

## DAILY CURRENT AFFAIRS (DCA)

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## INDIA SETS TERMS FOR WTO PLURILATERAL AGREEMENTS

### Context

- After opposition to plurilateral pacts at the World Trade Organisation's (WTO's) Ministerial Conference this year, India offered its proposal on WTO reforms which could help **insert plurilateral agreements within the WTO framework**.

### Background

- India had blocked the **insertion of China-backed Investment Facilitation for Development (IFD) plurilateral pact** into the WTO rulebook.
- The change in India's position **came after the BRICS summit and the bilateral talks with China**.
  - The New Delhi Declaration said **BRICS members recognise the importance of identifying pathways for plurilateral initiatives**.

### What are Plurilateral Agreements?

- A plurilateral agreement is a **trade deal between a group of WTO members rather than all WTO members**.
  - For example, if 50 WTO members agree on a particular set of rules, the remaining members are not automatically bound by those rules.
- A plurilateral agreement can become **part of the WTO's official rulebook only if all WTO members agree to it**.

### Difference Between Plurilateral Deals and Multilateral WTO Agreements?

- Multilateral agreement** involves the **WTO membership as a whole**. The idea is that all WTO members negotiate the rules together.
- On the other hand, **plurilateral agreement** involves **only a group of WTO members**.
  - Countries that join the agreement have to follow its rules, while **countries that do not join are generally not bound by those rules**.

### Why is India Against some Plurilateral Deals?

- India has been concerned that **plurilateral agreements could allow a group of powerful or interested countries** to create new rules without the participation of everyone. This becomes **especially important for developing countries**.
- India's argument is that **WTO members should first decide common rules and safeguards** for all plurilateral agreements.

- It does not want **one agreement to be added first and the broader rules to be decided later**.

### India's Terms to Advance Talks on WTO Plurilateral Agreements

- Right to opt out:** WTO members should have the right to not participate in a plurilateral agreement, without losing their existing rights under the WTO.
- Protect developing countries:** Special and Differential Treatment (S&DT) should remain central so that plurilateral agreements do not ignore the concerns and priorities of developing and least-developed countries.
- Avoid overburdening the WTO:** Too many plurilateral agreements could put pressure on the WTO's limited budget and administrative resources.
- Protect essential WTO functions:** WTO resources should not be diverted from important activities such as technical assistance and capacity building for developing countries.

### WTO

- The WTO is the successor of the erstwhile **General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT)**, and is the world's largest **intergovernmental trading body** established in **1995**.
- It is the **only global international organization** dealing with the **rules of trade between nations**.
- It has **over 160 member nations**, and represents **98% of the world's trade**.
- Its stated goal is to **open trade for the benefit of all**.
- Ministerial conferences** usually take place **every two years**.

Source: IE

## INDIA REJECTS PAKISTAN-CHINA BOUNDARY JOINT COMMISSION

### Context

- India rejected the Boundary Joint Commission set up by Pakistan and China, saying that the body has no legal basis to decide on arrangements related to Indian territory under illegal occupation.

### Background

- Pakistan and China signed a Boundary Agreement in **1963**, under which Pakistan purportedly ceded

around **5,800 sq km** of territory in the **Shaksgam Valley to China**.

- The first meeting of the newly constituted **Pakistan-China Boundary Joint Commission** was held in Islamabad.
- Pakistan has stated that the commission is intended to promote border management, joint surveys, trade flows and people-to-people connectivity.

#### India's Position on the Boundary Joint Commission

- India maintains that the **entire Union Territories of Jammu and Kashmir and Ladakh are integral and inalienable parts of India**.
- India considers the **1963 Sino-Pakistan Boundary Agreement illegal and invalid**, as Pakistan lacked the legal authority to alter the status of Indian territory.
- India has rejected attempts by China and Pakistan to undertake boundary cooperation involving territories claimed by India, arguing that such arrangements cannot affect India's sovereignty.

#### Geographical Significance of Shaksgam Valley

- The Shaksgam Valley **lies north of the Karakoram range**, adjoining China's Xinjiang region and Pakistan-occupied Gilgit-Baltistan.
- The territory also forms part of the wider **India-China-Pakistan strategic triangle** in the western Himalayas.
- Under the 1963 agreement, **Pakistan agreed to transfer control of the territory to China**, subject to a future settlement of the Kashmir dispute.



#### India's Concerns on China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC)

- India's objections also extend to the **China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC)** because parts of the corridor pass through areas of Pakistan-occupied Jammu and Kashmir.

- CPEC forms an important component of **China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)** and connects Kashgar in Xinjiang with Gwadar in Balochistan through Gilgit-Baltistan.

#### Implications for India

- **Territorial Sovereignty:** China-Pakistan arrangements over areas claimed by India may create attempts to legitimise the 1963 agreement and the transfer of the Shaksgam Valley.
- **Border Security:** Greater China-Pakistan connectivity can strengthen infrastructure and logistical links near India's northern and western frontiers.
- **Strategic Convergence:** The commission further institutionalises China-Pakistan cooperation, adding to India's strategic challenges on its two sensitive frontiers.
- **Connectivity Concerns:** CPEC strengthens China's access to the Arabian Sea through territory claimed by India.

#### Way Ahead

- India needs to maintain a consistent diplomatic and legal position on territorial sovereignty while preventing developments on the ground from creating precedents regarding disputed territories.
- Greater diplomatic engagement with neighbouring countries and sustained monitoring of infrastructure developments can help safeguard India's strategic interests.

Source: TH

## DECONGESTING RAILWAYS TO UNLOCK INDIA'S FREIGHT POTENTIAL

#### Context

- Indian Railways is seeking to increase its freight-carrying capacity by decongesting High Density Networks (HDNs) through multitracking and accelerating the development of additional Dedicated Freight Corridors (DFCs).

#### Importance of Freight Transportation

- Freight earnings contribute over **65%** of Indian Railways' total earnings, helping subsidise passenger services.
- **Railways** accounted for around **27% of India's freight transport** and carried **1,670 million tonnes** of freight in **2025-26**.

- Rail freight is relatively **cheaper and has lower emissions** than road transport, but network congestion and weak last-mile connectivity limit its competitiveness.
- Indian Railways aims to increase freight loading to **3,000 million tonnes by 2030**.

#### About High-Density Networks (HDNs)

- HDNs are **heavily utilised passenger-freight routes** where train movements frequently approach or exceed the designed line capacity.
- The **11,051 km HDN** constitutes only about **16%** of the railway network but carries more than **40%** of total railway traffic, making it critical to the functioning of the network.
- **The seven major HDNs** connect Howrah–Delhi, Howrah–Mumbai, Mumbai–Delhi, Delhi–Guwahati, Delhi–Chennai, Howrah–Chennai and Mumbai–Chennai.
- **A network utilisation level** of around **70–80%** is considered **desirable for smooth train operations**.
  - ♦ However, only **4.6%** of the HDN operates below 80% capacity, while substantial portions operate at **100–120%, 120–150% and above 150%** of capacity.
  - ♦ Congestion particularly affects freight trains, contributing to the relatively low average freight-train speed of around **25 kmph**.

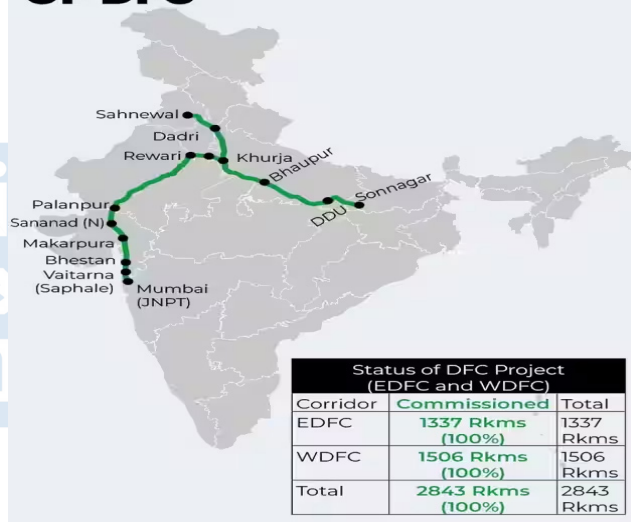
#### Multitracking for Capacity Augmentation

- Multitracking involves **adding additional railway lines** on heavily utilised routes so that passenger and freight services can operate with greater flexibility.
- The Railways is **seeking to four-line** the seven HDNs, with the objective of converting overloaded routes into routes with adequate spare capacity.
- **Significance:**
  - ♦ Additional lines can **reduce conflicts between passenger and freight** services and thereby reduce transit delays.
  - ♦ Shorter transit times can also reduce wastage, deterioration and handling-related losses in goods movement.
  - ♦ According to the Ministry of Railways, the approximate transportation cost is ₹1.60 per tonne-km by rail compared with ₹3.60 per tonne-km by road, indicating the potential for shifting more freight towards rail.

#### Dedicated Freight Corridors

- Dedicated Freight Corridors are **specialised railway routes designed primarily for freight trains**, allowing goods traffic to move without competing directly with passenger services for capacity.
  - ♦ They may **run parallel to existing railway routes** or take **alternative alignments** to bypass congested passenger terminals and sections.
- **Eastern and Western DFCs:** Eastern Dedicated Freight Corridor (EDFC) is from **Ludhiana to Sonnagar** and the Western Dedicated Freight Corridor (WDFC) is from **Jawaharlal Nehru Port Terminal (JNPT) to Dadri**.

#### PROJECT MAP OF DFC



#### What are the challenges?

- **Inadequate last-mile connectivity** increases handling time and costs, particularly when railway terminals are not directly connected to industrial clusters, ports, mines and consumption centres.
- **Congested terminals and loading facilities** can offset the time savings achieved through faster movement on the main railway network.
- **Dependence on bulk commodities** such as coal limits the diversification of railway freight towards containers, automobiles, agricultural produce and other higher-value goods.

#### Conclusion

- Expanding freight capacity is only the first step; its real economic value will depend on how efficiently the expanded network is integrated with the wider logistics system.

- A stronger rail freight network can help India achieve lower logistics costs, more reliable supply chains and a greater shift towards sustainable freight transportation.

Source: IE

## E20 PETROL IN INDIA

### Context

- India's accelerated adoption of E20 petrol has renewed debate over fuel economy, household costs, emissions, food security and the foreign-exchange benefits of ethanol blending.

### What is E20?

- E20 petrol contains **20% anhydrous ethanol and 80% motor gasoline**. India started retailing E20 at selected outlets in **2023** under the **Ethanol Blended Petrol (EBP) Programme**.
- The policy is aimed at reducing dependence on imported crude oil, promoting domestic biofuel production, supporting farmers and reducing the carbon intensity of transport.
- The government advanced the target of **20% ethanol blending in petrol to 2025-26**, instead of the earlier 2030 target.

### Major Promises of E20

- **Lower Emissions:** Ethanol is partly derived from biomass and can therefore reduce the carbon intensity of fuel.
  - ♦ The actual environmental benefit, however, depends on several factors i.e. vehicle efficiency, ethanol feedstock and production process, lifecycle emissions, blending level and distance travelled per litre.
- **Foreign-exchange Savings:** Domestic ethanol can replace a part of imported petroleum. This can reduce crude-oil demand and help in saving foreign-exchange.
- **Farmer Income Diversification:** Ethanol provides an additional market for crops such as **sugarcane and maize**. For farmers, this creates another possible revenue channel.
  - ♦ India increasingly uses **maize and sugarcane-derived feedstocks** for ethanol.
  - ♦ At the same time, large-scale diversion of these crops can affect their availability and prices.
- **Supports Rural Economy:** More distilleries, ethanol supply chains and biomass utilisation can bring investment and employment opportunities to rural areas.

- **Reduces Excess Sugar Stocks:** Ethanol gives sugar mills another outlet for sugar and molasses. This can help in managing the structural surplus in the sugar sector.
- **Feedstock Diversification:** Government policy has increasingly encouraged **maize and other feedstocks**. It can reduce excessive dependence on sugarcane.
- **Strategic Transition:** E20 can be an intermediate step towards **flex-fuel vehicles, advanced biofuels and lower-carbon mobility**.

### Related Issues & Concerns

- **Lower Fuel Economy & Higher Consumer Expenditure:** Ethanol contains less energy per litre than gasoline. As the ethanol share increases, vehicle fuel economy can therefore decline.
  - ♦ The **ARAI-SIAM-IOCL study** estimated a **2–6% reduction in fuel economy**, depending on vehicle category and vintage.
- **Legacy-vehicle Compatibility:** Older vehicles may not have been designed for higher ethanol blends. It raises concerns related to compatibility, durability and maintenance.
  - ♦ Owners of such vehicles may consequently face adjustment costs during the transition.
- **Emission Benefit is Mileage-dependent:** Ethanol has a lower carbon content per litre. But the benefit also depends on vehicle mileage.
  - ♦ The supplied analysis indicates that with a **4–6% mileage loss**, emissions per kilometre could potentially rise.
  - ♦ The actual result can vary with vehicle vintage and the lifecycle of ethanol production.
- **Food-versus-fuel Concern:** Greater diversion of **maize and sugarcane** towards ethanol can increase competition between fuel, food, feed and other agricultural uses.
- **Sugar Export Implications:** Higher domestic ethanol demand has created policy tensions between ethanol requirements and sugar availability, including export restrictions.
  - ♦ Lower exports can, in turn, reduce agricultural export earnings.
- **Maize Import/Export Pressure:** Ethanol production is increasing demand for maize. If domestic supply does not keep pace, this can put pressure on prices and trade flows.
  - ♦ India was reported in the supplied material as becoming a **net maize importer** in the preceding year.

- **Water-intensive Feedstock:** Sugarcane requires relatively large quantities of water. It raises questions about the sustainability of further ethanol expansion in water-stressed regions.
- **Benefits Depend on Feedstock:** First-generation ethanol produced from food crops does not have the same sustainability profile as **2G ethanol made from agricultural residues**.
- **Distributional Impact:** The impact of a uniform E20 transition will not be the same for everyone.
  - ♦ Owners of older, less E20-compatible vehicles may face higher adjustment costs, while the benefits from reduced oil imports are realised largely at the macroeconomic level.

#### Way Forward

- **Vehicle Compatibility:** Ensure E20-compatible vehicles and fuel systems across the fleet.
- **Consumer Transparency:** Publish fuel-economy and ₹/km comparisons for different vehicle vintages.
  - ♦ It would allow consumers to understand the actual cost implications of different fuel blends.
- **Feedstock Diversification:** Put greater priority to agricultural residues, second-generation ethanol and other non-food feedstocks.
- **Food Security Safeguards:** Ethanol procurement needs to be calibrated so that diversion of agricultural commodities does not undermine food availability.
- **Lifecycle Assessment:** E20 should be assessed on **well-to-wheel emissions**, rather than only on tailpipe emissions.
- **Public Transport:** Expand reliable mass transit and last-mile connectivity. It can reduce dependence on private vehicles and, in turn, fuel demand.
- **Consumer choice:** A phased transition, along with appropriate availability of compatible fuel for legacy vehicles, can reduce adjustment costs.

Source: TH

## NEWS IN SHORT

### GLOBAL GENDER GAP INDEX 2026

#### Context

- India has retained its **131st rank** on the **Global Gender Gap Index 2026** released by the World Economic Forum, with only 14 economies ranking below it.

#### About

- Since its inception in **2006**, the index benchmarks progress towards gender parity across **four dimensions**: Economic Participation and Opportunity, Educational Attainment, Health and Survival, and Political Empowerment.
- The Index uses a 0 to 1 scale, where 1 represents full parity.

#### Key Findings

- **Iceland has topped** the ranking, followed by Finland and Norway. In fact, four economies, Iceland, Finland, Norway and Sweden, have appeared in the top 10 in every edition since 2006.
- The **last 3 places** are occupied by- Pakistan (143rd); Iran (144th), and Chad (145th).
- At the current pace, the world is estimated to be **120 years** away from achieving full gender parity.

#### India's Performance

- India's overall gender parity score stands at **64.5%**, with **Educational Attainment** recording the highest parity score at **96.6%**, despite a marginal decline of **0.5 percentage points** from the previous edition.
- **Health and Survival** stands at **95.6%**, while parity remains lower in **Economic Participation and Opportunity** at **41.2%** and **Political Empowerment** at **24.5%**.

Source: TH

### SOHAR PORT

#### Context

- With the Strait of Hormuz in a chokehold due to Iran-U.S. hostilities, **Oman has pitched investment opportunities to India in Sohar Port of Oman**.

#### About

- The Sohar port could provide **uninterrupted access to energy resources from the Persian Gulf**.
- The port is located on the **Omani coast on the Gulf of Oman**, and ships can access hubs in the Gulf through this port as it **sits far from the Strait of Hormuz**.
- Earlier, Oman had offered **Duqm and Salalah ports to India**, but the Sohar Port has the advantage of being located in the **northeast of Oman**, close to vital energy pipelines of the United Arab Emirates and eastern Saudi Arabia.



- ♦ It must have a minimum **population of 5,000**.
- ♦ At least **75%** of the male main working population must be engaged in non-agricultural activities.
- ♦ It must have a population density of at least **400 persons per sq. km**.

#### Scale of India's Urbanisation

- According to the **2011 Census**, India had a population of about **121 crore**, of which around **37.7 crore (31.2%)** lived in urban areas and about 83.3 crore (68.8%) lived in rural areas.
- However, the **Economic Advisory Council to the Prime Minister (EAC-PM)** has estimated that India's urbanisation level could have been as high as **63% in 2015**.

Source: TH

#### About Gulf of Oman

- The Gulf of Oman is the **northwest arm of the Arabian Sea**, between the eastern portion (Oman) of the Arabian Peninsula to the southwest and Iran to the north.
- The gulf is 200 miles (320 km) wide **between Cape al-Hadd in Oman and Gwādar Bay on the Pakistan–Iran border**.
- It is 350 miles (560 km) long and **connects with the Persian Gulf to the northwest through the Strait of Hormuz**.
- **The small ports along the gulf include** Şuḥār, al-Khābūrāh, Muscat, and Şūr, in Oman, and Jāsk and Bandar Beheshtī (formerly Chāh Bahār), in Iran.

Source: TH

## CENSUS TOWN

#### Context

- The Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs (MoHUA) has told a Parliamentary Standing Committee that the 1981 criteria for identifying **Census Towns** no longer capture the actual scale and spatial diversity of India's urbanisation.

#### What is a Census Town?

- A Census Town is a settlement that continues to have a statutory rural status but satisfies demographic and occupational conditions indicating an urban character.
- Under the criteria unchanged since **1981**, a settlement must satisfy all three conditions:

## CONSTITUTIONAL STRUCTURE OF THE UK AND THE INDEPENDENCE DEBATE

#### Context

- The **Cardiff Agreement**, signed by the leaders of pro-independence political parties in **Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland**, has renewed debate over the future of the United Kingdom.

#### About

- The British Isles, a group of over **6,000 islands** located in northwestern Europe, comprises the two major islands of Great Britain and Ireland, besides several smaller islands.
- Great Britain consists of three nations — **England, Scotland, and Wales** — whereas Ireland is made up of the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland.
- United Kingdom is the **sovereign state** consisting of **England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland**.

#### How was the United Kingdom formed?

- **Wales and England:** Wales was brought constitutionally into the Kingdom of England through the Laws in Wales Acts of **1535 and 1542**.
- **England and Scotland:** The Acts of Union 1707 united the Kingdoms of England and Scotland, creating the Kingdom of Great Britain.
- **Great Britain and Ireland:** The Acts of Union 1800 incorporated the Kingdom of Ireland into the United Kingdom, known as the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland.

- **Creation of present-day UK:** Following the **Anglo-Irish Treaty of 1921**, most of Ireland became independent as the Irish Free State in **1922**, while Northern Ireland remained within the UK.

Source: IE

## CABINET APPROVES ENHANCEMENT OF EPFO WAGE CEILING

### In News

- The Union Cabinet, chaired by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, has approved raising the EPFO wage ceiling for mandatory coverage from ₹15,000 to ₹25,000 per month.

### More About News

- The move is expected to bring over **51 lakh additional employees** under mandatory social security coverage.
- The wage ceiling was last revised from **₹6,500 to ₹15,000 in 2014** and has remained unchanged for **over a decade**.

### About EPFO

- The **Employees' Provident Fund Organisation (EPFO)**, established in **1952**, functions under the **Ministry of Labour & Employment** and provides **provident fund, pension and insurance benefits** to eligible employees.
- It administers **three major schemes**:
  - ♦ The Employees' Provident Funds Scheme, 1952 (EPF),
  - ♦ The Employees' Pension Scheme, 1995 (EPS),
  - ♦ The Employees' Deposit Linked Insurance Scheme 1976 (EDLI).

Source: TH

## VARIABLE RATE REVERSE REPO (VRRR) AUCTIONS

### News

- The Reserve Bank of India (RBI) absorbed almost ₹2.9 lakh crore from the banking system through overnight Variable Rate Reverse Repo (VRRR) auctions as part of its efforts to absorb excess liquidity.

### Variable Rate Reverse Repo (VRRR)

- VRRR is a monetary-policy tool used by the RBI to absorb surplus liquidity from the banking system.

- Banks park their excess funds with the central bank for a specified period in exchange for interest.

### Difference Between Fixed and Variable Repo Rate

| Feature            | Fixed Repo Rate              | Variable Repo Rate                |
|--------------------|------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| Interest Rate      | Fixed throughout loan tenure | Changes based on RBI decisions    |
| EMI Predictability | High                         | Low, as EMIs may fluctuate        |
| Risk Factor        | No change in rate            | Exposure to market rate hikes     |
| Long-Term Cost     | Higher if rates fall         | Savings possible if rates decline |

### Do you know?

Transient liquidity refers to temporary cash flow fluctuations in a financial or banking system, while a Variable Rate Repo (VRR) auction is a monetary tool used by the RBI to inject short-term liquidity into the banking system.

Source: TH

## NITI AAYOG'S INDIA ELECTRIC MOBILITY INDEX (IEMI) 2025

### In News

- NITI Aayog released the India Electric Mobility Index (IEMI) 2025.

### India Electric Mobility Index (IEMI)

- It assesses the development of the e-mobility ecosystem and the adoption of electric vehicles (EVs) on Indian roads.
- It is a first-of-its-kind index that offers a dynamic comparative analysis of the progress of road transport electrification across Indian states and union territories.
- The composite scores on performance across all 36 States and Union Territories (UTs) range from 10 to 84, with a median score of 40.

### Latest Data

- **Top Performers:** Delhi bagged the highest score of 84, followed by Maharashtra (78), Karnataka (73), Chandigarh (71), and Goa (65).
  - ♦ Madhya Pradesh recorded a substantial improvement, moving from the 23rd to seventh rank.
  - ♦ Delhi, Chandigarh, and Maharashtra were the top three in the highest-weighted category of transport electrification.
  - ♦ Karnataka emerged victorious in the EV charging infrastructure readiness category,

while Delhi topped the EV research and innovation category.

- **Main problems:** shortage of charging infrastructure, dispersed population, expanding innovation industry. But the EV adoption rate is fast-moving from 0.5% of total registered vehicles in 2018 to 8.25% in 2025-26, with over 8.7 million EVs on Indian roads.
  - ♦ While the two-wheeler segment continues to dominate the industry in terms of registrations, electric commercial vehicles and buses are also enjoying development – a sign of the growing significance of electrification in decreasing emissions from road transport.

Source: IE

## VOYAGER MISSIONS

### In News

- NASA is powering down instruments on Voyager spacecraft to save energy and extend their interstellar missions.

### Voyager Missions

- NASA sent Voyager 2 and Voyager 1 in 1977 to explore Jupiter and Saturn.
- The uncommon planetary alignment, which occurs roughly every 175 years, enabled them to extend their journey to Uranus and Neptune, utilising gravity-assist technology to cut down on travel time and fuel.
- The spacecraft visited all four outer giant planets, 48 moons and their ring and magnetic systems, revolutionising planetary astronomy.

### Features

- Voyager 1 and Voyager 2 are the only spacecraft ever to operate outside the heliosphere, the protective bubble of particles and magnetic fields generated by the Sun.

- Voyager 1 reached the interstellar boundary in 2012, while Voyager 2 (traveling slower and in a different direction than its twin) reached it in 2018.
- The spacecraft are powered by radioisotope thermoelectric generators (RTGs), which convert heat from decaying plutonium into electricity.
  - ♦ However, the generators lose about 4 watts of power every year, forcing NASA engineers to gradually switch off instruments and onboard systems to conserve energy.

Source: TH

## DADASAHEB PHALKE AWARD FOR 2024

### Context

- **Legendary actor Anant Nag**, known for his impressive work in **Hindi and Kannada cinema** will be honoured with the **Dadasaheb Phalke Award for 2024**.

### About

- **Instituted in 1969**, it is India's **highest award** in the field of cinema, presented **annually** at the **National Film Awards ceremony** by the Directorate of Film Festivals, an **organisation set up by the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting**.
- It is presented on the recommendation of the **Dadasaheb Phalke Award Selection Committee**.
- The award is named after Dadasaheb Phalke (1870–1944), who is regarded as “**the father of Indian cinema**”. He **directed India's first feature film, Raja Harishchandra (1913)**.
- The **award comprises** a Swarna Kamal (Golden Lotus), a shawl and a cash prize of Rs. 10 Lakhs.
- **The first recipient** of the award was actress **Devika Rani**, who was honored in 1969.

Source: TH

