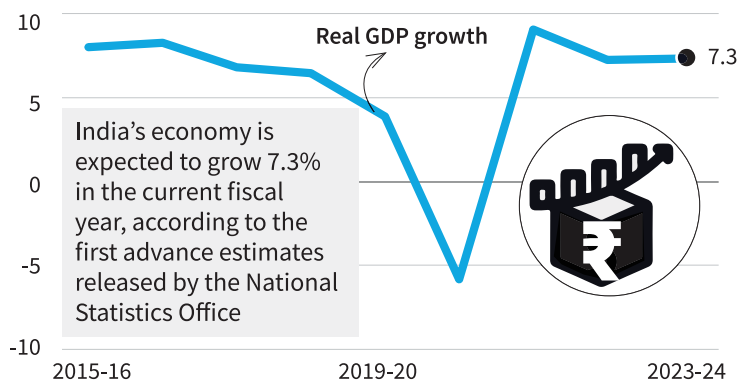
NEWS HIGHLIGHTS:

- INS Chennai diverts from anti-piracy patrol, intercepting a vessel en route to Bahrain; MARCOS conducts sanitization, ensuring crew safety.
- Maritime surveillance, including MPA and helicopters, aided in monitoring and interception, preventing potential piracy threats.
- Recent hijackings, including the Malta-flagged tanker by Somali pirates and rebel attacks, raise security concerns in the region.
- Indian Navy responds by intensifying efforts, enhancing maritime surveillance in the face of growing piracy and rebel threats.
- The vessel, targeted on its way from Brazil to Bahrain, marks the second hijacking incident in the region recently.

ECONOMICS

INDIA'S GDP ESTIMATED TO GROW BY 7.3%: NSO DATA

CONTEXT: India's projected real GDP growth for 2023-24 is 7.3%, surpassing the previous year's 7.2%, exceeding the Reserve Bank of India's 7% estimate.

First estimates

Real GDP growth — 7.3

India's economy is expected to grow 7.3% in the current fiscal year, according to the first advance estimates released by the National Statistics Office

	2015-16	2019-20	2023-24

Source: CMIE, Reuters

HIGHLIGHTS: The National Statistical Office (NSO) predicts a slight easing in India's GDP growth from 7.7% in the first half to around 6.9%-7% in the second half of the year. Notably, Gross Value Added (GVA) is expected to dip from 7% in 2022-23 to 6.9%, with nominal GDP growth at 8.9%,

potentially leading to a fiscal deficit surpassing the 5.9% target. Concerns arise as GVA growth in sectors like agriculture and services is anticipated to decrease significantly.

NEWS HIGHLIGHTS: Economists express scepticism over optimistic GDP estimates, emphasizing concerns about weak consumption growth at 4.4%, the slowest in two decades excluding the pandemic year. NSO anticipates a drop in the share of private final consumption expenditure in GDP to 56.9%, the lowest in three years. The RBI projects third-quarter GDP growth at 6.5%, potentially moderating to 6% in January to March 2024.

HISTORY - ART AND CULTURE

DISCOVERY OF PALAEOLITHIC TOOLS ADDS TO UNDERSTANDING OF HUMAN SETTLEMENTS

CONTEXT: Telangana's Mulugu district floods revealed Palaeolithic quartzite tools in a dried-up stream, enhancing insights into human habitation in the region.

BACKGROUND: A recent discovery in the flooded regions of Mulugu and Jayashankar Bhupalpally districts in Telangana sheds light on human habitations in the area. Unearthed by researcher Eleswaram Janardanachari, a stone axe measuring 15.5cm x 11cm x 5.5cm was found in the stream between Gurrevula and Bhupatipuram villages in Mulugu district, contributing to the understanding of historical settlements in Telangana and central India.

NEWS HIGHLIGHTS:

- Ancient Discovery: Paleontologist Ravi Korisettar identifies a stone axe from the Lower Palaeolithic period, dating back approximately 3 million years.
- Palaeolithic Age Insights: The tool, part of the Old Stone Age, provides a glimpse into early human history, dating 3.3 million years BC.
- Distinctive Features: Recognition based on chipping style, material, and size reveals the tool's use by Palaeolithic hunter-gatherers for woodcutting and hunting.
- Global Significance: Similar hand axes found worldwide indicate a common technology among Palaeolithic cultures; this particular find adds to the global archaeological knowledge.
- Historical Context: The discovery echoes a site near Chennai from 1863, labeled the Madras Hand-Axe Industry or Madrasian Culture, with tools about 1.5 million years old.

Palaeolithic age in India

- Timeframe: Palaeolithic Age in India spans approximately 3.3 million to 10,000 years ago, dating from 3.3 million years BC.
- Tool Technology: Characterized by the use of heavy quartzite tools, including hand axes, for woodcutting and hunting animals.
- Global Connection: Similar Palaeolithic tools found worldwide suggest shared technology and practices among ancient cultures.
- Historical Sites: Notable sites in India, like Attirampakkam near Chennai, reveal bifacial hand-axes from early humans, dating around 1.5 million years.
- Cultural Label: In historical context, the Palaeolithic culture in India is associated with labels like the Madras Hand-Axe Industry or Madrasian Culture.

SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

DRUG WAR

CONTEXT: Antimicrobial resistance poses a threat to medical progress, emphasizing the importance of balance in preventive practices like antibiotic prophylaxis.

BACKGROUND: The 'First Multicentric Point Prevalence Survey of Antibiotic Use at 20 NAC-NET Sites India 2021-22' by the National Centre for Disease Control reveals alarming trends. In tertiary-care hospitals across 15 States and two Union Territories, over 70% of patients were prescribed antibiotics, with more than 50% having the potential to cause deadly antimicrobial resistance (AMR). This underscores long-standing concerns raised by experts.

HIGHLIGHTS:

- AMR Crisis: Pathogens evolving and resisting drugs, known as Antimicrobial Resistance (AMR), lead to global deaths and medical risks.
- Causes of AMR: Unsound medical and animal husbandry practices, misuse, and overuse of antimicrobials contribute to drug-resistant pathogens.
- Global Impact: WHO estimates 1.27 million deaths directly attributed to bacterial AMR in 2019, undermining modern medicine and increasing risks.
- Urgent Measures Needed: Critical call for rational antibiotic prescription, curbs on drug use in animals, and urgent development of new antibiotics.
- Regulation and Research: Crucial roles for doctors and government in regulating drug use, but urgent need for research to address the antibiotic development pipeline crisis.

What is Antimicrobial Resistance?

Antimicrobial Resistance (AMR) is the ability of microbes to resist the effects of drugs, rendering standard treatments ineffective and posing a global threat to public health.

- Cause of Antimicrobial Resistance (AMR): Overuse of

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antibiotics in healthcare and agriculture, exemplified by routine antibiotic use in livestock farming.

- Impacts: AMR leads to treatment failures, increased mortality rates, and longer illnesses. Example: Common infections becoming untreatable.
- Statistics in India and Worldwide: Globally, by 2050, AMR could cause 10 million deaths annually. In India, overuse is evident with a high antibiotic consumption rate.
- National Policy in India: India's National Action Plan on AMR focuses on surveillance, regulation, and promoting responsible antibiotic use. Example: Restricting over-the-counter antibiotic sales.
- Global Initiatives: Global leaders collaborate through initiatives like the Global Antibiotic Research and Development Partnership (GARDP) to develop new antibiotics. Example: Research funding to combat AMR globally.

The alarming prevalence of prophylactic antibiotic use, contributing to antimicrobial resistance (AMR), demands urgent intervention. Misuse, overuse, and a deficient research pipeline necessitate stringent regulations by both the medical community and the government to safeguard the efficacy of antimicrobials and preserve the gains of modern medicine.

GOVERNANCE

THE NEED TO EXAMINE THE EXAMINATION SYSTEM

CONTEXT: Examination scandals undermine education standards; credibility of examination systems is crucial for fostering genuine learning and preparing students for diverse challenges.

BACKGROUND: The lack of credibility in the examination system within educational institutions adversely impacts educational standards. When the examination pattern is predictable, focusing on memory-based testing, teaching becomes oriented towards rote memorization. Inflating marks and aiming for high pass percentages are often prioritized, leading to increased talent search costs for employers. Establishing a credible examination system is crucial for enhancing the overall standard of education.

Decentralised System

- Diversity in Education: India's vast education system, with 1,100 universities and 50,000 colleges, faces challenges in examination standardization.
- Issues with Current System: Lack of transparency and standardized assessments lead to scandals; uniformity stifles experimentation in assessment and curriculum.
- Concerns on Summative Exams: The traditional summative exams fail to assess higher-order thinking and critical skills, emphasizing memory over application.
- Flaws in Question Papers: Instances of language errors, conceptualization issues, and irrelevant questions are common, hindering fair evaluation of students' learning.
- Employability Gap: Employers rely on their assessments due to doubts about institutional certification, creating a

market for coaching and competitive exams.

Assessment Quality: Effective assessment systems in Indian education require alignment with outcome-based learning, emphasizing transparency and oversight. Despite regulatory advisories, institutions often fall short in curriculum implementation and higher-order skill development. Addressing secrecy issues and promoting simultaneous reforms in both curriculum and examinations are crucial for meaningful change.

Steps to Take

- Diverse Approaches to Learning: With specified minimum standards, multiple methods for achieving learning outcomes are encouraged in education.
- Continuous Assessment: Teacher-led continuous assessment, though subjective, can improve with documentation, real-time oversight, and student participation.
- Technology Integration: Utilizing technology enhances credibility in assessments, offering standardized question papers, evaluation, and various software solutions for transparency.
- Quality Assurance Measures: Codifying negligence, fraud, and academic inadequacies, linked to corrective measures, ensures accountability. External audits and transparency are crucial.
- Credible Certifications: University degrees and school certificates should reflect comprehensive learning achievements, emphasizing transparency, credibility, and adherence to minimum standards.

DEC. PMI SIGNALS SERVICES ACTIVITY REBOUNDED TO A THREE-MONTH HIGH

CONTEXT: India's services sector showed a December rebound, marking a three-month high, with accelerated growth in new business and output, per HSBC's PMI.

Services rebound

The HSBC India Services Purchasing Managers' Index rose last month to 59, from 56.9 in November

- Hiring was at a slightly stronger pace than Nov. with firms opting to recruit a mix of part-time and full-time workers

- Business optimism levels, however, improved from November levels

- Firms passed on cost burdens, with output charges rising at a pace that was faster than input cost inflation

BACKGROUND: In December, the services sector in India witnessed the 19th consecutive month of increased job creation, with a slightly accelerated hiring pace compared to November. Despite a slowdown in export orders, particularly in regions like Australia, Canada, Europe, West Asia, and South America, business optimism improved. Input cost inflation reached a 40-month low, but firms continued to pass on cost increases to clients, resulting in output charges rising above the long-run average.

HIGHLIGHTS: The October to December 2023 quarter marked the lowest quarterly average, attributed to weaker index levels in October (58.4) and November (56.9). However, outstanding business volumes saw a slight increase in December, representing the fastest uptick in four months. India's services sector concluded the year positively, with an upswing in business activity and a three-month high in new orders, according to Pranjul Bhandari, HSBC's Chief India Economist. Input costs rose at a slower pace than in November, continuing a trend since mid-2023.

I&B MINISTRY INVITES FEEDBACK ON THE DRAFT RULES FOR PERIODICALS

CONTEXT: The Information and Broadcasting Ministry seeks input on the draft Press and Registration of Periodicals Rules, 2024, for implementation.

BACKGROUND: The proposed law introduces a simplified online process for title verification and registration of periodicals. Convicted individuals associated with terrorist activities or actions against state security are prohibited from publishing periodicals. The new law aims to substantially decriminalize various violations, except for cases of publishing without obtaining a Certificate of Registration despite directives.

THE PRESS AND REGISTRATION OF PERIODICALS ACT, 2023 (Some Important Points)

- Periodical printers must notify Press Registrar General and specified authority; citizens, except those convicted of specific offenses, can publish periodicals with required details; approval needed for printing foreign periodicals in India.

- The Central Government appoints a Press Registrar General and other officers to oversee the registration, maintenance, and regulation of periodicals, with specified functions and responsibilities.

- The Act outlines procedures for periodical registration, including obtaining certificates, revisions, ownership transfers, discontinuation reporting, and the Press Registrar General's authority for suspension or cancellation based on specified criteria.

- Annual statements and reports are mandated for transparency.

- The Press Registrar General can penalize publishers for publishing without registration or failing to furnish annual statements. Penalties include fines and imprisonment for persistent violations.

- The Press and Registration Appellate Board, led by the Chairperson of the Press Council of India and two members, allows appeals against refusal, cancellation, or penalties under the Act.

- The Act empowers the Central Government to issue policy directions, establishes an Appellate Board, and provides for rules, repeal of the Press and Registration of Books Act, and transitional provisions.

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SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

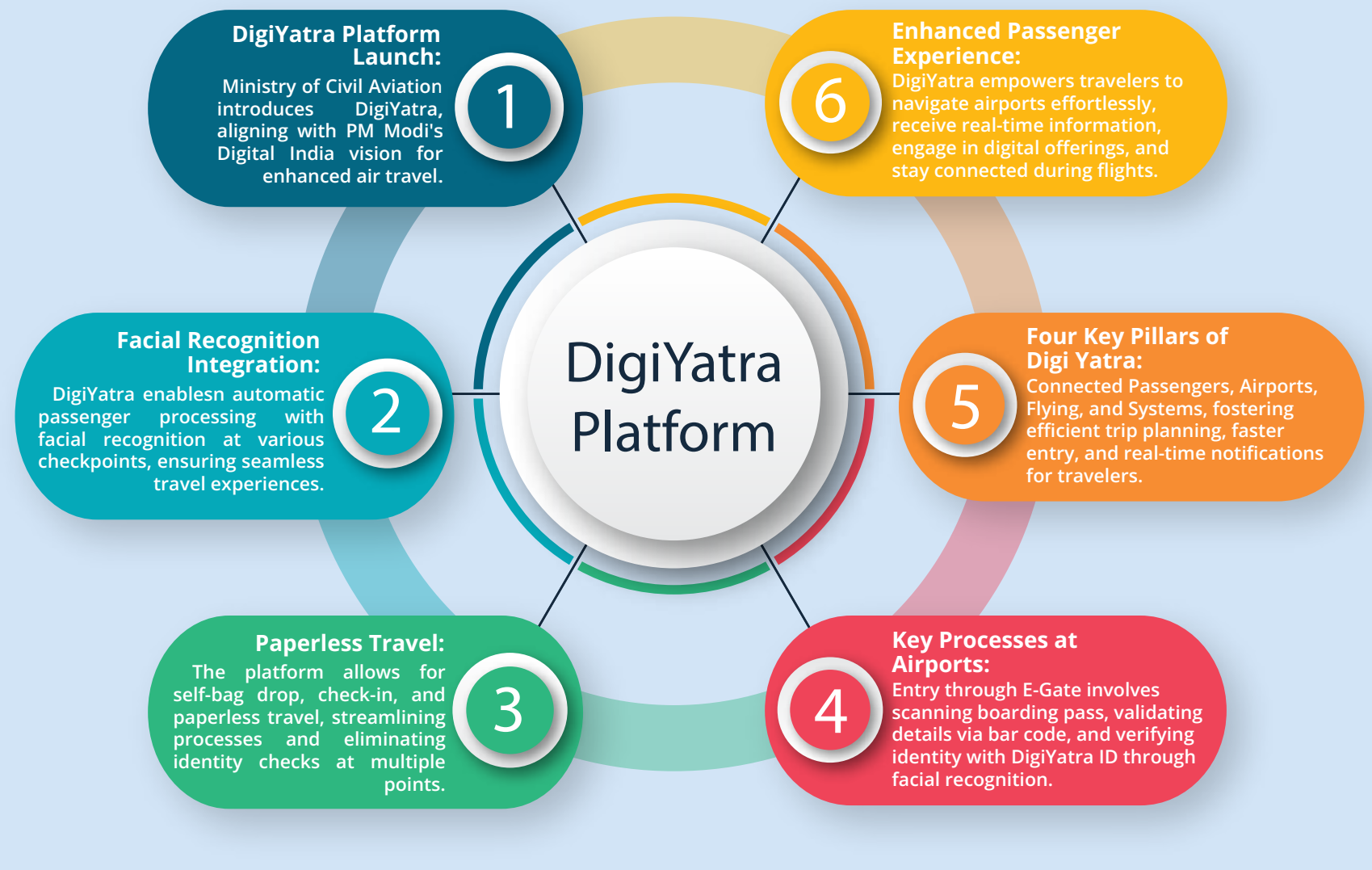# DIGI YATRA ENROLMENT GROWS AMID UNAUTHORIZED SIGN-UPS

CONTEXT: When visiting Indian airports, be cautious as security and private staff might collect your facial biometrics without your awareness or consent.

BACKGROUND: Last month, during the peak of year-end travel, air travellers expressed dismay and frustration on social media over perceived privacy violations at busy airports. This discontent primarily stemmed from the Union government's Digi Yatra initiative, aggressively promoted for digital passenger processing, aiming for paperless and smooth airport movement. The program, launched voluntarily in December 2022, faced criticism for its impact on privacy.

NEWS HIGHLIGHTS:

- Citizen distrust: Indians hesitant to join Digi Yatra due to the government's track record after the world's largest data breach.

- Massive data breach: Over 81.5 crore Indians' sensitive details, including Aadhaar and passports, reportedly sold on the dark web.

- Privacy law concerns: Individuals sceptical as existing privacy laws are perceived as ineffective and lack serious enforcement.

- Controversy at airports: Discrepancies arise as private airport staff allegedly collect facial biometrics, contradicting claims by the Central Industrial Security Force (CISF).

- Conflicting statements: CISF denies involvement in biometrics exercise, while a Delhi airport official suggests collaboration and emphasizes educating passengers about consent.

DigiYatra Platform

1 — DigiYatra Platform Launch: Ministry of Civil Aviation introduces DigiYatra, aligning with PM Modi's Digital India vision for enhanced air travel.

2 — Facial Recognition Integration: DigiYatra enablesn automatic passenger processing with facial recognition at various checkpoints, ensuring seamless travel experiences.

3 — Paperless Travel: The platform allows for self-bag drop, check-in, and paperless travel, streamlining processes and eliminating identity checks at multiple points.

4 — Key Processes at Airports: Entry through E-Gate involves scanning boarding pass, validating details via bar code, and verifying identity with DigiYatra ID through facial recognition.

5 — Four Key Pillars of Digi Yatra: Connected Passengers, Airports, Flying, and Systems, fostering efficient trip planning, faster entry, and real-time notifications for travelers.

6 — Enhanced Passenger Experience: DigiYatra empowers travelers to navigate airports effortlessly, receive real-time information, engage in digital offerings, and stay connected during flights.

"Doing nothing is very hard to do. You never know when you're finished."—Leslie Nielsen

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CABINET GIVES NOD TO 'PRITHVI' PROGRAMME FOR EARTH OBSERVATION

CONTEXT: The Union Cabinet approved the ₹4,797-crore 'Prithvi' program, set to integrate five current schemes of the Ministry of Earth Sciences.

HIGHLIGHTS:

- Comprehensive Earth Observation: India's Ministry of Earth Sciences focuses on long-term observations across the planet, tracking changes in various domains.

- Holistic Approach: The Prithvi program integrates activities such as climate modeling, hazard prediction, polar exploration, and sustainable harnessing of oceanic resources.

- Deep Ocean Mission (DOM): Part of the Ministry's initiatives, DOM aims to explore the Indian Ocean, including sending a manned submersible 6,000 meters deep.

- Significant Funding: The DOM, with an outlay of ₹4,000 crore over five years, was approved by the Cabinet in 2021.

- Diverse Objectives: Research spans meteorology, weather forecasting, marine ecology, coastal research, seismology, ocean technology, polar research, and tropical meteorology.

- Institutes and Support: Ten institutes, including the India Meteorological Department and National Centre for Earth Science Studies, conduct research with the support of research vessels.

- Translation into Services: The Ministry translates earth system science insights into services for societal, environmental, and economic benefit.

Program Overview: "PRITHvi VIgyan (PRITHVI)" by the Ministry of Earth Sciences spans 2021-26, integrating five sub-schemes for comprehensive Earth System Science.

Holistic Approach: PRITHVI integrates research, technology, and outreach, aligning with the Ministry's commitment to addressing Earth System Science comprehensively.

Sub-schemes: Includes ACROSS, O-SMART, PACER, SAGE, and REACHOUT, focusing on atmosphere, ocean, polar, geoscience, and education.

PRITHvi VIgyan (PRITHVI) Program

Long-term Goals: Augmenting vital Earth System observations, modeling hazards, exploring polar regions, and harnessing oceanic resources sustainably for societal benefits.

Objectives: Aims for sustained observations, weather and climate prediction models, polar exploration, oceanic resource technology, and societal service translation.

Earth System Sciences: Holistically addresses atmosphere, hydrosphere, geosphere, cryosphere, and biosphere interactions, enhancing understanding and reliable services.

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