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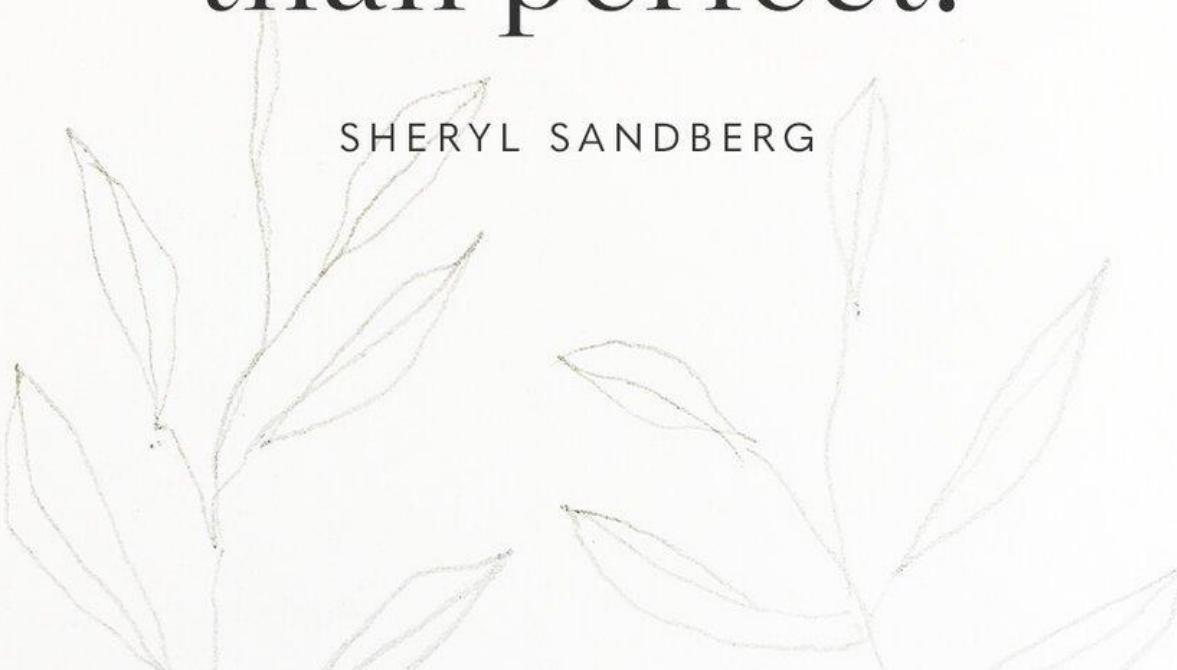
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SHERYL SANDBERG



Ahead of PM's Paris trip, Rafale, Scorpene deals reach final leg

Modi has been invited to visit AI summit in France on February 10 and 11; government-to-government deals estimated at \$10 billion likely to be placed for approval before Cabinet Committee on Security in the next couple of weeks, sources say

Dinakar Peri
NEW DELHI

Two large defence deals between India and France are being finalised, amid expectations that Prime Minister Narendra Modi will visit Paris in February for the Artificial Intelligence Action Summit to be hosted by French President Emmanuel Macron.

The deals, together estimated at over \$10 billion, will include the purchase of 26 Rafale-M fighter jets for the Indian Navy's aircraft carriers, and three additional Scorpene-class conventional submarines. The two deals are expected to be put before the Cabinet Committee on Security (CCS) for approval in the next couple of weeks, sources said.

Shopping list

As Prime Minister Narendra Modi is expected to be in Paris in February, India is looking to seal arms deals

WHAT THE COUNTRY WANTS?

- 26 Rafale-M fighter jets for the Navy's aircraft carriers
- Three more Scorpene-class conventional submarines
- The two deals are expected to be put before the Cabinet Committee on Security for approval soon



It is just matter of completing the formalities of the acquisition process and we expect that if not this month, next month, hopefully, this [Scorpene submarines] and Rafale-M deals should be signed

Navy chief Admiral DINESH K. TRIPATHI in December

India needs the naval version of the Rafale for INS Vikrant

"The expectation is that PM Modi will visit Paris to attend the AI Summit and will also have a bilateral component. So both sides are working to tie up the two deals which are in the

final stages of conclusion," an informed source said. This was also independently confirmed by other sources.

The French President's office has already an-

nounced that Mr. Modi has been invited for the Artificial Intelligence Summit on February 10 and 11. France says the meet will focus on actions to ensure that the global AI sector can drive beneficial outcomes.

Final stage

In response to a question at his annual press conference last month, Navy chief Admiral Dinesh K. Tripathi said that both deals are in the final stage and could be completed next month. "It is just a matter of completing the formalities of the acquisition process and we expect that if not this month, next month, hopefully, this [Scorpene submarine] and the Rafale-M deal should be signed," he had said.

On the Rafale-M deal, the Navy chief had said it

was "one level short of taking it to the CCS (Cabinet Committee on Security)" for clearance, which will be followed by the signing of the contract. As it is a government-to-government deal, it is expected to be implemented quickly.

The deal for three Scorpene submarines is a repeat order to the Mazagon Dock Shipbuilders Limited, which is building them in partnership with the Naval Group of France. Of the six submarines from the earlier contract, five have been inducted.

The last one, *Vaghsheer*, is set to be commissioned on January 15 in Mumbai, in the presence of Mr. Modi, along with two other frontline platforms.

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Content.

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Cabinet Committee on Security (CCS)

- It is headed by the Prime Minister.
- The Committee discusses, debates, and is the apex body when it comes to the appointments of the officials in the national security bodies.
- It also makes all the important decisions on defence policy and expenditure and, generally, all matters of India's security.
- Members: PM, Ministers of Defence, Home Affairs, Finance and External Affairs.

Cabinet Committees

- Cabinet Committees are extra-constitutional, meaning, they are not mentioned in the Indian Constitution.
- They are partly designed to reduce the burden on the Union Cabinet by allowing smaller groups of ministers to make decisions on specific policy areas.
- They are constituted or reconstituted when a new government takes over or the Cabinet undergoes a reshuffle.

Fact

There are a total of 8 cabinet committees:

- **Cabinet Committee on Economic Affairs.**
- **Cabinet Committee on Political Affairs.**
- **Cabinet Committee on Investment and Growth.**
- **Cabinet Committee on Security.**
- **Cabinet Committee on Parliamentary Affairs.**
- **Cabinet Committee on Employment and Skill Development.**
- **Cabinet Committee on Accommodation.**
- **Appointments Committee of the Cabinet.**

Fact

- The French President's office on Thursday announced that it has invited Prime Minister Narendra Modi for the Artificial Intelligence Action Summit in Paris in February 2025, describing India as a “very important country”.
- If Modi, who shares a close rapport with President Emmanuel Macron, visits France on the occasion, it will be his second visit to Paris since 2023.
- The summit, to be hosted by France at the Grand Palais in Paris, will convene heads of state and government, leaders of international organisations, chief executives from large and small companies, representatives from academia, non-governmental organisations, artists and members of civil society.
- The event will focus on five key themes -- public interest AI, the future of work, innovation and culture, trust in AI and global AI governance.

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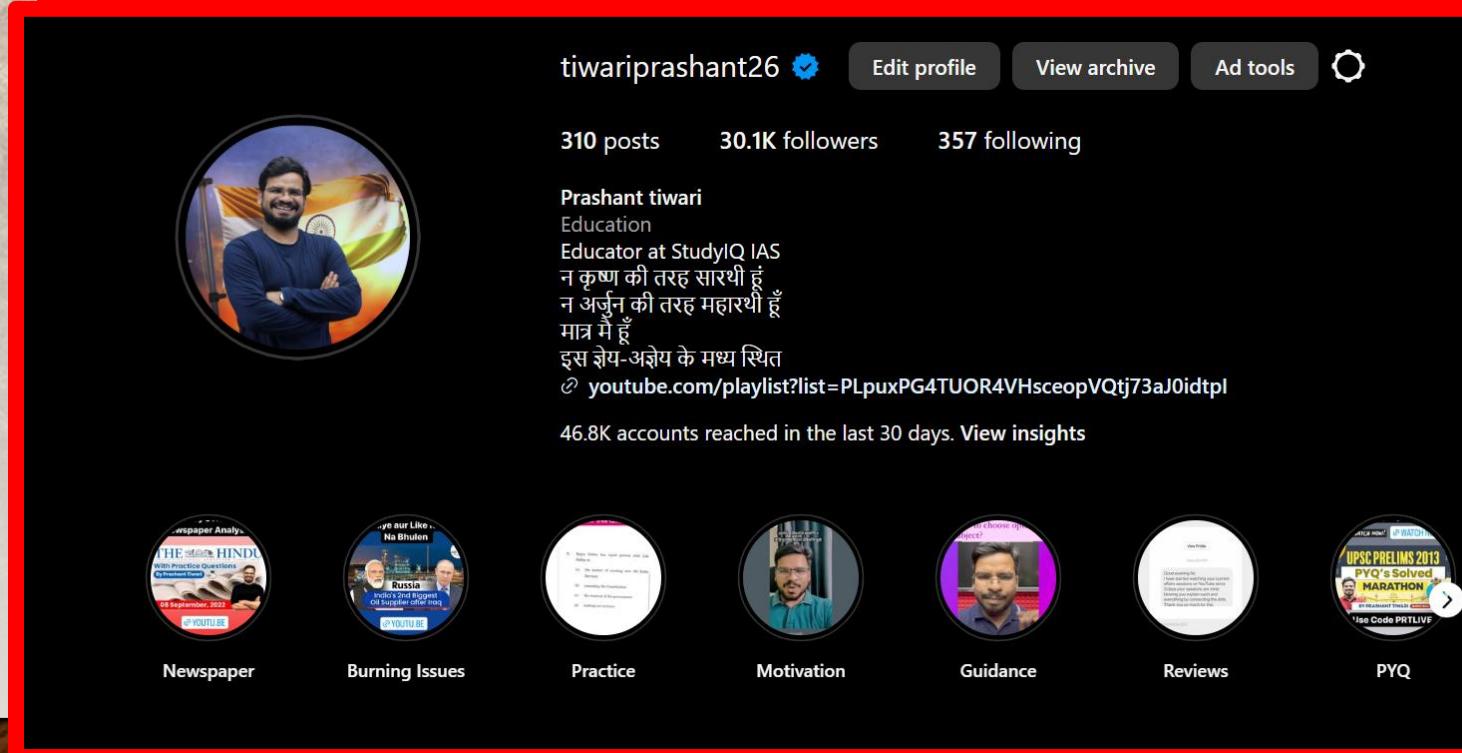
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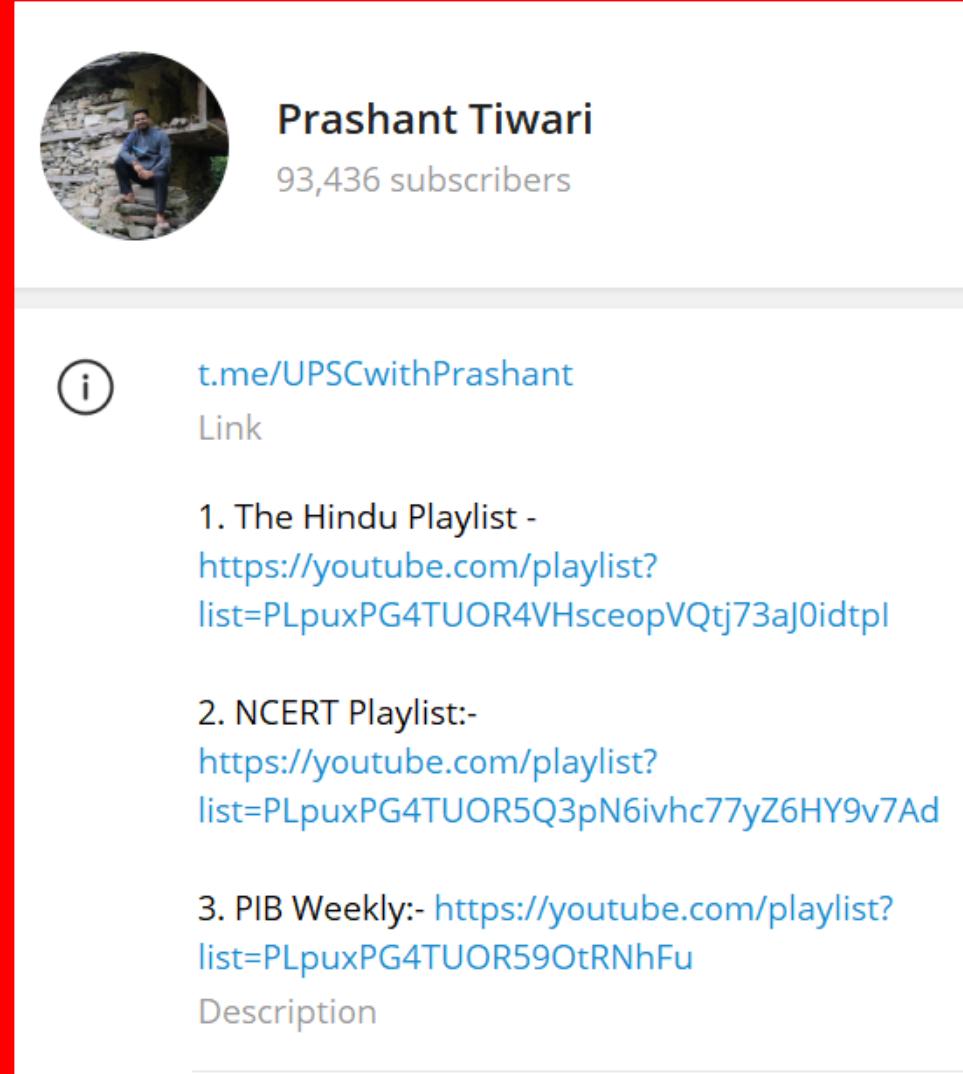
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Educator at StudyIQ IAS
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Description

Tribal festival



Revelry time: Members of the Toda tribe in the Nilgiris gather around a 'moonbo' (head) temple in the Muthanad 'mund' (hamlet) in Udhagamandalam on Sunday to celebrate the Modwerth festival and discuss plans for the year ahead. M. SATHYAMOORTHY

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Content.

- **Toda Tribe of the Nilgiri Hills of southern India.**
- **The Toda language is Dravidian but is the most unusual and different among the languages belonging to the Dravidian family.**
- **They live in settlements of from three to seven small thatched houses.**
- **They traditionally trade dairy products, as well as cane and bamboo articles, with the other Nilgiri peoples.**

- **Toda Embroidery**
- **In the Toda language it is called pohor.**
- **The traditional Toda dress is a distinctive shawl which is called putukuli.**
- **Considered a grand garment, it is only worn for special occasions like visits to the temple, festivals and finally as a shroud.**
- **The embroidery is done by Toda women and has distinctive red and black (and occasionally blue) thread work in geometric designs on unbleached white cotton fabric.**
- **It has got a Geographical Indications (GI) Tag.**



Shompen Tribe:

- They are one of the most isolated tribes on Earth.
- They are one of the least studied Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs) in India.
- They reside in dense tropical rain forests of the Great Nicobar Island of Andaman and Nicobar group of Islands. Around 95% of the island is covered in rainforest.
- The Shompen habitat is also an important biological hotspot, and there are two National Parks and one Biosphere Reserve, namely Campbell Bay National Park, Galathea National Park, and Great Nicobar Biosphere Reserve.
- Population: Though according to the Census (2011), the estimated population of Shompen is 229, the exact population of Shompen is unknown till today.
- Most of them remain in the forest and have little or no contact with outsiders.
- They are semi-nomadic hunter-gatherers and their main sources of livelihood are hunting, gathering, fishing, and a little bit of horticultural activities in a rudimentary form.

Modi inaugurates Delhi section of RRTS, Meerut now a 40-minute ride away

PM also throws open to public Janakpuri-Krishna Park stretch of Delhi Metro Phase-IV; CM Atishi says RRTS is not sole initiative of Centre but joint venture with Delhi's contribution of ₹1,260 crore

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

Prime Minister Narendra Modi inaugurated a 13-km-long Rapid Rail Transit System (RRTS) section between New Ashok Nagar in Delhi and Sahibabad in Uttar Pradesh on Sunday.

This comes at a time when the Delhi Assembly poll is due in February and the model code of conduct is likely to come into force in the coming days.

Commuters can now board the Namo Bharat train on the RRTS corridor from New Ashok Nagar to reach Meerut South or vice versa. According to the government, the distance of nearly 58 km can be covered in under 40 minutes, reducing the travel time by about one-third. Until now, the last station of the Namo Bharat train was Sahibabad.

Mr. Modi took a ride from Sahibabad to New Ashok Nagar RRTS station and interacted with co-passengers, including children. "Today is a very important day for Delhi-NCR. Today, for the first time, the Namo Bharat train will enter the Capital, and there will also be an opportunity to inaugurate and lay the foundation stone of many development projects, including the expansion of the Delhi



PM Narendra Modi interacting with school students during his train ride between Sahibabad (U.P.) and New Ashok Nagar (Delhi); the Namo Bharat train arrives in the national capital on Sunday. PTI/ANI

Metro," the Prime Minister said in a post on X.

From 5 p.m. on Sunday, Namo Bharat trains were available to the public at 15-minute frequency. The fare from New Ashok Nagar to Meerut South is ₹150 for a standard coach and ₹225 for a premium coach.

The other two RRTS stations in Delhi – Sarai Kale Khan and Jangpura – are expected to be operational by April and May 2025, respectively. In March 2019, Mr. Modi had laid the foundation stone of the Delhi-Meerut RRTS corridor, a ₹30,000-crore project.

The Prime Minister also inaugurated the 2.8-km stretch between Janakpuri and Krishna Park of Delhi

Metro Phase-IV, the first stretch of Delhi Metro Phase-IV to be inaugurated. This will benefit areas of West Delhi such as Krishna Park, parts of Vasant Kunj, and Janakpuri.

Upcoming projects

Mr. Modi laid the foundation stone of the 26.5-km Rithala-Kundli section of Delhi Metro Phase IV. This corridor will connect Rithala in Delhi to Nathupur (Kundli) in Haryana, enhancing connectivity in the north-west parts of Delhi and Haryana.

He also laid the foundation stone of the new Central Ayurveda Research Institute at Rohini, which will be constructed at a

cost of around ₹185 crore, providing state-of-the-art health care and medicine infrastructure, a statement said.

Senior Aam Aadmi Party leader and Delhi Chief Minister Atishi said the projects inaugurated by Mr. Modi are not solely of the Centre but a joint venture of the Central and State governments.

"The RRTS, a joint venture of the Central, Delhi, U.P., and Haryana governments, is connecting the NCR region with Delhi. The Delhi government has also invested ₹1,260 crore in the RRTS line being built from Delhi to Meerut, as it will boost the economy of Delhi," she said.

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Regional Rapid Transit System (RRTS)

About

- With semi high-speed rail connectivity at its core, the RRTS is an integrated, mass transit network.
- It aims to ensure balanced and sustainable urban development through better connectivity and access across the NCR.

Origin

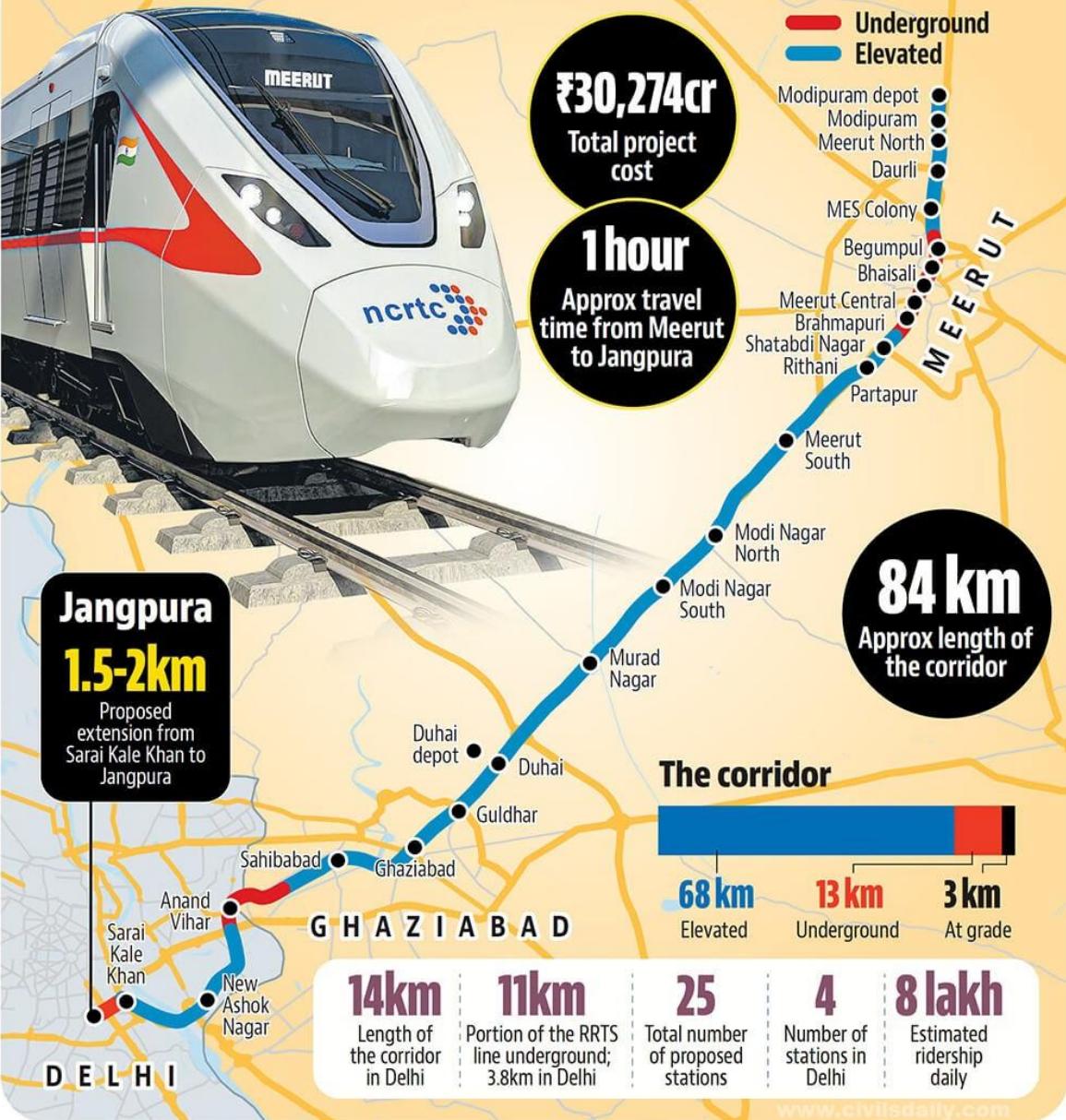
- The idea of such a network lies in a study which the Indian Railways was commissioned to carry out in the year 1998-99.
- The study identified the possibility of an RRTS network to connect various locations in the NCR through fast commuter trains.
- The proposal was re-examined in the year 2006 with the extension of the Delhi Metro lines to some NCR towns such as Gurgaon, Noida and Ghaziabad.
- It was soon taken up by the National Capital Region Planning Board (NCRPB) while developing its Functional Plan on Transport for NCR-2032.
- NCRPB identified and recommended eight RRTS corridors to connect NCR towns with high speed rail-based commuter transit services.

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- The National Capital Region Transport Corporation (NCRTC) has constructed the RRTS also known as Namo Bharat.
- NCRTC is a joint venture company of the Central government and the governments of Delhi, Haryana, Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh.
- NCRTC, under the Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs, is mandated with implementing the RRTS project across the National Capital Region.

A new start

The 84-km Regional Rapid Transit System (RRTS) corridor from Delhi to Meerut, being built at a cost of ₹30,274 crore, will start from south Delhi's Jangpura



FASTER THAN METROS, MORE FREQUENT THAN TRAINS



180 km/hr
DESIGN SPEED

160 km/hr
OPERATION SPEED

100 km/hr
AVERAGE SPEED



60 Min

TIME TO TRAVEL 100KM

CORRIDORS- UNDER RRTS PHASE 1

- ① Delhi - Ghaziabad - Meerut Corridor
- ② Delhi - Gurugram - SNB - Alwar Corridor
- ③ Delhi - Panipat Corridor



OTHER CORRIDORS

- ④ Delhi - Faridabad - Ballabgarh - Palwal
- ⑤ Ghaziabad - Khurja
- ⑥ Delhi - Bahadurgarh - Rohtak
- ⑦ Ghaziabad - Hapur
- ⑧ Delhi - Shahdara - Baraut

PM must set up independent panel to review the Great Nicobar project: Congress

Press Trust of India

NEW DELHI

The Congress on Sunday termed the Great Nicobar Island infrastructure project a “recipe for ecological and humanitarian disaster”, and said the Prime Minister should immediately order a pause and set up an independent panel to review it.

Congress general secretary Jairam Ramesh said the Modi government was pushing ahead with the project despite several objections raised by him in the past.

“The ₹72,000-crore mega infrastructure project in Great Nicobar Island is a recipe for ecological and humanitarian disaster. My exchanges on this unfolding tragedy with the Union Minister of Environment, Forests, and Climate



Jairam Ramesh

Change are all in the public domain,” he said in a post on X.

The former Union Environment Minister said the project’s various components were an international container transshipment port, an airport, a power plant, a massive greenfield township, and tourism facilities.

“The entire project will destroy at least 33,000 acres of pristine tropical forest. Now comes news

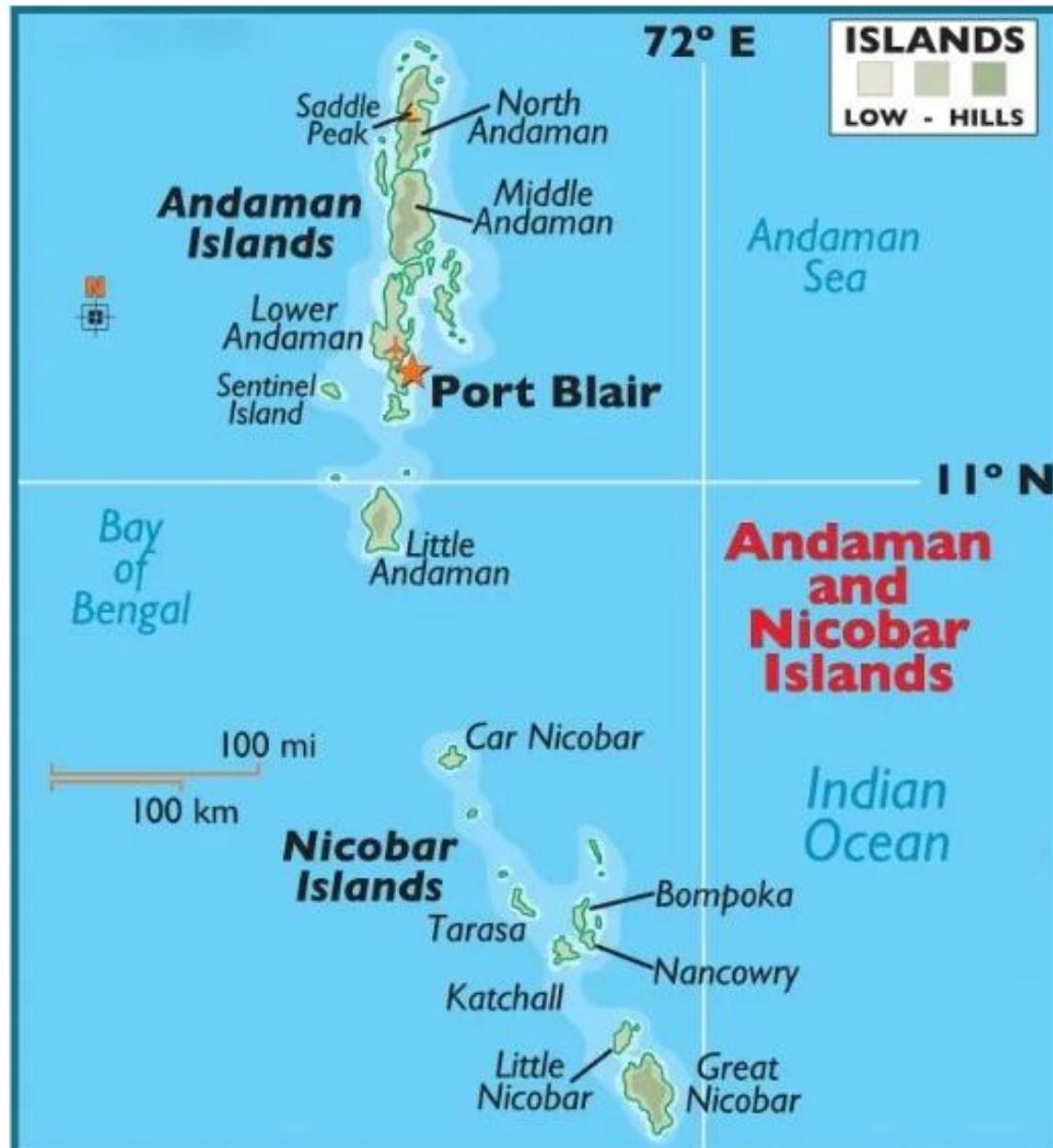
that the project is proposed to be expanded to establish – a cruise terminal to facilitate a global port-led city, a shipbuilding and ship-repair facility, and an export-import port,” Mr. Ramesh said.

He claimed that an additional 100 acres of biodiversity-rich forests would be destroyed on account of these new proposals.

“This is sheer folly multiplying. The blatant hypocrisy of a Prime Minister who boasts to the world of his deep commitment to environmental causes stands thoroughly exposed.”

“There is no mystery on who will get these port contracts. If the PM wants to walk his talk, he should immediately order a pause and set up an independent panel to review the project,” he said.

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- The Great Nicobar Island (GNI) project, launched in 2021, is a mega project to be implemented at the southern end of the Andaman and Nicobar islands.
- It involves developing a trans-shipment port, an international airport, township development, and a 450 MVA gas and solar-based power plant on the island.
- The project was implemented after a report by NITI Aayog which identified the potential to utilise the advantageous position of the island, which is approximately equidistant from Colombo in Sri Lanka to the southwest and Port Klang (Malaysia) and Singapore to the southeast.

Features:

- The mega infrastructure project is being implemented by the Andaman and Nicobar Islands Integrated Development Corporation (ANIIDCO) and is proposed to include an International Container Trans-shipment Terminal (ICTT), a greenfield international airport.
- It is close to the Malacca Strait, the main waterway that connects the Indian Ocean to the Pacific, and the ICTT is expected to allow Great Nicobar to participate in the regional and global maritime economy by becoming a major player in cargo transshipment'.
- The site for the proposed ICTT and power plant is Galathea Bay on the southeastern corner of Great Nicobar Island, where there is no human habitation.

Strategic Importance:

- The upgrade is aimed at facilitating the deployment of additional military forces, larger and more warships, aircraft, missile batteries, and troops.
- Close surveillance of the entire area around the archipelago, and the building up of a strong military deterrence at Great Nicobar is of vital importance to India's national security.
- The island is close to the Malacca Strait, the main waterway that connects the Indian Ocean to the Pacific, and the ICTT is expected to allow Great Nicobar to participate in the regional and global maritime economy by becoming a major player in cargo transshipment'.
- The Bay of Bengal and Indian Ocean regions are extremely important for India's strategic and security interests. This is because the Chinese military (the People's Liberation Army Navy) is trying to increase its presence and influence in this entire region.
- India is particularly concerned about the possibility of China building up its naval forces at important choke points in the Indo-Pacific area, such as the Malacca, Sunda, and Lombok Straits.
- Furthermore, China is attempting to expand its foothold in this region by building a military facility on the Coco Islands, which are located just 55 km north of India's Andaman & Nicobar Islands.
- This raises concerns for India, as the Andaman & Nicobar Islands are strategically very important for India's maritime security in the region.

Content.

- **Impact on Indigenous Tribes:** The Shompen and Nicobarese are a Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group (PVTG) of hunter-gatherers, with an estimated population of only a few hundred individuals. They live in a tribal reserve on the island.
- There are serious concerns that the proposed infrastructure upgrade could have a potentially devastating impact on the Shompen tribe and their way of life, which is closely tied to the island's natural environment.
- Also, the project violates the letter and spirit of the Forest Rights Act (2006), which holds the Shompen as the sole legally empowered authority to protect, preserve, regulate and manage the tribal reserve.

Content.

- **Threat to Island Ecology:** The project will impact the island's ecology with the felling of nearly a million trees. It is feared that the port project will destroy coral reefs with spinoff effects on the local marine ecosystem, and pose a threat to the terrestrial Nicobar Megapode bird and leatherback turtles who nest in the Galathea Bay area.
- This area is about 15% of the GNI's land mass and constitutes one of the country's largest forest diversions in a nationally and globally unique rainforest ecosystem.
- **Seismic Vulnerability:** Proposed port is located in a seismically volatile zone, which experienced permanent subsidence of around 15 feet during the 2004 tsunami. This raises concerns about the safety and viability of constructing such a large-scale infrastructure project in a high-risk, disaster-prone area.
- **Lack of Adequate Consultation:** There is an accusation against the local administration of not consulting the Tribal Council of Great and Little Nicobar Islands adequately, as per legal requirements.

Great Nicobar Island

- Great Nicobar is the southernmost and largest of the Nicobar Islands, a sparsely inhabited 910-sq-km patch of mainly tropical rainforest in southeastern Bay of Bengal.
- Indira Point on the island, India's southernmost point, is located 90 nautical miles (<170 km) from Sabang at the northern tip of Sumatra, the largest island of the Indonesian archipelago.
- The Andaman and Nicobar Islands consist of 836 islands, divided into two groups known as the Andaman Islands located in the north and the Nicobar Islands situated in the south, separated by the 10° Channel which is 150 kilometres wide.
- Great Nicobar has two national parks, a biosphere reserve, small populations of the Shompen, Onge, Andamanese and Nicobarese tribal peoples, and a few thousand non-tribal settlers.

No secret affair

Deliberations on draft Digital Personal Data Protection Rules must be open

The draft Digital Personal Data Protection Rules, 2025, is a long overdue advance in the direction of enforcing the fundamental right to informational privacy for Indians, affirmed by the Supreme Court of India in the landmark case, *Justice K.S. Puttaswamy vs. Union of India* (2017). The Digital Personal Data Protection Act, which these draft rules seek to enforce, was passed in Parliament over a year ago. This seven-year wait has most likely not been without costs for the privacy of the data of Indians, as it coincided with a period that saw a rapid growth in digitisation. The proposed rules offer direction on how online services will be required to: communicate the purposes of their data collection to users; safeguard children's data online; establish the Data Protection Board of India (DPBI); set the standards for government agencies to follow to be exempt from the Act's provisions, and spell out the procedures to be observed if personal data is breached by a data fiduciary. The concerns regarding the proposed DPBI's institutional design have not been resolved by these proposed Rules, and it may not be realistic to expect such an outcome from subordinate legislation.

It is regrettable that the government continues to cloak the rule-making process of a critical policy such as this in secrecy. Since the Justice B.N. Srikrishna committee was convened to draft the first Bill for data protection, the government has consistently declined to place recommendations from stakeholders in the public domain, and has foreclosed such disclosure for these draft rules as well. For legislation where the stakes are high for individual users as well as for large technology firms, an open deliberative process is essential. It can only be facilitated when industry associations and the general public can find equal footing by being equal participants with transparency into each other's viewpoints during the consultation process. In the short and medium term, it is essential for the government to proceed with these principles in mind, while never departing from the key aims of any data protection law: minimising data collection, promoting disclosures, penalising neglect in protecting user data, and discouraging surveillance practices, both by the private sector and the government. This process must also play out in a timely fashion, as Indians have been waiting far too long to finally obtain the rights that were affirmed for them in 2017. Else, people's confidence in the government's seriousness about protecting their data from government agencies as well as private enterprises would be shaken.

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The outlook for India in the year ahead

India is at a pivotal moment in its history. It is among the leading nations in the world when it comes to economic growth and political stability. India today projects an atmosphere of peace, which is seemingly out of place in a world that is undergoing a profound shift in its economic and geo-political landscape. India is today privy to the rise of new economic and political groupings.

The year 2024 was a period of pronounced political uncertainty across the globe. Much of the world was a mute witness to the multiple and concurrent conflicts that threaten peace and stability today. This is specially true of Europe and West Asia.

One major tragedy still unfolding is Gaza, which has few parallels, while the ongoing Ukraine conflict contains the seeds of a much wider conflict in the future. India has, however, managed to steer itself successfully within this geo-political landscape.

A year of new troubles

This may, however, be too good to last. The year 2025 seems poised to bring in a host of fresh troubles that will require deft handling on the part of India's policymakers. At this time, it might, hence, be wise for India's leaders to heed the message contained in an ancient Chinese saying that says 'the wind sweeping through the tower heralds a rising storm in the mountain'.

I begin by assessing the situation with India's largest neighbour, China. Much is being made of the recent border negotiations and an apparent disengagement at the Line of Actual Control in Ladakh. This was followed by the first formal meeting between Prime Minister Narendra Modi and China's President Xi Jinping meeting in five years, as well as the resumption of the Special Representatives' talks on border issues. Wiser heads would know that disengagement does not mean 'dispute resolution'. The border conflict still remains alive and unchanged. Far more needs to be done to reach any kind of détente. India, hence, cannot afford to 'take its eye off the ball'.

Meanwhile, China has, of late, taken a series of steps to strengthen security cooperation with nations of the Global South, which are aimed at outflanking India. It recently facilitated reconciliation talks that were held in Beijing among various Palestine factions. In September last year, China and African nations jointly agreed to progress the China-sponsored Global Security Initiative (GSI) and deepen cooperation in areas such as counter terrorism, disaster management and public health.

China also managed to steal a march over India during the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation Summit held in Pakistan in October. It took full



M.K. Narayanan

a former Director, Intelligence Bureau, a former National Security Adviser, and a former Governor of West Bengal

advantage of the absence of the Indian Prime Minister at the Summit to mute India's voice at a forum that is perceived as being anti-West. Mr. Xi again took full advantage of the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation Summit, in Peru in November, to strengthen ties with 'traditional enemy', Japan.

Japanese Prime Minister Shigeru Ishiba has since agreed with Mr. Xi to promote a 'mutually beneficial relationship ...based on common strategic interests'.

The churn in South and West Asia

It is in India's traditional area of influence, viz., South Asia, however, that the biggest churn is taking place – or has already taken place. Questions have been raised after the ouster of the Sheikh Hasina regime in Bangladesh as to whether India indeed has a proper 'neighbourhood policy'. Today, India appears almost isolated in the region and with the eclipse of Ms. Hasina and the emergence of a caretaker regime (which is openly hostile to India), India appears friendless.

Both Nepal and Sri Lanka today appear to look like 'fair weather friends' – at least in so far as the present is concerned. Where the Maldives stands, is indeed a subject to debate. Pakistan has always been inimical to India, and Afghanistan today does not seem to figure prominently in India's calculations. Bhutan, under the present King, does not display the same warmth towards India, appearing more intent on balancing relations with China. Across the South Asia region, therefore, how the roll of the dice would turn out is a matter of speculation.

Far more problematic though could well be the impact of the current churn in West Asia, more specifically, the developments in Syria of late. The ouster of the Assad regime in Syria is certain to have a cataclysmic impact on that part of the world. In turn, it will have relevance for countries in the wider region as well, including India. How India deals with the situation resulting from the collapse of the erstwhile Bashar al-Assad regime, and the takeover of the reins by a Sunni group, the 'Hayat Tahrir al Shams' (HTS) is unclear. Its leader, who carried the nom-de-guerre Abu Mohammed al Julani, has since reverted to his real name, Ahmed Hussain al Sharaa. The HTS leader was previously linked to al Qaeda, and even briefly flirted with the Islamic State (ISIS), but is today displaying a more moderate outlook. It may, however, be too early to determine what the outlook for Syria is, and for the region as a whole under the new dispensation.

The HTS was able to wage a successful offensive against the Assad regime largely because it could identify with the Sunni majority in Syria, in contrast to the Assad regime that had,

of late, become more reliant on Russia and Iran to maintain its hold over the country. From India's viewpoint, the Assad family (belonging to Syria's Alawite group, a minority sect of Shia Islam) was initially viewed as a stabilising force in the Gulf region, especially during the difficult days that rocked parts of West Asia in the wake of the Arab Spring. India, home to a Shia and Sunni population, had greatly welcomed this. More recently, many of these perceptions had altered.

The implications of a Sunni regime in Syria are certain to be widespread. One by one, elements of the so-called 'axis of resistance' are being dismantled. On the other hand Israel, despite its pogrom in Gaza, seems to be gaining the upper hand in West Asia. Which side has gained the most, given recent developments in Syria, is not yet fully clear, but quite evidently, Iran has been a loser – and it might well result in Iran's influence across West Asia declining. It may also no longer be the same revolutionary force in West Asia, that it was perceived to be following the 1979 revolution in Iran. The Ayatollahs in Iran are also set to face a major setback, and a major churn in Iran cannot be ruled out. The Shia world as a whole would, thus, be the overall loser, and militias such as the Hezbollah could well be cut to size.

Implicitly, the pro-Palestine movement would be adversely affected and Palestine may not persist as a live issue. Global jihad could also face a deathblow.

The biggest gainers will in all likelihood be Israel and Türkiye. Russia's influence has suffered with the fall of the Assad regime. But given Russia's relations with Türkiye's strongman, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, and the pragmatic approach taken by Russian President Vladimir Putin, Russia could well retrieve the situation.

Do not rule out the digital threat

In conclusion, it needs to be mentioned that notwithstanding the developments in the geo-political arena, it is the digital threat that is set to achieve a quantum leap during 2025. The situation warrants careful assessment and sending out of a dire warning about the dangers present in the digital arena. Some of this was evident during the latter part of 2024, but this is likely to grow exponentially during 2025. Convergence among technologies is threatening national infrastructure in a manner that had never previously been envisaged. According to data available with Agencies, there was a dramatic rise in cyber attacks occurring in India in the recent period. Almost all major companies and Government institutions were hit by denial of service and ransomware attacks. All this is set to increase in geometrical progression during 2025 and the following years.

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- India is at a pivotal moment in its history. It is among the leading nations in the world when it comes to economic growth and political stability. India today projects an atmosphere of peace, which is seemingly out of place in a world that is undergoing a profound shift in its economic and geo-political landscape. India is today privy to the rise of new economic and political groupings.
- The year 2024 was a period of pronounced political uncertainty across the globe. Much of the world was a mute witness to the multiple and concurrent conflicts that threaten peace and stability today. This is specially true of Europe and West Asia.
- One major tragedy still unfolding is Gaza, which has few parallels, while the ongoing Ukraine conflict contains the seeds of a much wider conflict in the future. India has, however, managed to steer itself successfully within this geo-political landscape.

Content.

- **India's largest neighbour, China**
- **It is in India's traditional area of influence, viz., South Asia, however, that the biggest churn is taking place — or has already taken place.**
- **West Asia**
- **In conclusion, it needs to be mentioned that notwithstanding the developments in the geo-political arena, it is the digital threat that is set to achieve a quantum leap during 2025. The situation warrants careful assessment and sending out of a dire warning about the dangers present in the digital arena.**

India needs to prioritise preventive care

India is facing a healthcare crisis that is growing both in scope and cost. We face an alarming dichotomy today: while life expectancy of Indians is expected to increase further, many are facing disease burden earlier. As the country sees an alarming rise in non-communicable diseases (NCDs) such as heart disease, stroke, diabetes, and cancer, the financial burden on individuals and the healthcare system continues to escalate.

NCDs accounted for about 65% of all deaths in 2022, up from about 50% in 2010-13, as per the National Family Health Survey-5. The prevalence of risk factors for NCDs is worryingly high. One in four adult men are hypertensive. One in eight is diabetic. Further, breast, lung, and cervical cancer are on the rise, with the median age of diagnosis occurring earlier than global averages.

Millions of people who are facing these conditions could have been managed better, at often lower costs, had they been diagnosed earlier. In this context, shifting the focus from reactive treatment to proactive prevention is crucial, not only to improve health outcomes but also to control the ever-increasing healthcare expenses.

A growing economic burden
The Union Budget for 2024 allocated ₹87,657 crore to the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, marking a 13% increase from the previous year. While this is a step forward, experts agree that this allocation remains insufficient given the scale of India's health challenges.

The National Health Accounts show the total current health expenditure estimate in 2021-22 as ₹7.9 lakh crore, growing at a rate more than overall inflation. The share of household health expenditure, including insurance contributions, while decreasing over time, still drives nearly 50% of the spend. This remains one of the highest globally.



Sathya R. Sriram

CEO, Preventive Health, Apollo Hospitals



Akshay Ravi

Partner, Healthcare practice, EY Parthenon

The World Health Organization (WHO) projects that the economic burden of NCDs in India will surpass ₹280 lakh crore by 2030 – a cost equivalent to ₹2 lakh per household. This escalating cost, driven by rising healthcare expenses and productivity losses, poses a severe threat to financial stability, particularly for middle and lower-income families.

Regular screenings, especially for high-risk individuals, could significantly reduce the incidence of serious, life-threatening and debilitating conditions and its resultant cascading economic and social effects. In a large hospital network, for every 1,000 people screened, at least three people are identified for pre-emptive cardiac or cancer interventions.

Targeted but periodic screening investigations for individuals such as mammograms for breast cancer, pap smears for cervical cancer, X-ray or low-dose computed tomography for lung cancer, ultrasound for liver disease, echo cardiography and treadmill stress test for heart disease beyond the physical vitals and blood tests enable early intervention.

Unfortunately, comprehensive health checks (which can cost anywhere between ₹8,000 and ₹15,000 in metro cities today) are perceived as expensive. If the government were to enable a step change in preventive health services adoption, it could significantly reduce the overall financial burden on individuals and the healthcare system.

Tax incentives, subsidised screenings, and public awareness are key policy tools that can enable this. As part of the Finance Act, 2013, the Union government made efforts to encourage preventive healthcare by offering a ₹5,000 tax deduction under Section 80D of the Income Tax Act for health checks. However, this amount has remained stagnant for the last decade, despite the 12-14% estimated healthcare inflation rate and the rising cost of healthcare services. Thus, it would be

prudent for our policymakers to consider revising the tax deduction limit to at least ₹15,000 in the Union Budget for 2025-26. This would incentivise more individuals to undergo preventive health checks, potentially saving the nation several thousand of crores if future healthcare costs. The incremental tax foregone to the exchequer from such a measure is estimated to be less than ₹5,000 crore, a worthy investment towards improving the health of the nation.

The path forward

We need to prioritise preventive care to mitigate the increasing economic and financial burden of chronic diseases. A three-pronged approach can potentially drive a change in the adoption of preventive health services.

First, we need to strengthen early intervention capabilities through the Ayushman Health and Wellness Centres, including capturing trends effectively and enabling risk-driven targeted screening using AI-enabled imaging modalities to offer lower cost screenings at-scale.

Second, we need to improve the adoption of screening at private centres by encouraging insurers and private health providers to offer a subsidised minimum screening programme for every individual between 40-60 years. For example, for women after the age of 40, a mammogram is necessary annually or once in two years, based on her risk factors.

Exploring part funding through allocations from proceeds from the healthcare cess or the proposed 35% GST slab on tobacco and sugar products can help reduce funding needs.

Finally, the increase in tax deduction limit can further incentivise people to complete comprehensive health checks.

By prioritising preventive care over reactive treatments, India can pave the way for a healthier and more economically resilient future.

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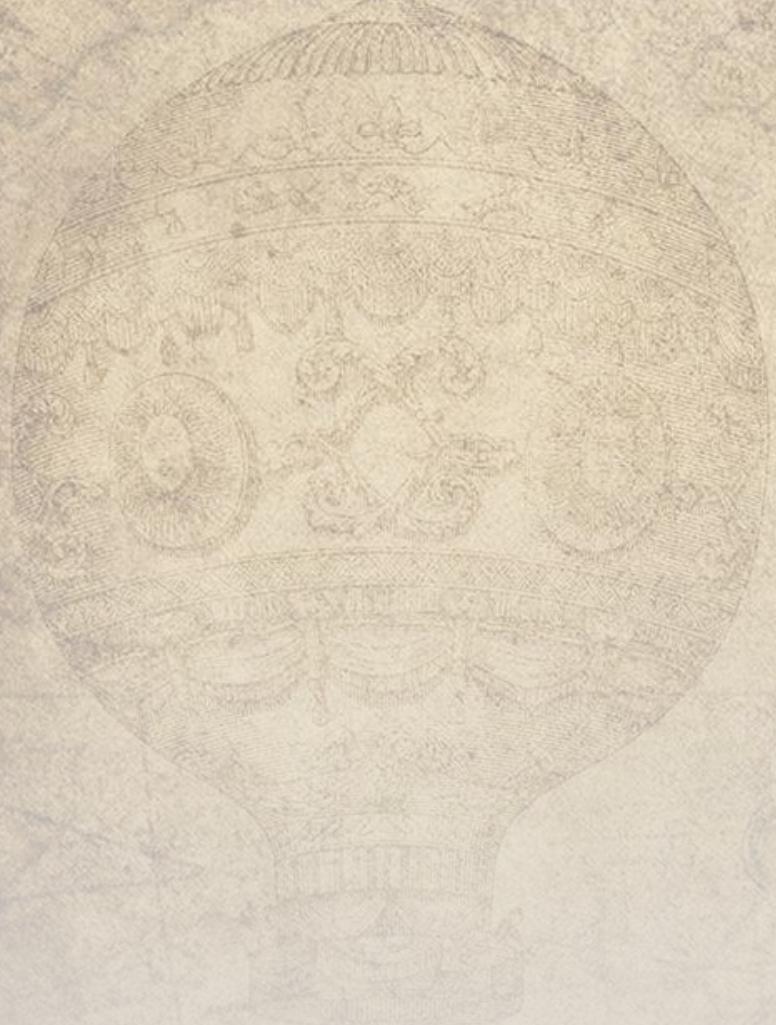
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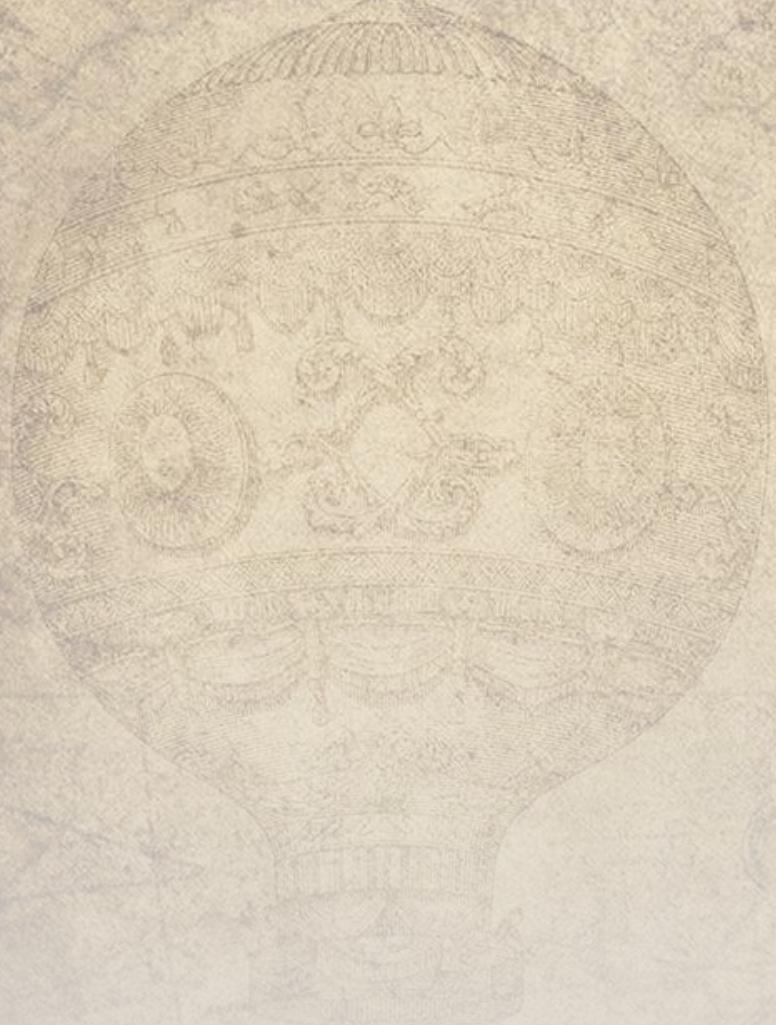
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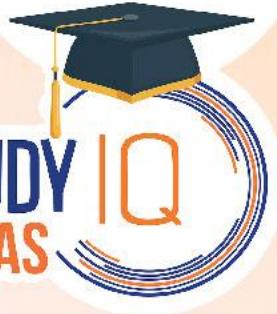
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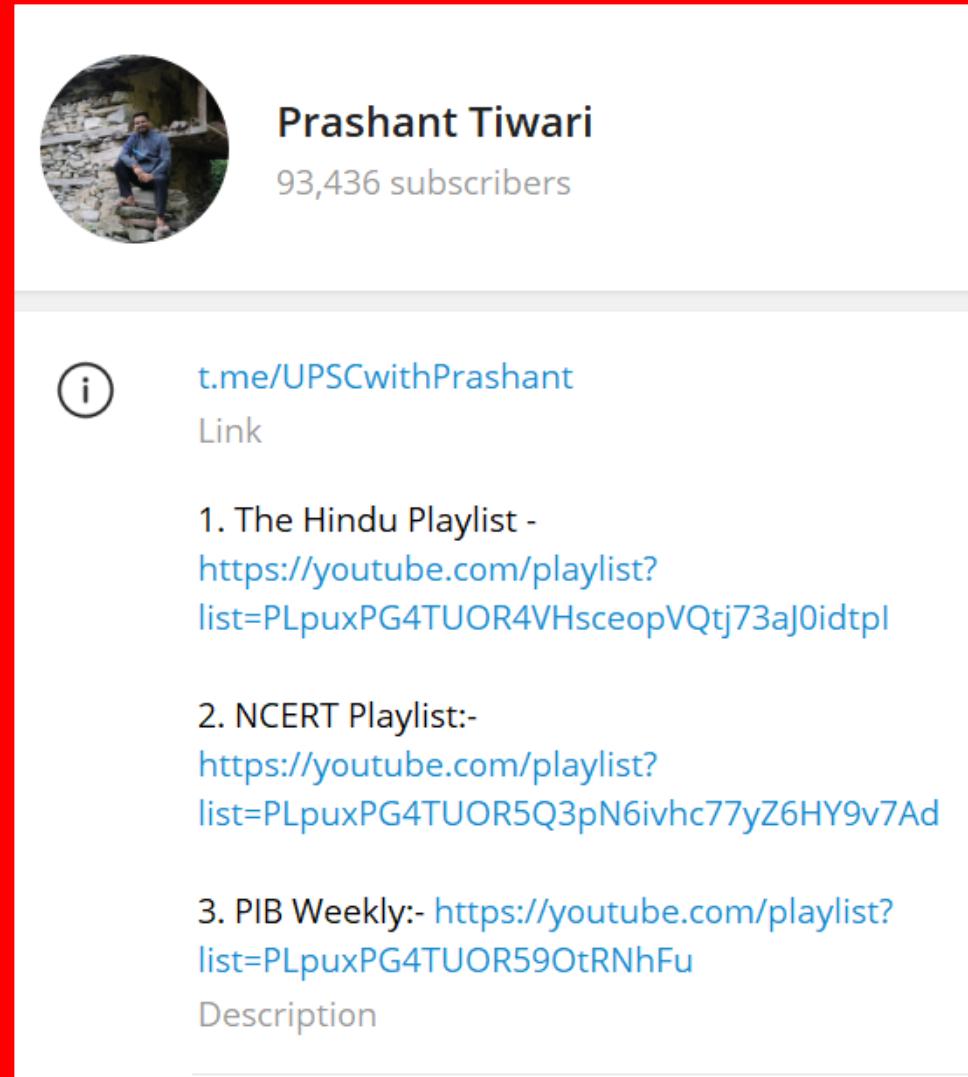
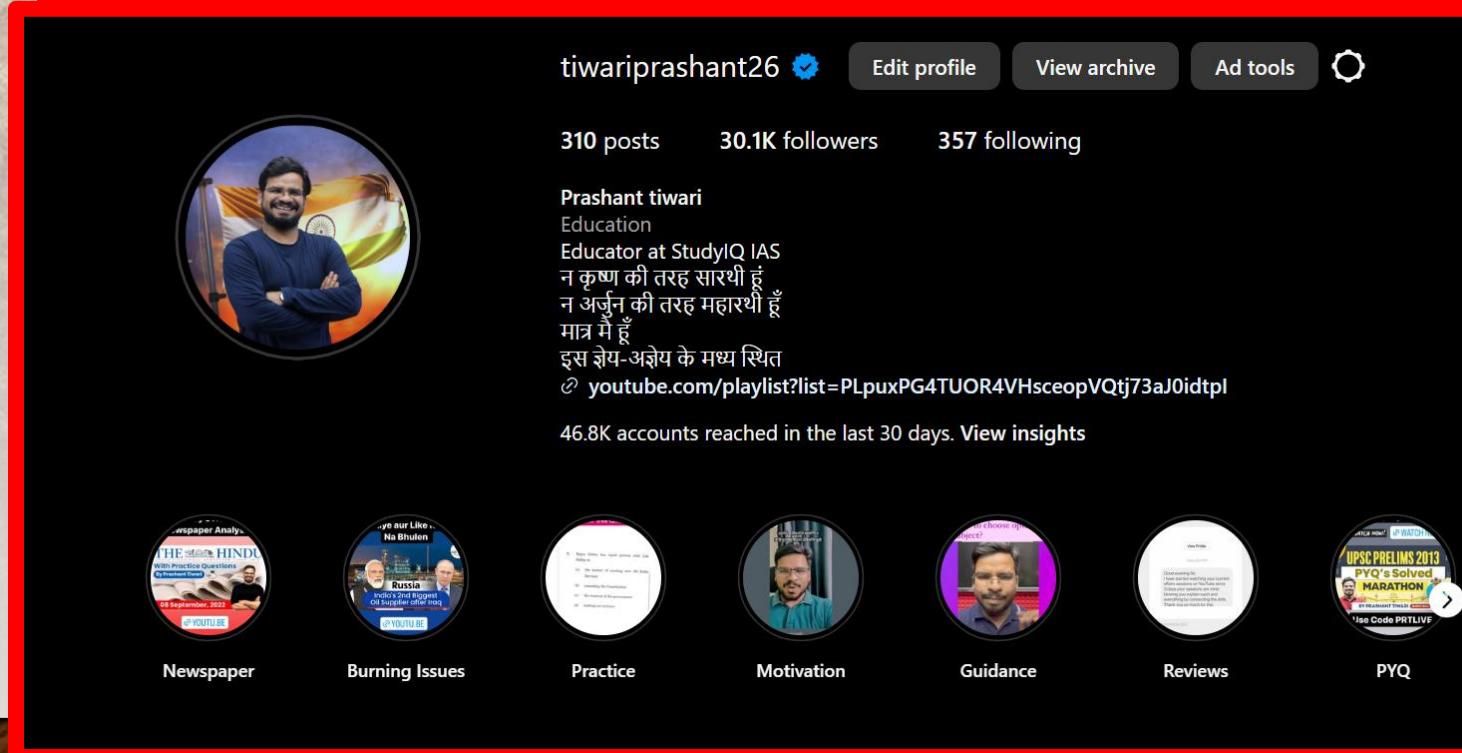
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