

# Headlines

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**Trade deficit - Page No.1 , GS 3**

**China's expansionist strategy - Page No.8 , GS 2**

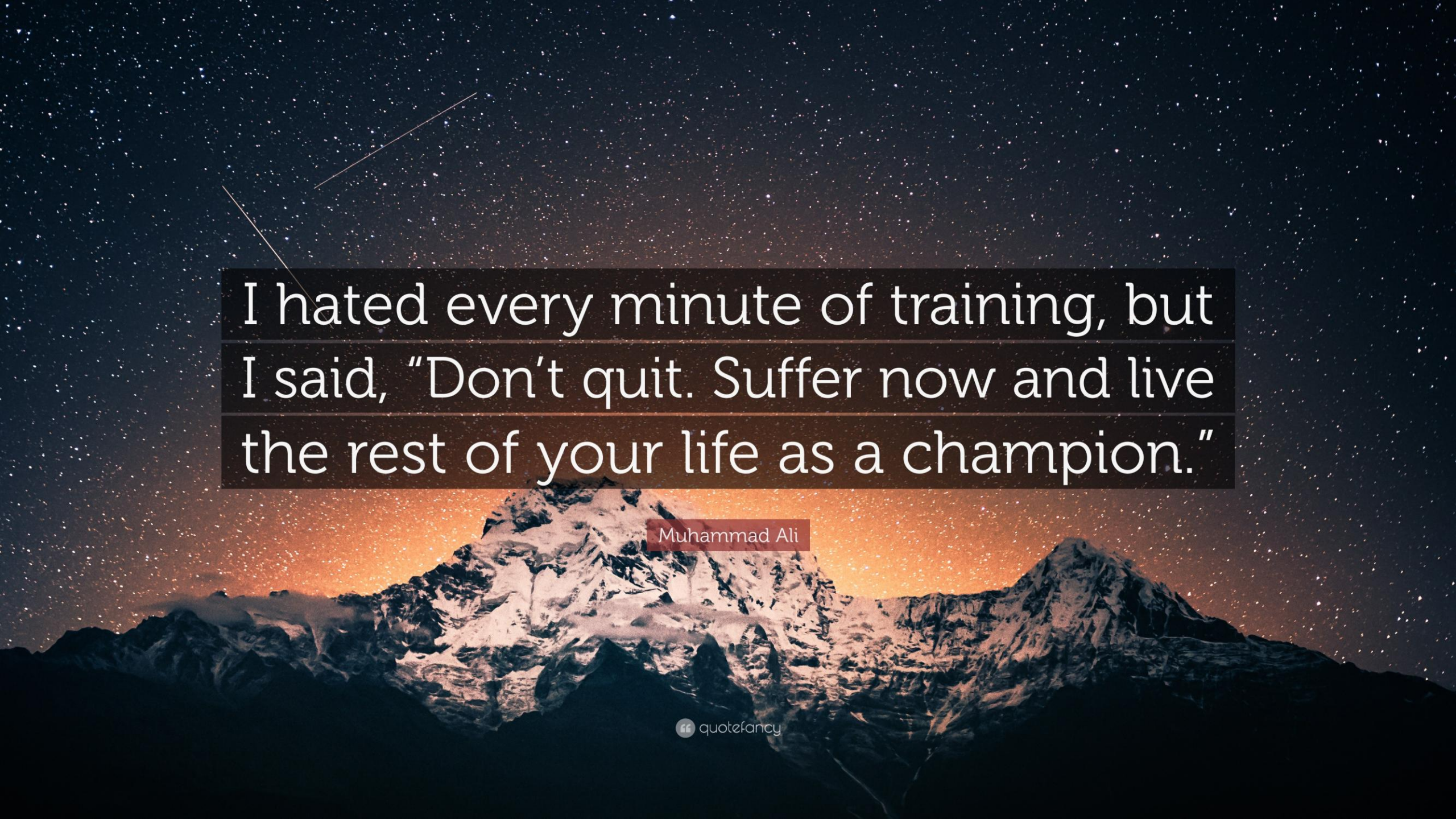
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I hated every minute of training, but  
I said, "Don't quit. Suffer now and live  
the rest of your life as a champion."

Muhammad Ali



# Gaza ceasefire agreement ready, say U.S. and Hamas

Page No. 1, GS 2

Israeli PM Netanyahu says final details of the deal are still being ironed out; agreement promises release of hostages held by Hamas and Palestinians jailed in Israel during a six-week pause in war

**Associated Press**  
DOHA

Israel and Hamas agreed to a ceasefire deal to pause the devastating war in the Gaza Strip, multiple officials announced on Wednesday, raising the possibility of winding down the deadliest and most destructive fighting between the bitter enemies.

The deal, coming after weeks of painstaking negotiations in the Qatari capital, promises the release of dozens of hostages held by Hamas in phases, the release of hundreds of Palestinian prisoners in Israel, and would allow hundreds of thousands of people displaced in Gaza to return to what remains of their homes. It also would flood badly needed humanitar-



**Hopes up:** Supporters of Israelis kidnapped by Hamas react to the news reports on ceasefire deal in Tel Aviv on Wednesday. REUTERS

ian aid into a territory ravaged by 15 months of war.

Three officials from the U.S. and one from Hamas confirmed that a deal had

been reached, while the office of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said final details were still being ironed out.

All three U.S. officials and the Hamas official requested anonymity to discuss the contours of the deal before the official announcement by mediators in Doha.

Mr. Netanyahu's office said in a statement that it hoped "details will be finalised tonight." Any agreement needs to be approved by Netanyahu's Cabinet.

Once official, the deal is expected to deliver an initial six-week halt to fighting that is to be accompanied by the opening of negotiations on ending the war altogether.

Over six weeks, 33 of the nearly 100 hostages are to be reunited with their loved ones after months in captivity.

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Syria

West Bank

Re'im

Gaza

Jordan

Egypt

Israel







## **Fact**

- **Late 1800s: Zionist movement emerges, advocating for a Jewish homeland in historic Palestine.**
- **1917: Balfour Declaration – The British government expressed support for a “national home for the Jewish people” in Palestine.**

### **1947-1949: Partition and First Arab-Israeli War:**

- **1947: UN approved a partition plan for Palestine, leading to the creation of Israel in 1948.**
- **1948-1949: The first Arab-Israeli War (or War of Independence) resulted in the establishment of Israel and the displacement of hundreds of thousands of Palestinian Arabs.**
- **1964: Formation of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), representing Palestinian interests.**
- **1967: Six-Day War – Israel gains control of the West Bank, Gaza Strip, and East Jerusalem.**

## **Fact**

- **1978: Camp David Accords – Israel-Egypt peace treaty.**
- **1987-1993: First Intifada – Palestinian uprising in the occupied territories.**
- **1993: Oslo Accords – Peace negotiations between Israel and the PLO, leading to limited Palestinian self-rule.**
- **2005: Israel withdraws from the Gaza Strip but maintains control of its borders.**



## **Fact**

### **What is the solution to Israel Palestine Conflict?**

- **One-state solution:** This plan seeks to establish a unified state encompassing the region between the River Jordan and the Mediterranean Sea, incorporating Israel, the West Bank, and the Gaza Strip into a single entity.
- **Two-State Solution:** It envisions the establishment of two separate and sovereign states – Israel and Palestine – living side by side in peace and security.
- **Border Adjustments:** Negotiations would need to address the specific borders of the two states involving land swaps, allowing Israel to retain some settlement blocs in exchange for equivalent land concessions to the Palestinians.



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Education

Educator at StudyIQ IAS

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न अर्जुन की तरह महारथी हूँ

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# India's goods exports dip 1% in December; trade deficit narrows to three-month low

Page No. 1, GS 3

**Vikas Dhoot**  
NEW DELHI

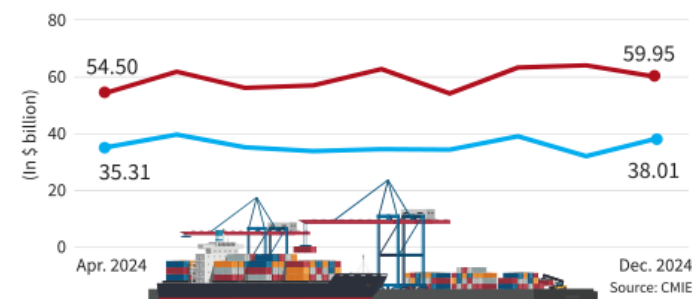
India's goods exports contracted 1% year-on-year in December to a fraction over \$38 billion, while imports grew 4.9% to almost \$60 billion, but this narrowed the merchandise trade deficit to a three-month low of \$21.9 billion, reflecting a sharp moderation from November's record gap of \$31.8 billion.

Gold imports that were feared to have spiked to a fresh high of \$14.9 billion in November, before the Centre corrected that tally by \$5 billion last week to \$9.9 billion citing an erroneous 'double count', more than halved sequentially in December to \$4.7 billion. However, this still marked a significant 55.4% increase over the December 2023 gold imports.

Commerce Secretary Sunil Barthwal sought to

## Export blip

Goods shipments shrank 1% in December, but the trade deficit narrowed to a 3-month low of \$21.9 billion with gold imports easing



play down concerns about the export blip, saying that shipment values have grown in every quarter through the first nine months of this financial year. This shows that they have not only been resilient during a challenging year but also more consistent, he said. Officials also stressed that December's export tally marked only the third occasion in 2024-25 that outbound shipments' value has crossed

the \$38 billion mark.

Overall goods exports are now estimated to be 1.6% higher through the April to December 2024 period at \$321.7 billion, while imports have risen 5.15% to \$532.5 billion. On a year-on-year basis, December's trade deficit was 17% higher, while the total deficit through the year is up 11.1% at \$210.8 billion.

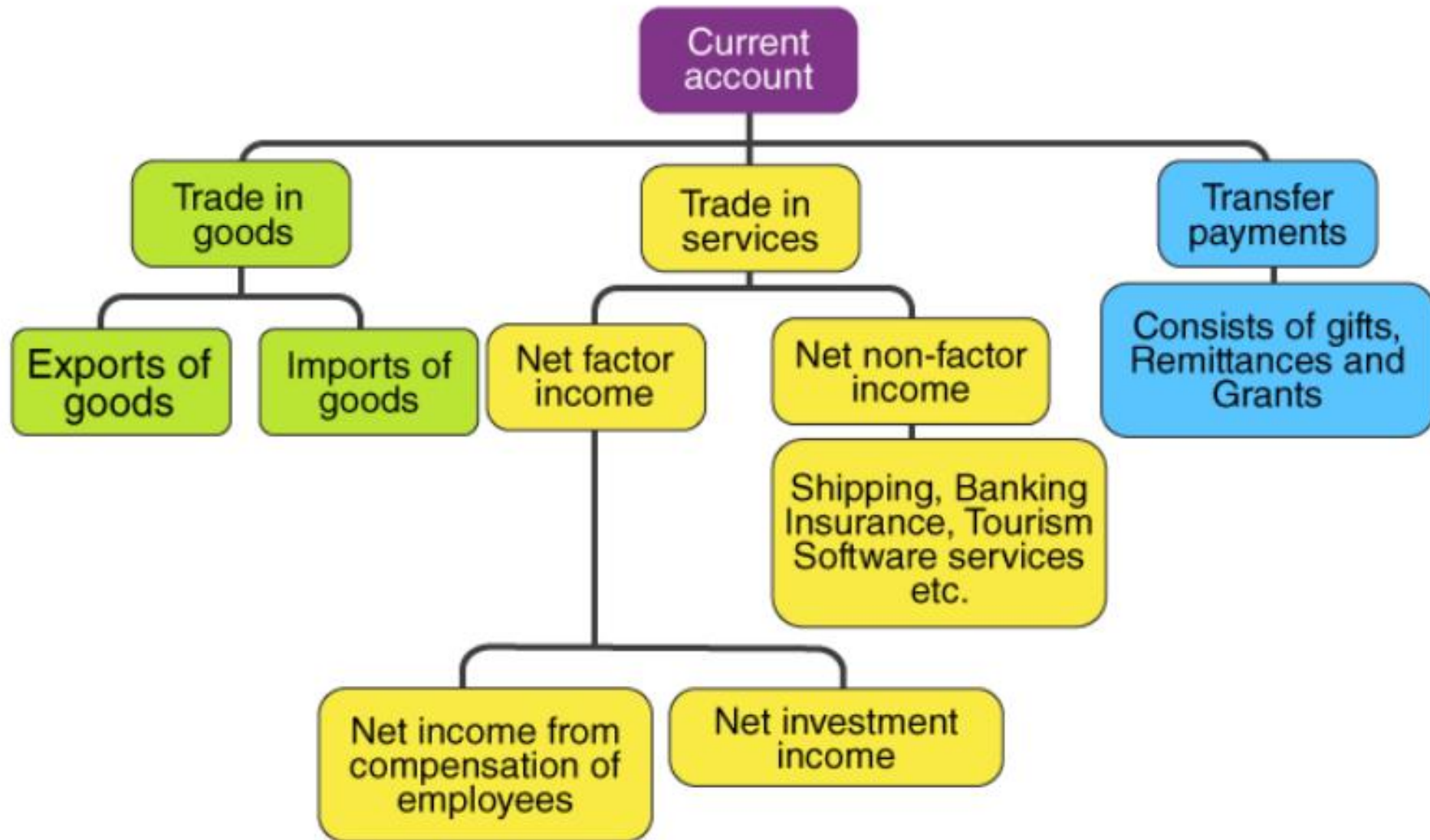
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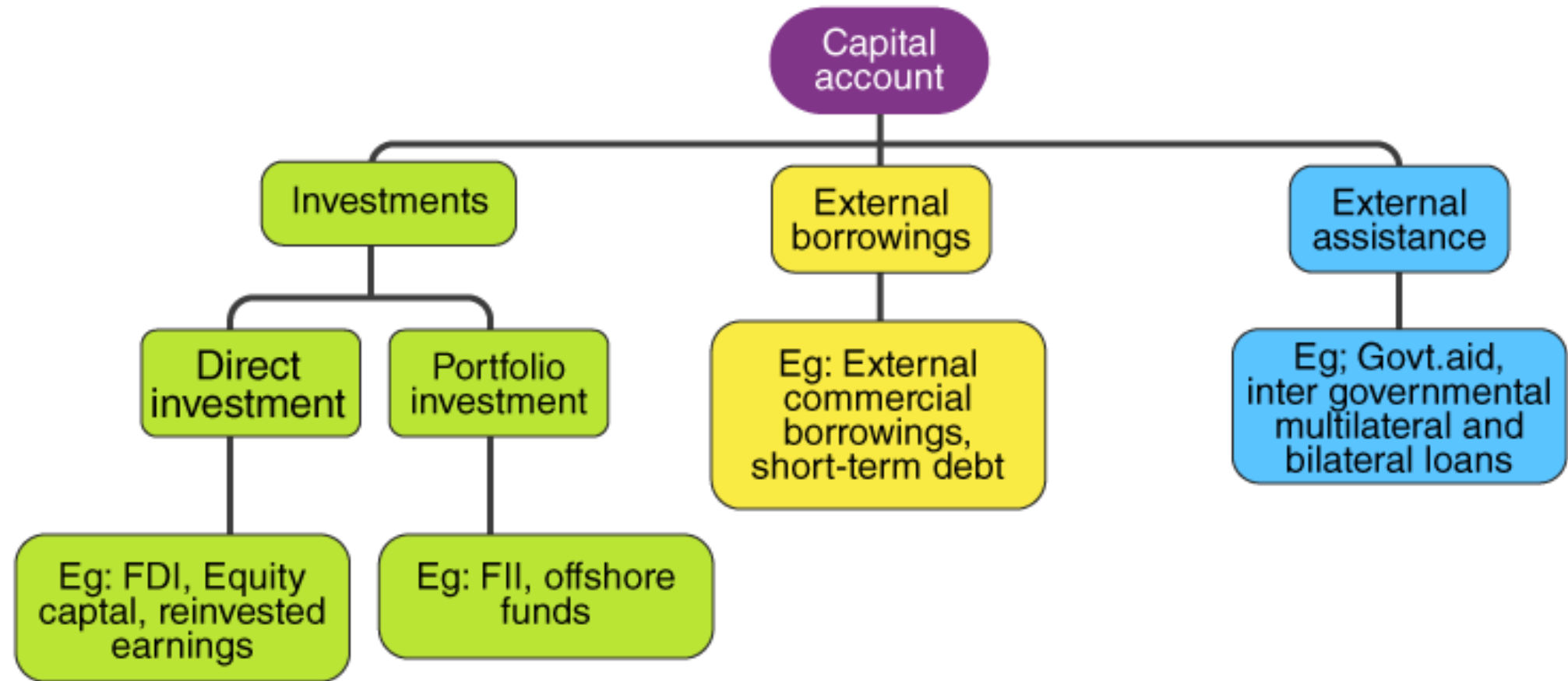
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# Agasthyar's legacy to be the focus of Kashi Tamil Sangamam 3.0

Page No. 14, GS I

**The Hindu Bureau**  
NEW DELHI

Announcing that the theme of the third edition of Kashi Tamil Sangamam will be the legacy and philosophy of Maharishi Agasthyar, Union Education Minister Dharmendra Pradhan said here on Wednesday that the intellectual brilliance of Agasthyar was the bedrock of the Tamil language and literature as well as the shared values, knowledge traditions and heritage of the country.

The event, to be held at the Namo Ghat in Varanasi, will begin on February 15 and will conclude on February 24.

The Minister also inaugurated the registration process for the Sangamam, and said the Centre expected 1,200 delegates from Tamil Nadu this time. The Sangamam will be held against the backdrop of the Kumbh Mela, Mr. Pradhan said.

The Union Education Ministry is the key organiser of the event. A document on Agasthyar temples in Tamil Nadu and another one on Siddha medicine will be released during the event, Mr. Pradhan said.

The last date of registration for the event is Febru-

**The event, to be held at the Namo Ghat in Varanasi, will be held from Feb. 15 to 24**

ary 1. The participants will be selected after a Tamil quiz on February 2. The portal, [kashitamil.iitm.ac.in](http://kashitamil.iitm.ac.in), is hosted by the Indian Institute of Technology, Madras.

Responding to questions, Mr. Pradhan said the Centre had not used the Sangamam for any political purposes and the intention was cultural integration and upholding of the inseparable and timeless bonds between Tamil Nadu and Kashi.

The participants will be from five categories – students, teachers, and writers; farmers and artisans; professionals and small entrepreneurs; women from various sectors; and those involved in start-ups, innovation, edu-tech and research. “This year, an additional group of around 200 students of Tamil origin studying in various Central universities will be a part of this event to enliven the bond between Kashi and Tamil Nadu. Participation of youth in all categories will be encouraged this year,” Mr. Pradhan said.



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## **Content.**

- **Kashi Tamil Sangamam celebrates many aspects of the historical and civilisational connection between India's North and South.**
- **The broader objective is to bring the two knowledge and cultural traditions (of the North and South) closer, create an understanding of our shared heritage and deepen the people-to-people bond between the regions.**
- **It is being organized by the Ministry of Education in collaboration with other ministries like Culture, Textiles, Railways, Tourism, Food Processing, Information & Broadcasting etc. and the Government of Uttar Pradesh.**
- **The endeavour is in sync with National Education Policy (NEP), 2020's emphasis on integrating the wealth of Indian Knowledge Systems with modern systems of knowledge.**
- **IIT Madras and Banaras Hindu University (BHU) are the two implementing agencies for the programme.**



## **Content.**

### **Cultural Significance:**

- **King Parakrama Pandya, who ruled over the region around Madurai in the 15th century, wanted to build a temple to Lord Shiva, and he travelled to Kashi (Uttar Pradesh) to bring back a lingam.**
- **While returning, he stopped to rest under a tree — but when he tried to continue his journey, the cow carrying the lingam refused to move.**
- **Parakrama Pandya understood this to be the Lord's wish, and installed the lingam there, a place that came to be known as Sivakasi, Tamil Nadu.**
- **For devotees who could not visit Kashi, the Pandyas had built the Kasi Viswanathar Temple in what is today Tenkasi in southwestern Tamil Nadu, close to the state's border with Kerala.**



# The red flag as China's expansionist strategy rolls on

In recent days, India has witnessed two significant incidents of Chinese aggression along the China-India border, highlighting vulnerabilities that not only threaten India's territorial integrity but also undermine its sovereignty. The Chinese government's announcement of the construction of a dam on the Yarlung Zangbo river (which is the Brahmaputra river), and the creation of two new counties in north-eastern Ladakh, have set alarm bells ringing.

India has strongly condemned these Chinese actions, asserting that they are illegal and a direct challenge to India's sovereignty. In response to China's ambitious hydropower project, India has expressed concern, noting that it is monitoring the situation and will take necessary measures to safeguard its national interests. These developments are particularly disturbing given the recent consensus on troop disengagement along the Line of Actual Control (LAC). These new moves further underscore the unpredictability of China's approach in the region.

## The transboundary water issue

India is not alone in facing the brunt of China's expansionist policies. Other South Asian countries such as Nepal and Bhutan have been subjected in a similar manner to Chinese territorial encroachments. Disputes over land boundaries persist between China and several of its South Asian neighbours, and China's unilateral actions with respect to transboundary rivers, particularly the Brahmaputra and Indus river systems, have the potential to jeopardise water security in India, Nepal, Bangladesh, Bhutan, and Pakistan. Despite these challenges, each country has opted to engage with China on a bilateral basis.

The proposed Chinese dam, with an annual capacity to generate 300 billion kilowatt-hours of electricity a year, is located on the lower reaches of the Yarlung Zangbo near the China-India



**Rahul M. Lad**

Assistant Professor,  
Department of  
Geography, School of  
Liberal arts and Social  
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Education and  
Humanities, JSPM  
University, Pune

border. This massive infrastructure project presents significant challenges for downstream countries, particularly India and Bangladesh.

The construction of the dam is likely to reduce the amount of water and silt reaching downstream, which could have severe long-term consequences for agriculture, fisheries, and biodiversity in India and Bangladesh. Further, during the monsoon season or in times of geopolitical tensions, the uncontrolled release of water could result in devastating floods along the Indian border, which will be an issue of strategic vulnerability for India. In anticipation, India has accelerated plans to build its own hydropower projects and reservoirs, including an investment of \$1 billion to expedite the construction of 12 hydropower stations in Arunachal Pradesh.

## Border disputes, cartographic aggression

China's recent actions, including the creation of the two new counties, are a part of its ongoing strategy of cartographic aggression aimed at asserting control over disputed territories. This kind of tactic is intended to gain strategic leverage over its regional adversaries.

China's territorial disputes with India are multifaceted, with the most recent aggression occurring along the western front, specifically in Ladakh. Additionally, China continues to lay claim to Arunachal Pradesh, a State that is an inalienable part of India. Beyond India, China also asserts overlapping claims on territories in countries such as Nepal and Bhutan.

China's tactics in asserting territorial claims—such as renaming locations within Indian-controlled territories, establishing settlements in disputed areas, and incorporating contested regions into official maps—are becoming increasingly visible. For instance, in 2023, the Chinese government standardised 11 locations in Arunachal Pradesh to assert its ownership, following similar actions in 2021 and 2017.

However, international law does not recognise

territorial claims based solely on cartographic assertions. In various landmark cases, which include the ruling by the International Court of Justice (ICJ) on the Minquiers and Ecrehos dispute between the United Kingdom and France, maps were deemed insufficient evidence of sovereignty. The ICJ ruled that effective administrative control and sovereignty are crucial for determining ownership of contested territories. Therefore, China's use of cartographic aggression, while provocative, lacks legal validity under international law. Nevertheless, China's efforts to establish a physical presence in disputed territories, such as by building settlements, could complicate matters for India in the future.

## The South Asian response

While China has sought economic engagement with all South Asian nations, its territorial and water-related disputes with these countries continue to strain regional relations. Unlike the Southeast Asian nations, which have employed collective responsive measures through multilateral organisations such as the Mekong River Commission (MRC) and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), South Asian countries, including India, have chosen to address their concerns with China on a bilateral basis. This approach has largely been shaped by the power asymmetry between China and its smaller neighbours.

India, as the dominant regional power in South Asia, should take the lead in fostering a collective response to China's actions. A unified approach, including regional forums, multilateral institutions, or enhanced diplomatic coordination would strengthen South Asia's position in addressing China's increasing influence and territorial ambitions. A comprehensive strategy involving diplomatic engagement and regional cooperation is crucial for India's sovereignty and regional security in the face of China's growing assertiveness.

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- **Despite these challenges, each country has opted to engage with China on a bilateral basis.**
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- **The construction of the dam is likely to reduce the amount of water and silt reaching downstream, which could have severe long-term consequences for agriculture, fisheries, and biodiversity in India and Bangladesh.**
- **Further, during the monsoon season or in times of geopolitical tensions, the uncontrolled release of water could result in devastating floods along the Indian border, which will be an issue of strategic vulnerability for India.**
- **In anticipation, India has accelerated plans to build its own hydropower projects and reservoirs, including an investment of \$1 billion to expedite the construction of 12 hydropower stations in Arunachal Pradesh.**
- **Beyond India, China also asserts overlapping claims on territories in countries such as Nepal and Bhutan.**







## Burrow tragedy

India must learn from its mining disasters and enforce regulations

**W**ith four deaths so far, the coal mining tragedy in Assam's Dima Hasao district has revived a long-standing debate on the hazardous nature of rat-hole coal mining in India. As opposed to modern coal mining, which is mechanised, the 'rat-hole' points to the crude and antiquated technique of employing people, and even children, to burrow into the ground to scoop out the underground coal. Depending on the depths that they plumb, the odds are high that their pickaxes will often unleash a torrent of water from a hidden aquifer that can suddenly inundate the excavated tunnel – as it is suspected to have happened at Dima Hasao. Because such accidents have recurred over the decades, along with the attendant health and environmental hazards, this mode of mining was banned by the National Green Tribunal (NGT) in 2014. The use of proper geological surveys and appropriate machinery would have made the mine economically unviable. The Assam Chief Minister has stated that the mine appeared to be “prime facie... illegal” and one abandoned by the State's Mines and Minerals Department. If that is the case, it reflects poorly on the State administration that such mines can be exploited by unscrupulous elements with such ease, despite the ban. Surely, this is only a fraction of the unregulated mining that actually goes on.

The Supreme Court of India, in 2019, had asked whether it was possible for such mining to continue without the “connivance” of officials, when it was examining the rescue of 15 miners trapped in a rat-hole mine in the East Jaintia Hills in December 2018. A report submitted by a monitoring committee set up by the NGT observed that despite the ban, the demand for coal to power cement manufacturing and thermal power plants in the northeast had sustained and supported rat-hole coal mining. On the other hand, when convenient, State authorities have sought out and even felicitated rat-hole miners, some from Assam, as in 2023, when they were called in as a last resort after advanced machinery and the expertise of professional geologists and earth scientists had failed to rescue 41 construction workers trapped in the large, over-ground Silkiyara tunnel in Uttarkashi. The Dima Hasao operation too, like others, will end and the net success or failure of saving those trapped will induce a familiar amnesia that will be broken only by the next accident. Until decisive action to puncture the economics of rat-hole mining is taken, India is only burrowing the way to another tragedy.

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- **Because such accidents have recurred over the decades, along with the attendant health and environmental hazards, this mode of mining was banned by the National Green Tribunal (NGT) in 2014.**
- **Unlike large-scale mechanised mines, this practice involves digging narrow, horizontal tunnels barely large enough for a single person to squeeze through.**
- **These tunnels, often referred to as "rat holes," can extend tens of meters underground.**



## **Content.**

- While predominantly practised in Meghalaya, reports of rat-hole mining have surfaced in other northeastern states of India as well.
- This method thrives in regions with thin coal seams, unsuitable for large-scale mining techniques.

## **Reasons :**

- **Poverty:** Local tribal populations with limited livelihood options, often resort to rat-hole mining as a means of survival.
- The quick cash generated from selling the extracted coal, despite the risks involved, becomes a tempting proposition for those struggling to make ends meet.
- **Land Ownership:**
- Ambiguous land titles pose challenges for establishing regulated mines, creating opportunities for illegal operators to exploit loopholes and persist in their activities.
- **Coal Demand:** The constant demand for coal, both legal and illegal, fuels the practice of rat-hole mining.



# OYO's new policy may be at the cost of rights

**P**ayal Kapadia's award-winning film *All We Imagine As Light* depicts the journey of a young couple, Anu and Shiaz, struggling to find a private space. They may be fictional, but their problem certainly is not. Across the country, young people in pre-marital relationships have long found it difficult to come by privacy. This issue is likely to be exacerbated by policies such as the one recently implemented by OYO.

Last week, OYO announced that unmarried couples would be disallowed from accessing its partner hotels. The hotels have been given the discretion to implement this policy in accordance with local sensibilities. Going forward, all couples will be required to present 'valid proof of relationship' while checking in. Explaining the reason for its move, OYO stated that civil society groups and citizens had requested it to institute this rule.

Initially, the policy will apply only to hotels in Meerut, Uttar Pradesh, but reports suggest that OYO may expand its application to other cities. Beyond the practicalities of providing 'valid proof of relationship,' it is clear that OYO is encouraging partner hotels to discriminate against customers based on their marital status. The burning question, however, is whether those adversely affected by this policy may find legal redress either in the Constitution or otherwise.

In various decisions, the Supreme Court has recognised individuals' right to enter pre-marital relationships. In *Shafin Jahan vs Asokan K.M.* (2020), the court held that Article 21 of the Constitution includes the right of individuals to choose their partners 'whether within or outside marriage'. Similarly, in *Navtej Singh Johar vs Union of India* (2018), the court recognised the right of all individuals to physical, emotional, mental, and sexual companionship. Other decisions of the apex court have affirmed that the rights to privacy, dignity, and



**Spoorthi Cotha**

Advocate based in Bengaluru

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autonomy – emanating from Article 21 – mean that people have the freedom to engage in consensual, intimate, or sexual relationships and to cohabit with their partners if they choose. At their core, these decisions acknowledge the freedom to conduct oneself in a manner of one's choosing. For many unmarried couples, accessing hotel services is one way to exercise these rights. Individuals in pre-marital relationships apart, persons of different genders who are friends, colleagues, or cousins may also travel together and require OYO's services.

Under the constitutional scheme, fundamental rights enshrined in Part III of the Constitution are ordinarily enforceable against the State and its instrumentalities, not against non-State actors. In other words, citizens may seek constitutional remedies from courts when the State infringes upon their fundamental rights but not when a private party hinders their exercise. This is because constitutional rights are generally thought to apply "vertically" (i.e., against the State) and not "horizontally" (i.e., between private individuals or entities).

However, the Constitution contains three express provisions which depart from the traditional "vertical" model of rights: Article 15(2) stipulates that no citizen shall, on grounds only of religion, race, caste, sex, place of birth, or any of them, be prevented from accessing shops, public restaurants, hotels and places of public entertainment or using wells, tanks, bathing ghats, roads, and places of public resort funded by the State or dedicated to public use; Article 17 forbids the practice of untouchability; and Article 23 prohibits human trafficking and forced labour. In *Kaushal Kishor vs State of Uttar Pradesh* (2023), the Supreme Court travelled beyond this schema of horizontal rights by holding that the right under Article 21 could be enforced even against private parties.

While Article 15(2) would prevent OYO from denying its services to customers based on caste, religion, or the other grounds listed, it may not readily constitute a bar against discrimination on the ground of marital status. Separately, the effect of the decision in the Kaushal Kishor case remains to be seen – commentators have criticised it for being unclear, and in the absence of coherent and consistent jurisprudence on this subject, it is uncertain whether unmarried individuals can enforce their rights under Article 21 against OYO.

Apart from constitutional rights and remedies, statutes may provide a model for the exercise of fundamental rights in transactions between private parties. While some enactments confer certain rights on women irrespective of marital status, the time may have come for lawmakers to enact an anti-discrimination law which protects individuals (regardless of their gender) against discrimination based on marital status, in the private sphere.

The full and free exercise of our rights as citizens depends not only on State (in) action but on private actors – be it as a member of the public, a family unit, a business undertaking, or a corporation – creating the conditions for their exercise. This applies not only in the context of individuals in pre-marital relationships who may seek commercial services but also more broadly, say, to people who may wish to rent homes, who apply for employment in private establishments, or who make offers to purchase land – but are denied access on the basis of their marital status, caste, religion, sexual orientation, gender identity, or other attributes.

The tyranny of the majority is often nowhere as evident as in the private sphere. An act may not meet with social approval but the Constitution guarantees our right to do it anyway. The law – regardless of the form it takes – must protect this right.



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- **Across the country, young people in pre-marital relationships have long found it difficult to come by privacy. This issue is likely to be exacerbated by policies such as the one recently implemented by OYO.**
- **Last week, OYO announced that unmarried couples would be disallowed from accessing its partner hotels. The hotels have been given the discretion to implement this policy in accordance with local sensibilities.**
- **Going forward, all couples will be required to present ‘valid proof of relationship’ while checking in.**
- **Explaining the reason for its move, OYO stated that civil society groups and citizens had requested it to institute this rule.**



- **Initially, the policy will apply only to hotels in Meerut, Uttar Pradesh, but reports suggest that OYO may expand its application to other cities. Beyond the practicalities of providing 'valid proof of relationship,' it is clear that OYO is encouraging partner hotels to discriminate against customers based on their marital status. The burning question, however, is whether those adversely affected by this policy may find legal redress either in the Constitution or otherwise.**
- **In various decisions, the Supreme Court has recognised individuals' right to enter pre-marital relationships.**
- **In Shafin Jahan vs Asokan K.M. (2020), the court held that Article 21 of the Constitution includes the right of individuals to choose their partners 'whether within or outside marriage'.**
- **Similarly, in Navtej Singh Johar vs Union of India (2018), the court recognised the right of all individuals to physical, emotional, mental, and sexual companionship.**



## **Fact**

- **Other decisions of the apex court have affirmed that the rights to privacy, dignity, and autonomy — emanating from Article 21 — mean that people have the freedom to engage in consensual, intimate, or sexual relationships and to cohabit with their partners if they choose.**
- **At their core, these decisions acknowledge the freedom to conduct oneself in a manner of one's choosing.**
- **Under the constitutional scheme, fundamental rights enshrined in Part III of the Constitution are ordinarily enforceable against the State and its instrumentalities, not against non-State actors.**
- **In other words, citizens may seek constitutional remedies from courts when the State infringes upon their fundamental rights but not when a private party hinders their exercise.**



## **Fact**

- This is because constitutional rights are generally thought to apply “vertically” (i.e., against the State) and not “horizontally” (i.e., between private individuals or entities).
- However, the Constitution contains three express provisions which depart from the traditional “vertical” model of rights: Article 15(2) stipulates that no citizen shall, on grounds only of religion, race, caste, sex, place of birth, or any of them, be prevented from accessing shops, public restaurants, hotels and places of public entertainment or using wells, tanks, bathing ghats, roads, and places of public resort funded by the State or dedicated to public use; Article 17 forbids the practice of untouchability; and Article 23 prohibits human trafficking and forced labour.
- In *Kaushal Kishor vs State of Uttar Pradesh* (2023), the Supreme Court travelled beyond this schema of horizontal rights by holding that the right under Article 21 could be enforced even against private parties.







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