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UNION CABINET APPROVES VISTAR SCHEME

Context

- Cabinet has approved the **'Viksit Bharat Initiative for Statistical Transformation, Analytics & Research', VISTAR Scheme** for 2026-27 to 2030-31.

About

- It is a **central sector scheme** to overhaul **India's official statistical system,** bringing all of the statistics ministry's survey, data and economic census work under one umbrella.
- **Aim:** To establish a dynamic, real-time and future-ready official statistical architecture for enhanced timeliness, data granularity, interoperability with harmonised and AI ready datasets.
- It will fund **59 surveys over the 16th Finance Commission cycle** (FY27-FY31) to fill critical data gaps in various sectors.
  - It will also fund the long-delayed **8th Economic Census** and a revamped programme of support to state statistical bureaus.
- **The scheme has three components:** comprehensive statistical operations and strengthening of the ecosystem; Support for Statistical Strengthening (SSS) for states; and the Economic Census.
- **First Component:** Under this, the Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation (Mospi) will **digitise statistical processes** and **embed artificial intelligence** and **machine learning** in data processing, validation and analysis.
  - The ministry plans new measures, including a **Headline Index of Services Production and an Index of Unincorporated Sector Enterprises.**
  - It will also ta**p alternative sources such as mobile phone, scanner and e-commerce data** to complement traditional surveys and ease the burden on respondents.
- **Second Component:** The central funds to states and Union Territories will be **"deliverable-linked".**
  - Mospi will help scale up **district-level and million-plus city** estimates in **flagship surveys** such as the Periodic Labour Force Survey, and in compiling state gross domestic product (GDP) and district GDP.
- **Under the Economic Census (EC) component,** MoSPI will undertake the **8th Economic Census (EC)** in collaboration with the States / UTs.
  - It will provide granular data and activity details of all the non – farm establishments and workers hired, therein, upto Gram Panchayat and Ward level.
  - The economic census data will be useful for policy makers at **national and sub-national levels,** which will pave the way for estimating the **contribution of the unorganized sector to the Gross Domestic Product (GDP).**

Significance

- VISTAR Scheme will encompass all statistical and data management activities of the Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation.
- It will play a crucial role for upgrading the official statistical system of the country.

Source: PIB

DOUBLE-FORTIFIED SALT (DFS) AND INDIA'S ANAEMIA BURDEN

In Context

- India faces a high anaemia burden, prompting the proposal of **Double-Fortified Salt (DFS) containing iron and iodine**. However, concerns persist over its **effectiveness, safety and compatibility with salt-reduction goals.**

Double-Fortified Salt (DFS)

- DFS is edible salt fortified with iron (haemoglobin formation) and iodine (thyroid function).
- Salt is consumed by nearly every household, so fortification can reach large populations without changing dietary habits.

Concerns with Universal DFS Rollout

- **Conflict with salt reduction:** WHO advises under 5 g of salt daily, and India faces rising hypertension and NCDs. DFS delivers iron only if salt is consumed, so cutting sodium also cuts iron intake.
- **Unequal delivery:** Adult men consume more salt than women and children. Iron thus reaches the vulnerable least, while groups at lower anaemia risk receive more.
- **Risk of iron excess:** The body cannot easily excrete surplus iron, which may cause oxidative

stress. Persons with thalassaemia face overload risk, and iron in malaria-endemic, poorly sanitised settings raises further concern.

- **Cumulative exposure:** Iron already comes through fortified rice in PDS, PM POSHAN, ICDS and IFA supplementation. Adding DFS may push children and adolescents toward excess intake.
- **Poor absorption:** DFS contains non-haem iron, whose uptake falls with phytates (cereals, millets, pulses), tea and coffee polyphenols and calcium. Infection and inflammation raise hepcidin, which blocks iron uptake, so benefits shrink where disease burden is high.

What is Anemia?

- Anaemia is a condition in which the **haemoglobin level in blood is below the normal range**, reducing the blood's oxygen-carrying capacity. Iron deficiency is a major cause of anemia, but it is not the only cause.
- According to the **WHO**, women in the reproductive age group and **having haemoglobin levels lower than 12 grams per decilitre (g / dL)**, as well as children under 5 with haemoglobin levels lower than 11.0 g / dL are considered anaemic.
- According to **NFHS-5 (2019–21)**, 67.1% of children aged 6–59 months and 59.1% of women aged 15–49 years were anaemic. (**Anaemia data was excluded from the NFHS-6 (2023–24)**).

What is its impact?

- **Health:** Fatigue, weakness and increased maternal and child health risks.
- **Cognitive:** Impaired learning, memory and child development.
- **Economic:** Reduced work capacity and labour productivity.
- **Social:** Intergenerational malnutrition and poor quality of life.
- **Human Development**: Undermines demographic dividend and SDG 2 (Zero Hunger) and SDG 3 (Good Health).

India's Strategy: Anaemia Mukt Bharat (AMB)

- AMB follows the **6×6×6 framework** (six beneficiary groups, six interventions, six institutional mechanisms).
- Its core measures are IFA supplementation, deworming, behaviour change communication, testing and treatment, and attention to nutrition and sanitation.



Challenges in India's Anaemia Control Strategy

- IFA compliance is **low because of gastrointestinal side effects**.
- Diagnostics rarely go beyond haemoglobin, with limited **testing for ferritin, B12 and inflammation.**
- Healthy, diverse diets **remain unaffordable** for many households.
- Multiple programmes **delivering iron without adequate assessment** of cumulative exposure.
- Monitoring that often focuses on tablets distributed and tests conducted **rather than health outcomes.**

Way Forward

- **Evidence-based fortification:** Run monitored district pilots before national scale-up, tracking haemoglobin, ferritin and inflammation markers. Assess cumulative iron exposure and watch malaria-endemic and haemoglobinopathy-prone areas.

- **Targeted interventions:** Prioritise vulnerable groups and diagnosed deficiencies. Choose iron compounds suited to local diets and avoid unnecessary exposure.
- **Stronger diagnostics:** Expand access to ferritin and B12 testing and build treatment protocols around the underlying cause.
- **Social determinants:** Improve food affordability and diversity, and strengthen sanitation, deworming and malaria control. Address adolescent undernutrition, early marriage and maternal health.
- **Outcome-based monitoring:** Measure haemoglobin and iron status improvements and adverse effects, with district-level accountability.

Source: TH

FALLING FERTILITY RATE IN INDIA

Context

- The Supreme Court held that **laws penalising having more than two children have lost their relevance due to the falling fertility rate in India.**

Total Fertility Rate

- **India's Total Fertility Rate (TFR),** the average number of children a woman would have in her lifetime assuming she lives through her reproductive years (15-49 years), has **dropped to 1.9 below the replacement level of 2.1.**
  - **Replacement rate** is the number of child births a woman must go through to keep the population constant from one generation to the next without migration.
- **The only states in India with a TFR higher than 2.1 in 2024** were Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, and Chhattisgarh.
- **Delhi records the lowest TFR at 1.2,** followed by Tamil Nadu, Kerala and West Bengal at 1.3 each.
- **In 1985, India's TFR was 4.3** and has fallen at a rate of about 0.06 per year and there is no sign that this decline will reverse.
  - At the current pace, India's TFR is projected to drop below 1.6 by 2031.

Implications

- **Slower Population Growth and Eventual Stabilisation:** A fertility rate below replacement level means that, over time, each generation will be smaller than the previous one. Eventually, the population is expected to stabilize and later decline.
- **Rising Ageing Population:** A sustained low fertility rate will increase the proportion of elderly citizens.
  - According to the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment, **India's population aged 60 and above** is expected to **increase from approximately 10 crore in 2011 to 23 crore in 2036.**
  - India may face challenges similar to those experienced by countries such as Japan and South Korea i.e. **higher pension liabilities, greater healthcare expenditure and increased demand for geriatric care and social security.**
- **Future Labour Force Challenges:** A declining birth rate eventually leads to fewer entrants into the labour market. Economic growth could slow if productivity improvements do not compensate for a smaller workforce.
- **Regional Demographic Imbalances:** Fertility rates vary significantly across states, most southern and western states have well below replacement fertility, while states such as Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan continue to record relatively higher fertility levels.
  - This may alter the **internal migration patterns, political representation, resource allocation and labour market dynamics.**

Way Ahead

- **Need for New Population Policies:** India's policy focus may gradually shift from controlling population growth to managing ageing population.
- **Opportunity to Strengthen the Demographic Dividend:** India still has a large working-age population, lower fertility can reduce the dependency burden on families and the state.
  - Greater investments can be directed towards **education, health, skills, and productivity of the workforce.**

Source: TH

CABINET APPROVES TWO-YEAR EXTENSION FOR AGNIVEERS

Context

- The Union Cabinet has approved an **additional two-year engagement period** for the **75% of Agniveers** who are **not selected for regular service** after their initial four-year tenure**.**

About Agnipath Scheme

- It was introduced in **2022**, and is also called the **Tour of Duty scheme.**
- It is a **short-term recruitment scheme for the Indian Army, Indian Navy and Indian Air Force.**
- Under the policy, soldiers **(below-officer-rank (PBOR) cadres)** called **'Agniveers'** are recruited for **four years,** at the end of which **only 25%** of recruits from a batch are retained for regular service for **15 years.**
- **Age Limit:** Candidates between the **age of 17.5 years to 21 years** are eligible for enrolling in the Agnipath scheme.
- **Pay, Allowances & Allied Benefits:**
  - Year 1 Customised Package- ₹ 30,000/- + allowances.
  - Year 2. Customised Package- ₹33,000/- + allowances.
  - Year 3. Customised Package- ₹ 36,500/- + allowances.
  - Year 4. CustomisedPackage- ₹ 40,000/- + allowances.
  - From the above package**, 30% will be compulsorily deposited every month in a corpus, which is matched by the GoI.**
  - **Seva Nidhi Package:** On discharge at four years, the **corpus of ₹5.02 lakhs will be matched by the GoI,** an amount of **₹10.04 lakhs and accrued interest will be given to the Agniveers. The Seva Nidhi is exempted from Income Tax.**
- **Agniveers are provided non-contributory life insurance cover of ₹48 lakhs** for the duration of their engagement period.
  - They are **not eligible for Army Group Insurance Fund (AGIF) schemes/ benefits.**
- The scheme provides an **avenue to Indian youth,** desirous of serving the country to get recruited in the Armed Forces for a short duration.
  - The scheme enhances the **youth profile of the Armed Forces.**

Additional Engagement Period

- The existing provision to offer regular employment to **25 per cent of Agniveers based on merit will continue.**
- The **remaining 75 per cent** will be offered a further two years of service.
  - After completing this period, they will be **eligible for enrolment as regular soldiers,** subject to their willingness and fulfilment of selection criteria.
- **Objective:** To align the aspirations of Agniveers with the operational requirements and organisational efficiency of the armed forces.
- **Service Conditions:** The second engagement period will carry higher remuneration, an enhanced Seva Nidhi package and seniority benefits.

Significance of the Scheme

- **Reducing the Average Age in Military:** There has been a focus within the military to bring down the average age of soldiers, especially within the Army, since the 1980s.
- **Reduction in Defence Expenditure:** It helps reduce the long-term financial burden of salaries, pensions and other retirement benefits, creating more fiscal space for defence modernisation.
- **Technologically Advanced Future:** Future wars will be fought with artificial intelligence, autonomous systems, cyber space and space based ISR (Intelligence Surveillance and Reconnaissance).
  - Agnipath in India will ensure a youthful and tech-savvy profile of the armed forces.
- **Employment:** This scheme will increase employment opportunities and because of the skills and experience acquired during the four-year service such soldiers will get employment in various fields.
  - This will also lead to availability of a higher-skilled workforce to the economy which will be helpful in productivity gain and overall GDP growth.
- **Disaster Management:** Military-trained youth can assist in disaster response, rescue operations and emergency management during natural calamities.

Concerns and Challenges

- **Career uncertainty:** Regular enrolment remains dependent on merit, vacancies and selection criteria.
- **Rank disparity**: Agniveers entering regular service after six years will be placed one rank below those retained after four years.
- **Fiscal trade off:** Higher pay, a bigger Seva Nidhi and a longer tenure raise per head cost. The pension liability also returns in the longer run.

- **Unresolved skilling question:** Exiting at 24 instead of 22 helps, but civilian integration of ex Agniveers through certification and lateral entry remains thin.
- **Manpower planning:** The Armed Forces must balance youthfulness, experience and long-term institutional requirements.

Conclusion

- The additional engagement period follows a **detailed assessment** of the Agnipath **scheme's first four years** and recommendations from the armed forces.
- This decision is a **continuation of long-term structural reforms** of defence forces, aimed at creating a younger, fitter, technologically equipped and future-ready military.

Source: TH

INDIA TO ADD 500 GW OF NON-FOSSIL FUEL CAPACITY IN NEXT DECADE

Context

- PM Modi announced that India aims to add 500 GW of new non-fossil fuel-based power capacity over the next 10–11 years.

India's Progress in Renewable Energy

- India has achieved nearly **308 GW** of installed non-fossil fuel capacity, accounting for approximately **55.1%** of its total installed power capacity of **558.89 GW.**
- As per IRENA RE Statistics 2026, globally, **India stands 3rd in Solar Power** installed capacity, **4th in Wind Power** capacity and **3th in total Renewable Energy** capacity.
- India achieved its **Paris Agreement target** of deriving **50%** of installed electricity capacity from non-fossil fuel sources in 2025, five years ahead of the 2030 deadline.
- The country aims to achieve **500 GW** of non-fossil fuel-based installed capacity by 2030.

What are Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs)?

- Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) are **country-specific climate action plans** submitted under the **Paris Agreement.**
  - They outline targets for **reducing greenhouse gas emissions** and adapting to climate change.
  - NDCs are **revised periodically** to enhance ambition.
- India's NDC is based on the principle of **Common But Differentiated Responsibilities and Respective Capabilities (CBDR-RC).** The approach emphasises equity and climate justice.

Targets in NDC 3.0 (2031-2035)

- **Emissions Intensity Reduction:** India has committed to reducing the emissions intensity (CO_2 per unit of GDP) of its GDP by **47%** by 2035 from 2005 levels.
- **Expansion of Non-Fossil Fuel Capacity:** India has committed to achieving **60%** of its installed electric power capacity from non-fossil fuel sources by 2035.
- **Creation of Carbon Sink:** India has committed to creating a carbon sink of **3.5 to 4 billion tonnes** of CO_2 equivalent through forest and tree cover by 2035.

Significance of Renewable Energy Transition

- **Energy Security:** Reduces dependence on imported fossil fuels and exposure to geopolitical disruptions, particularly in West Asia.
- **Climate Commitments:** Supports India's **Nationally Determined Contributions** (NDCs) under the Paris Agreement and its long-term net-zero target of 2070.
- **Investment and Employment:** The renewable energy sector has attracted over $164 billion in investments in the past decade.
  - Investment opportunities worth approximately $220 billion (20 lakh crore) are expected by 2030.
- **Technological Development:** Promotes domestic manufacturing, innovation and technological capabilities in solar cells, batteries, green hydrogen and energy storage.

Constraints in Renewable Energy Generation

- **Low Capacity Utilisation Factor (CUF):** Clean energy sources are **intermittent** and weather-dependent. Hence, their actual output is much lower despite high capacity.
  - **Eg:** Solar CUF: ~20%, Wind CUF: ~25–30%, Coal CUF: ~60%, Nuclear CUF: ~80%.
- **Base Load Dependency on Coal:** Coal continues to supply over 75% of India's electricity demand, especially at night when solar isn't available.

  - India's grid still depends heavily on thermal sources for round-the-clock (RTC) power.
- **Storage and Transmission Limitations:** Lack of grid-scale battery storage prevents storing surplus daytime solar energy.
  - Transmission planning is not in sync with the pace of RE (renewable energy) installation.
- **Land Acquisition:** Land availability and environmental concerns can delay renewable energy projects.

Government Initiatives to Improve Clean Energy Utilisation

- **Green Energy Corridor (GEC):** Aims to strengthen the transmission infrastructure to evacuate renewable energy efficiently from generation points to demand centres.
- **PM-KUSUM Scheme:** Promotes installation of solar pumps and grid-connected solar power plants in rural areas to reduce diesel usage and support farmers.
- **National Green Hydrogen Mission:** Seeks to promote the production and use of green hydrogen to reduce reliance on fossil fuels in sectors like refining, steel, and fertilisers.
- **Production Linked Incentive (PLI) Scheme:** Provides financial incentives for domestic manufacturing of high-efficiency solar photovoltaic (PV) modules and advanced battery storage systems.
- **Renewable Energy Hybrid Policy:** Encourages setting up of projects that combine solar and wind energy in the same location to increase capacity utilisation and reliability.
- **National Solar Mission (NSM):** It was launched in **2010,** it has set ambitious targets for solar capacity installation, including grid-connected and off-grid solar power projects.
- **Renewable Purchase Obligation (RPO):** Requires power distribution companies and large electricity consumers to procure a certain percentage of their power from renewable sources, encouraging the demand for renewable energy.

Way Ahead

- **Battery and Storage Infrastructure:** Accelerate deployment of Battery Energy Storage Systems (BESS) through VGF (Viability Gap Funding) or PLI.
  - Hybrid projects (solar-wind-hydro with BESS) should be fast-tracked.
- **Decentralised Renewable Energy:** Promote rooftop solar, solar pumps, and mini-grids to relieve base-load pressure.
- **Expand domestic manufacturing** under initiatives such as the Production Linked Incentive (PLI) scheme.
- **Grid Modernisation and Smart Management:** Invest in smart grids with real-time demand-supply balancing.
  - Enable time-of-day pricing, especially to promote daytime solar usage.
- **Nuclear Power as a Strategic Pillar:** Nuclear capacity should be scaled in a phased and financially sustainable manner to provide firm, low-carbon base-load power.

Source: IE

NEWS IN BRIEF

EXTENSION TO FAST-TRACK SPECIAL COURTS SCHEME

In News

- The Union Cabinet has approved the continuation of the **Centrally Sponsored Scheme (CSS) for Fast Track Special Courts (FTSCs)**, including exclusive POCSO Courts, for a further **period of five years**.

Scheme for Fast Track Special Courts

- The Centrally Sponsored Scheme for Fast Track Special Courts was **launched in 2019 i**n pursuance of the Criminal Law (Amendment) Act, 2018, and in compliance with the **directions of the Hon'ble Supreme Court of India.**
- The Supreme Court had directed the establishment of **exclusive Special Courts in districts having more than 100 pending** cases under the POCSO Act, 2012.
- The Scheme was initially launched for a **period of one year and was subsequently extended up to 31.03.2026.**
  - The present approval ensures continuation of the Scheme for a further period of five years, i.e. up to 31.03.2031.

Major features of the approved Scheme

- The Scheme shall be implemented by the **Department of Justice in coordination with the respective State Governments** and UT Administrations.

- The Scheme has provision for the **operationalisation of 850 Fast Track Special Courts (FTSCs)**, including exclusive POCSO Courts, across various participating States/Union Territories.
- Provision of a dedicated Judicial Officer, Special Public Prosecutor, and 6 support staff to facilitate expeditious disposal of pending cases relating to rape and offences under the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act, 2012.
- Provision of financial assistance to participating States/UTs for meeting the operational expenditure of FTSCs, in accordance with the CSS funding pattern.

Impacts

- **Providing Speedy Justice:** Ensuring faster trials and timely justice for victims of sexual offences.
- **Reducing Pending Cases**: Reducing the number of pending cases of Rape and POCSO Act cases.
- **Child-Friendly and Victim-Centric Environment:** The Scheme encourages establishment of Vulnerable Witness Deposition Centres (VWDCs) and child-friendly court spaces to facilitate victim testimonies without causing further distress.
- **Reduced inequality:** By prioritizing cases involving vulnerable groups (women and children), the scheme intends to reduce inequalities in access to justice.

Source: PIB

SWACHH BHARAT MISSION (GRAMEEN) PHASE-II

Context

- The Union Govt. has extended the **Swachh Bharat Mission (Grameen) Phase-II until March 2028**.

Swachh Bharat Mission (Grameen)

- It was launched in **2014** to achieve **Open Defecation Free (ODF) status** nationwide by 2019, and all districts were **declared ODF by 2019–20.**
  - As of December 31, 2025, over 96% of villages under the Swachh Bharat Mission have attained **ODF Plus status.**
  - **An ODF Plus village** is defined as one that sustains its ODF Status, ensures solid and liquid waste management, and remains visually clean.
- SBM(G) Phase-II was being implemented from **2020-21 to 2025-26 in a mission mode.**
- The key objective of SBM(G) Phase II is to sustain the **ODF status of villages and to improve the levels of cleanliness in rural areas** through solid and liquid waste management activities, making villages **ODF Plus**. **This includes:**
  - ODF-Sustainability;
  - Solid Waste Management;
  - Liquid Waste Management;
  - Visual cleanliness.
- **The Centre and states share the cost of all components in the following ratios:** 90:10 for northeastern and Himalayan states, including Jammu and Kashmir; 60:40 for other states; and 100:0 for Union Territories.

Source: IE

QS ASIA RANKINGS 2027

Context

- The **QS Asia University Rankings 2027** showed a decline in rankings for around 71% of Indian universities.

About the Rankings

- Released by **QS Quacquarelli Symonds**, an international higher education analytics organisation, the rankings assess universities across Asia.
- The 2027 edition features 1,722 universities from 26 higher education systems.
- The rankings **assess universities across 11 indicators**, including academic and employer reputation, faculty-student ratio, citations per paper, papers per faculty, staff with PhDs, international research network, international faculty and student mobility. Academic reputation carries the highest weight at 30%, followed by employer reputation at 20%.

Key Highlights: Global

- The University of **Hong Kong retained the first position,** followed by Peking University.
- **Tsinghua University climbed six place**s to secure the third position.
- Hong Kong had five universities in the top 10, mainland China had three, and Singapore had two.

Top 10 universities in Asia in 2027

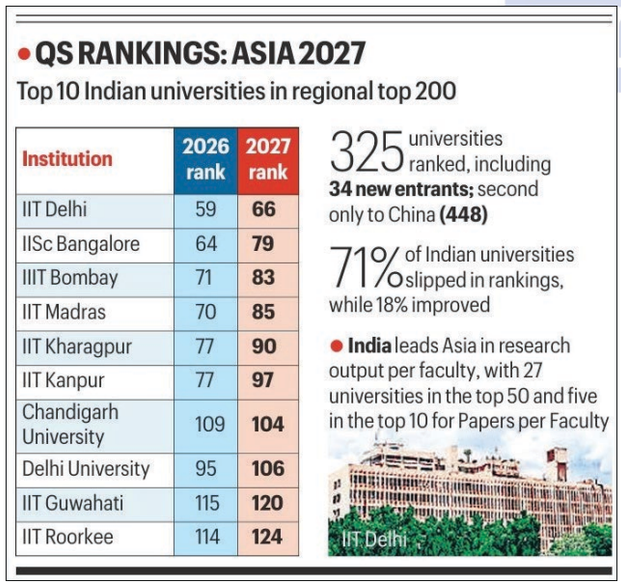
The top 10 universities in the QS World University Rankings: Asia Region 2027 are:

Rank	University	Location
1	The University of Hong Kong	Hong Kong SAR
2	Peking University	Mainland China
3	Tsinghua University	Mainland China
4	City University of Hong Kong (CityUHK)	Hong Kong SAR
5	The Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK)	Hong Kong SAR
=6	Fudan University	Mainland China
=6	National University of Singapore (NUS)	Singapore
8	Nanyang Technological University, Singapore (NTU Singapore)	Singapore
=9	The Hong Kong Polytechnic University	Hong Kong SAR
=9	The Hong Kong University of Science and Technology	Hong Kong SAR

Source: QS World University Rankings: Asia Region 2027

Key Highlights: India

- India's representation rose to **325 institutions from 294** last year, making it the **second most** represented higher education system in the region, after mainland China, which increased its tally to 448 from 395.
  - Since 2016, India's representation has increased more than **thirteenfold**, from 24 to 325 institutions.
- Only **six Indian institutions** feature in the top 100. All six have declined in the latest edition.
- **IIT Delhi**, the country's **highest-ranked institution**, fell seven places to 66 from 59 in the previous edition.



Source: IE

SHARJAH AWARD FOR BEST INTERNATIONAL NON-FICTION BOOK

Context

- Nirmala Lakshman has won the Sharjah Award for Best International Non-Fiction Book for her book 'The Tamils: A Portrait of a Community'.

About the Book

- Drawing on historical research and personal observations, the book explores the history, society and culture of the Tamil people, tracing the community's evolution across centuries and its influence beyond geographical boundaries.
- Going beyond familiar symbols of Tamil culture, such as the Chola dynasty, temples, Carnatic music and classical literature, it also uncovers little-known facets of Tamil heritage.

Sharjah Award for the Best International Book

- This award honors outstanding and distinguished international books by granting two prizes:
  - A prize of AED 50,000 for the **Best International Fiction Book**.
  - A prize of AED 50,000 for the **Best International Non-Fiction Book.**

Source: TH

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