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POLITY & GOVERNANCE

JJP, INLD seek floor test, say BJP govt. lost majority

CONTEXT: Jannayak Janta Party and the Indian National Lok Dal on Thursday wrote to the Governor seeking directions for an immediate floor test to determine the majority of the government or the imposition of President's Rule in the State.

INLD secretary-general and the party's lone MLA Abhay Chautala too wrote to the Governor seeking directions to the BJP government to prove its majority.

JJP, a partner in the BJP-led alliance government in Haryana for more than four years parted ways in March due to differences over seat-sharing for the Lok Sabha election.

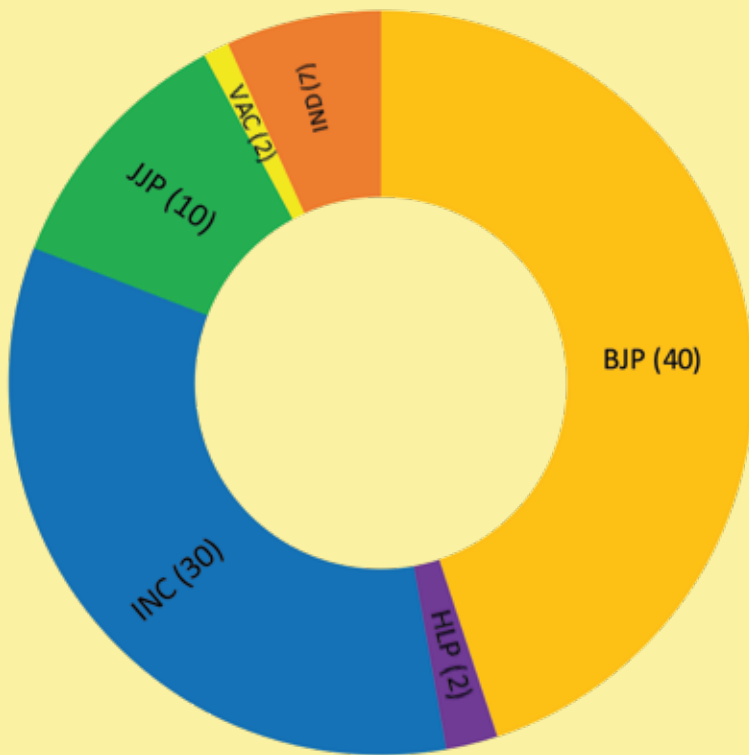


FIGURE: Pie chart representation of seats won by political parties to the Haryana State Legislative Assembly.

POLITY & GOVERNANCE

Air India Express cabin crew call off strike; 25 sacked staff to be reinstated

CONTEXT: Air India Express has agreed to reinstate 25 cabin crew whose services were terminated after a large number of them reported "sick" since May 6, while the flight crew have agreed to report to duty following a meeting mediated by the Chief Labour Commissioner (CLC) in New Delhi on Thursday.



On the third day of the protest on "leave", Air India Express was forced to cancel 85 flights across its network. Another Tata Group airline, Air India, supported it by operating flights on 20 of its routes, according to a media statement issued by Air India Express.

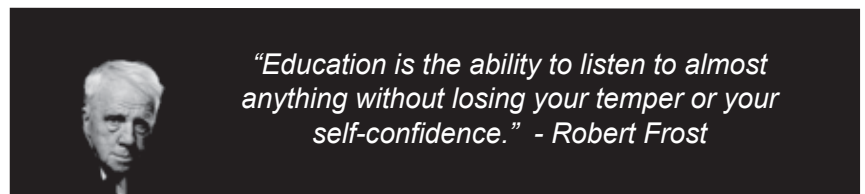
The representatives of the airline management said that all the issues raised by the cabin crew pertaining to alleged discrimination emanating from the merger with erstwhile AirAsia India and the removal of allowances will be resolved. The CLC will hold another meeting on May 28 on the matter. The Air India Express cabin crew are unhappy over "preferential treatment" for employees of the erstwhile AirAsia India resulting in certain postings granted to the latter. The CLC called a conciliation meeting after over 200 cabin crew at Air India Express started reporting "sick" from May 6 resulting in flight disruptions.

The act of reporting sick for work amounts to a concerted action with a common understanding to not operate the flight and disrupt services of the company not violate the applicable laws but also violates the Air India Express Limited Employees' Service Rules.



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

INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

U.S. won't supply arms to Israel if it attacks Rafah: Biden

CONTEXT: President Joe Biden said on Wednesday that he would not supply offensive weapons that Israel could use to launch an all-out assault on Rafah — the last major Hamas stronghold in Gaza — over concern for the well-being of the more than 1 million civilians sheltering there.



President Biden reaffirmed the U.S.'s commitment to Israel's defence, stating that the U.S. would continue to supply Israel with Iron Dome rocket interceptors and other defensive arms. However, he noted that if Israel were to enter Rafah, the U.S. has historically provided significant military aid to Israel, which has increased since Hamas's October 7 attack that resulted in the deaths of around 1,200 people in Israel and the capture of about 250 by militants.

Mr. Biden's recent remarks and his decision to temporarily halt a shipment of heavy bombs to Israel highlight the increasing differences between his administration and the government of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. While Mr. Biden stated on Wednesday that Israel's actions near Rafah had not yet crossed his red lines, he has consistently emphasized the need for Israel to take greater steps to safeguard the lives of civilians in Gaza.

The shipment was supposed to consist of 1,800 900-kg bombs and 1,700 225-kg bombs, according to a senior U.S. administration official who spoke on the condition of anonymity to discuss the sensitive matter. The focus of U.S. concern was the larger explosives and how they could be used in a dense urban area. Civilians have been killed in Gaza as a consequence of those bombs and other ways in which they go after population centres," Mr. Biden said.

INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

Bipartisan rescue

CONTEXT: In a rare show of unity transcending party lines, Democrats in the U.S. House of Representatives came to the defence of Republican House Speaker Mike Johnson.

Together with members of his own party, they thwarted an attempt to remove him from his position, voting 359-43 in favour of retaining him as speaker. The challenge to his leadership came from far-right Republican lawmaker Marjorie Taylor Greene of Georgia, a vocal supporter of former President Donald Trump. Greene criticized Johnson for his role in shepherding a bill that allocated \$ 95 billion in national security aid to Israel, Ukraine, and other U.S. allies in Asia, including \$ 61 billion for military support to Kyiv.

Greene accused Johnson of advancing the Democrats' agenda and impeding Republican efforts to influence legislation, which, she argued, aided the Biden administration in harming the country. Greene's remarks, made on the House floor, were met with disapproval from her colleagues, who booed her. In March, Greene had initiated a motion to remove Johnson from his position, and she had recently indicated her intention to bring this motion to a vote. Despite expressions of support from Mr. Trump on the Truth Social platform, he acknowledged that Republicans were not in a position to vote out Johnson.

The House of Representatives has become a battleground for factional dominance within the Republican Party, a conflict that has intensified with the approach of the November 2024 presidential election. This trend mirrors the turmoil seen in the election of Mr. Johnson's predecessor, California Congressman Kevin McCarthy, who had to navigate 15 rounds of voting to secure the Speaker's chair. McCarthy was ultimately removed from the role in late October 2023 through a motion to vacate brought by members of the House Freedom Caucus, an ultra-conservative group aligned with Mr. Trump's political agenda. This group has consistently criticized "mainstream" Republican lawmakers who have sought bipartisan cooperation to pass legislation, including crucial funding for U.S. allies.

As the election nears, moderate congressional Republicans face a dilemma. To win re-election, they must avoid being perceived as obstructing bipartisan legislation. However, the popularity of Mr. Trump and the steadfastness of his House allies make it challenging for them to reject a more confrontational approach to politics.

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POLITY & GOVERNANCE

Reservation within Constitutional bounds

CONTEXT: A political slugfest has emerged over the reservation issues with the BJP making outlandish remarks about the Congress' demand for caste census by linking it to religion.

Constitution and affirmative action

The Constitution aims to secure social justice while guaranteeing equality as a fundamental right. Articles 15 and 16 guarantee equality to all citizens in any action by the state (including admissions to educational institutions) and public employment respectively. To achieve social justice, they also enable the state to make special provisions for the advancement of OBC, SC and ST. OBC is a collective term to classify socially and educationally backward castes. Many States also classify certain castes as the Most Backward Classes (MBC). The reservation percentages vary from State to State.

In the Indra Sawhney case (1992), the Supreme Court upheld the 27% reservation for OBC. It opined that caste is a determinant of class in the Indian context and backwardness cannot be determined solely on economic criteria. However, to uphold the basic structure of equality, it fixed a cap of 50% for reservations unless there were exceptional circumstances. The reservation of OBC (27%), SC (15%) and ST (7.5%) resulted in a total reservation of 49.5%. The court also provided for excluding the creamy layer from OBC with an income limit currently at ₹8 lakhs per annum. Children of parents, either of whom entered the government service (Centre or State) as Group A/Class I officers and children of parents, both of whom entered as Group B/Class II officers are also excluded. In the Janhit Abhiyan case (2022), the court by a majority of 3:2 upheld the constitutional validity of the EWS reservation. It held that economic criteria could be a basis for reservation.

Affirmative action elsewhere

In the U.S., there is 'affirmative action' that consists of government-approved and voluntary private programs granting special consideration to racial minorities like African-American and Latin-American. In Fair admissions vs Harvard case (2023), the U.S. Supreme Court, however, ruled that race-based affirmative action programs in college admissions violate the equal protection clause of the U.S. Constitution. In the U.K., the law enables voluntary 'positive action' which allows employers to combat under-representation of disadvantaged groups. France does not have any affirmative action based on race or ethnicity. It provides educational measures designed to increase opportunities for low-income students.

Current debate

The Constituent assembly that framed our Constitution was against reservation solely based on religion. The Constitution guarantees the prohibition of discrimination only based on religion under Articles 15

Changes overview

A brief summary of important developments with respect to reservations at the central level



Year	Key development
1950 & 1951	Commencement of Constitution and First Amendment - Enabling provisions in Articles 15 and 16 to make special provisions for advancement of OBC, SC and ST
1982	Reservation for SC and ST fixed at 15% and 7.5% respectively, in central educational institutions and public sector undertakings
1990	27% reservation for OBC in central government employment introduced based on the recommendation of the Mandal Commission
2005	93rd Constitutional amendment inserted Article 15(5) that enabled reservation for OBC, SC and ST in educational institutions including private institutions
2019	103rd Constitutional amendment inserted Articles 15(6) and 16(6) that enabled up to 10% reservation for Economically Weaker Sections (EWS) among the unreserved category in educational institutions and public employment

and 16. The inclusion of all Muslim communities within the OBC quota in Karnataka forms the basis for the BJP's campaign at present. However, it is pertinent to note that sub-categorisation for Muslims within the OBC quota has been present in Karnataka since 1995. The four per cent sub-categorisation for Muslims introduced in 1995 by the H. D. Deve Gowda-led government was removed by the previous government led by Basavaraj Bommai. This was redistributed amongst the OBC in the Hindu community. However, after observation by the court in the case challenging this order, the status quo continues. Muslim and Christian communities who are socially and educationally backward are provided reservations under the OBC/MBC category. There is also sub-categorisation within the OBC/MBC quota for Muslim communities in States like Kerala, Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh. This is because the term used in the Constitution is 'socially and educationally backward classes' and could encompass backward communities from all religions. It is only for being a member of a SC, 'The Constitution (Scheduled Castes) order, 1950' specifies that the person should profess only Hinduism, Sikhism or Buddhism. There is no such requirement for being a member of a ST.

The Congress, meanwhile, in its manifesto has promised that they would work towards removing the 50% cap placed on reservations.

The way forward

Reservation is affirmative action meant to balance the historical discrimination faced by OBC, SC and ST communities. Rohini Commission was set up to provide recommendations on sub-categorisation amongst OBC castes. Though the findings of the report are yet to be made public, it has been estimated that 97% of reserved jobs and seats in educational institutions have been garnered by just around 25% of the OBC castes/sub-castes at the central level. Close to 1,000 of around 2,600

communities under the OBC category had zero representation in jobs and educational institutes. While sub-categorisation has been implemented in 11 different States, it has not been carried out at the central level. A similar issue of concentration of reservation benefits persists in the SC and ST categories. There is no exclusion based on the 'creamy layer' for these communities. The Dalit Christians and Muslims also suffer from considerable discrimination and lack of opportunities. The government has constituted a commission headed by former CJI K. G. Balakrishnan to study the question of extending SC reservation to Dalits who have converted to religions other than Sikhism and Buddhism.

Increasing the reservation limit beyond 50%, sub-categorisation among reserved categories, introducing appropriate creamy layers for SC and ST, and extending SC reservations to Dalit Christians and Muslims are matters that are sensitive with their set of pros and cons. There must be effort nevertheless to deliberate on these matters and frame suitable policies such that the benefits of reservation progressively reach the extremely marginalised sections. The aim should be towards the continuous pursuit of social justice while maintaining a harmonious balance with equality guaranteed in the Constitution.

ECONOMICS AND DEVELOPMENT

Markets plunge amid fears of uncertain poll outcome

CONTEXT: The uncertainty over the General Elections' outcome led to panic selling in India's stock markets with key benchmark indices falling about 1.5%. The S&P BSE Sensex fell 1,062 points, or 1.45 % to 72,404. The NSE Nifty-50 index too shed 345 points or 1.55 % to 21,957.5.

Poll pangs

Rumours about lower-than-expected turnout at voting keep markets on edge

- Except auto, major sectors led by energy, metals and realty face selling pressure

- Larsen & Toubro, down 6%, leads the fall among Sensex stocks



- Foreign Institutional Investors lead the selling fearing no clear majority for any political party

Only auto stock stable

Except auto stocks, major sectors led by energy, metals, and realty faced selling pressure. Larsen & Toubro, down 6 % led the fall among Sensex stocks, followed by Asian Paints, which fell 4.68 %. FIIs (Foreign Institutional Investors) are mainly selling fearing no clear majority (for any political party).

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ECOLOGY AND ENVIRONMENT

Corporate climate watchdog paper deems carbon offsets largely futile

CONTEXT: Staff at an influential corporate climate action group whose board announced a plan to allow companies to offset greenhouse gas emissions from their supply chain with carbon credits has now found such offsets are largely ineffective.



At stake is the growth of the still nascent market for voluntary carbon offsets. While they are used by some of the world's biggest companies, including Microsoft, Salesforce and Amazon.com, the size of the market remains small at around \$2 billion.

The Science-based Targets initiative (SBTi), a U.N.-backed non-profit that audits the emission-reduction plans of companies, triggered a revolt among staff last month by declaring its intention to allow use of carbon credits prior to concluding its research on them.

Issues clarification

Since then, the SBTi's board of trustees has issued a clarification to state it had not yet changed its policy and that any decisions would be "informed by the evidence". They are based on a review of evidence in scientific papers and other submissions by interested parties in a consultation. The findings are subject to further analysis and review, including from the Scientific Advisory Group, a panel comprising climate scientists from around the world. If upheld, they would represent a major obstacle to SBTi's board of trustees adopting carbon offsets as part of firms' emission-reduction plans.

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INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

China's aircraft carrier Fujian completes 8-day sea trial

CONTEXT: China's third aircraft carrier, Fujian, has successfully completed its eight-day maiden sea trials. Fujian is an 80,000-tonne supercarrier with electromagnetic catapults for launching aircraft, making China the second country after the U.S. to field a supercarrier with this technology.



During the sea trial, the aircraft carrier tested its propulsion, electrical systems, and other equipment, and achieved the expected results. In the next stage, People's Liberation Army Navy Ship (PLANS) Fujian will conduct follow-up tests according to established plans," according to China Military Online, the English language news website of the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA). The

aircraft carrier set sail for trials from Jiangnan Shipyard in Shanghai on May 01.

The developments will be watched very closely by India and other countries in the region which are also planning to build aircraft carriers as Beijing rapidly expands its maritime power and presence.

Named after East China's Fujian Province and given the hull number 18, the carrier was launched in June 2022. Last month, China announced that it is building its fourth aircraft carrier, likely a nuclear-powered supercarrier, to be unveiled very soon. China's first aircraft carrier Liaoning was commissioned in 2012 and the second carrier Shadong was launched in 2017.

In an interview last week, outgoing Commander of Hawaii-based U.S. Indo-Pacific Command (INDOPACOM) Adm John Aquilino said that in the three years since he's been in command, China has built more than 400 aircraft, 20 major warships, and doubled its missile inventory.

Indian Navy's carriers

Indian Navy currently operates two aircraft carriers – refurbished Russian carrier INS Vikramaditya, commissioned in 2013, and indigenously designed and built INS Vikrant, commissioned in September 2022.

In the second half of last year, the Indian Navy has moved the case for a second Indigenous Aircraft Carrier (IAC-II), a repeat of a Vikrant-like carrier which has been approved by the Defence Procurement Board last September. It is now awaiting approval by the Defence Acquisition Council, expected to be taken up after the elections.



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