

## Current Affairs of the Day

### A leopard count with a missing benchmark number

India's leopard population increases by 60% in 4 years" [since 2014] is what most newspapers highlighted when a first-of-its-kind report on leopard numbers in the country was released recently.

#### Scientific counting is crucial

Most times, the goal of species conservation is to protect and increase the population of the species of interest. In this direction, scientific monitoring of their current numbers, and an increase or a decrease in numbers over the years will determine whether the conservation efforts undertaken to preserve the species are bearing fruit. To achieve this, a solid, authentic benchmark is very essential and critical.

Though the report 'Status of leopards in India, 2018' distinctly mentions that the figure is the 'minimum number', the way it was launched has depicted that the country has 12,852 leopards. If we go by these figures, I feel this is an underestimate by at least 40%. In my opinion, India may have over 20,000 leopards.

#### By-product of tiger estimate

1. This study focused mostly on forested habitats where tigers are found, as it was a by-product of the all-India tiger estimate.
2. Hence other leopard habitats such as rocky outcrops, smaller dry forests, higher elevation habitats in the Himalayas, agricultural landscapes (coffee, tea, arecanut, sugarcane plantations) where leopards are known to be found in good numbers were not a part of this exercise.
3. Similarly, much of Northeast India was excluded from the study. Hence the area studied by itself does not represent a true pan-India leopard population. Though a very coarse scale map is made available in the report, it clearly depicts that vast stretches of leopard habitats have been excluded from the



study. I think this is a key factor that has kept India's leopard numbers lower than the true picture.

### Misleading picture

1. The claim that "leopard numbers increased by 60%" also needs to be closely looked into.
2. So, comparing results from 2014 with 2018, and hailing it as a 60% increase is quite misleading. It simply means that we covered more area and put in more camera traps to count leopards, which resulted in higher leopard numbers.

### The main threats

1. Overall, we need a benchmark number against which we can evaluate the trend in leopard numbers and threats to this carnivore.
2. In general, habitat loss due to mining and quarrying, poaching for body parts, mortality due to vehicular collisions, retaliatory killing due to human-leopard conflict and accidental deaths due to snares set for catching wild prey all seem to be impacting the conservation of this rosette-patterned cat.
3. If we can assess leopard numbers in a few selected sites and monitor the area occupied by them over large swathes, it will perhaps give us a better overview of leopard conservation efforts.

## A constant vigil

**Crux:** Constant monitoring is the only way India can build up its defences against new virus strains

### Highlights:

1. The report of the new variant from the U.K. and confirmed in at least 25 travellers from there puts India back at the base of a new learning curve.
2. First reported to WHO on December 14, the SARS-CoV-2 VUI 202012/01, or the 'U.K. strain', was detected only following an unexpected case spike in South East England.
3. Studies show that the virus variant, while not linked yet to increasing mortality, is more transmissible than other variants, thus indirectly contributing to a higher death toll.
4. Even though the world has only now woken up to this variant, it may have been circulating in the U.K. as early as October, and with people flying on the



U.K.-India route, it is quite likely that this may have already caused its circulation in India.

5. Now, Indian scientists have to grapple with a new beast called mass genomic surveillance. For some years now, India has had genome sequencing machines and the personnel to track and identify new variants.
6. However, like in the early days of RT-PCR, there are not enough of them to sequence the 4%-5% of isolates in the population like what the U.K. does. India has a genome sequenced around 5,000 isolates compared to the U.K.'s 137,000.

## Has the Special Marriage Act failed to protect interfaith couples?

**CruX:** The Special Marriage Act (SMA), 1954, is seen as a progressive law enacted to help interfaith couples. But with States such as Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh framing laws that target interfaith marriage, the procedural requirements of the SMA — such as the need to give prior notice, and allowance for ‘objections’ — seem to be undermining its original intent by opening the doors to violent moral policing by vigilante groups.

### The Special Marriage Act (SMA), 1954

1. Basically, this law was the first step towards a Uniform Civil Code. The thinking was that if you wanted a liberal, modern, secular and progressive law, let us start the experiment on a voluntary basis.
2. So, those going for an inter-faith marriage, as well as others, could register under the SMA. The effect of the SMA is that once your marriage is registered under it, your religion's personal laws won't apply.
3. The SMA did not achieve the kind of success it was intended to achieve. But that is a comment on how unprepared we are, as a society, when it comes to uniform laws.
4. The fact that very few marriages get registered under the SMA demonstrates that society is not yet ready to involve public institutions in what are purely private relationships.



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## Lingering Issues

1. At the same time, if someone wants to use the SMA for the purpose of inter-faith marriage, the state has no business asking them to put up a notice informing the whole world whom they want to marry.
2. When the SMA was enacted, the notice requirement was meant to ensure that the man did not already have a spouse and does not marry a minor. But now it has become an invitation to moral policing by right-wing groups.
3. The Supreme Court has finally admitted a petition where the constitutionality of this provision will be examined. If the right to privacy judgment is taken into consideration, there is no way this notice requirement can be sustained as constitutional.

## Need of Protection:

1. The SMA is not there to protect you. But the situation has changed, and people seem to be watching and observing who's marrying whom, but the law did not anticipate this.
2. Also, this need for protection is not merely in the case of inter-faith marriage, it's there in the case of inter-caste marriages as well.
3. But offering this kind of protection is not the role of civil law, as it then becomes criminal law, and the state must provide protection.
4. On the contrary, with the SMA, the state seems to be saying we're going to increase surveillance on inter-faith marriages.

## New Love Jihad Laws

1. If it's an inter-religious marriage, and I want to convert, then I have to fill a declaration form, go before a magistrate, and the magistrate will conduct an inquiry.
2. In the form, you have to fill in all the details about your age, address, etc., which makes interfaith couples extremely insecure.
3. So, the spirit of what the SMA was meant to be is not only being diluted, these 'love jihad' laws are completely contrary to it.
4. One may convert to another religion because of marriage, or even for no reason. There is no authority under our law available to the state to examine the cause or rationality of somebody's conversion.
5. Yet, strangely, more than half a dozen States in India have these anti-conversion laws, and they all have titled these 'freedom of religion laws' even



01/01/2021 Thursday



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though they curtail religious freedom. Moreover, hardly any convictions have been reported under these laws.

### **Right to propagation and Rev. Stanislaus Case (1977)**

1. The word “propagate” in Article 25 of the Constitution was inserted to assure Christian minorities. For them, it is an article of the faith to take the gospel to the other people.
2. But we then got a regressive Supreme Court judgment in Rev. Stanislaus (1977) in which the Court held that you cannot convert because ‘propagation’ of a religion does not extend to conversion.
3. In fact, India’s foremost constitutional expert H.M. Seervai said that this judgment is “productive of great public mischief” and must be overruled. This judgment should be reviewed as it is now contrary to the privacy judgment.
4. Whoever chooses to register their marriage under the SMA may continue to do so. The anti-conversion laws occupy a different space: they talk about conversion, which the SMA does not concern itself with. So, there is no conflict.

### **Anti-conversion laws are patriarchal and anti-women**

Though there have been some progressive judgments of the divisional benches of the Allahabad High Court, protecting the rights of adult individuals to marry whoever they want, the U.P. the government promulgated an ordinance that undermines constitutional rights, particularly of Hindu women. The primary purpose of these ordinances is to discipline Hindu women and control their bodies and sexuality. It undermines their agency.

### **Conclusion:**

We have to think about where our legal system is moving. On the one hand, we were thinking of the possibility of same-sex marriages, of making marriages contractual, and if we can have matrimonial property. On the other, we are getting laws that control which religion you follow when you intend to marry and decide for you who you can fall in love with and who you can't. This is not two steps back but hundreds of steps back.



## 'Pakistan's theatrics at the UN poses no challenge to India'

**Crux:** Counter-terror cooperation and United Nations reform are at the top of the agenda of India, in its eighth stint as a non-permanent representative.

### Highlights:

1. Counter-terrorism is a major priority area for India when we are on the Security Council. India should guard against attempts by certain member states to politicise the work of the 1267 Committee thereby, again, diluting our fight against terrorism.
2. The inability of the United Nations to agree on a Comprehensive Convention on International Terrorism (CCIT) remains one of the glaring shortcomings in the international legislative framework which could have boosted enforcement efforts to destroy safe havens of terrorists, their financial flows and their support networks.
3. We are determined to work towards immediate and time-bound text-based negotiations. India's credentials are known to all.
4. However, Indian two years in the Council will be one more opportunity to demonstrate to the global community how important it is for the Security Council to be more representative and reflective of contemporary realities.
5. A single objective which India would like to achieve by 2022 – it is to show the world the importance of “reformed multilateralism” and inevitably the important place that India enjoys in that construct for promoting international peace and security.

## Britain leaves Europe's single market

### Highlights:

1. Brexit becomes a reality on Thursday as Britain leaves Europe's customs union and single market, ending nearly half a century of often turbulent ties with its closest neighbours.
2. The British pound surged to a 2.5-year peak against the U.S. dollar before the long-awaited departure from the single market.
3. Once the transition ends, EU rules will no longer apply, with the immediate consequence being an end to the free movement of more than 500 million people between Britain and the 27 EU states.



4. Customs border checks will be back for the first time in decades, and despite the free-trade deal, queues and disruption from additional paperwork are expected.
5. The key financial services sector also faces an anxious wait to learn on what basis it can keep dealing with Europe, after being largely omitted from the Brexit trade deal.
6. Northern Ireland's border with EU member state Ireland will be closely watched to ensure that movement is unrestricted.

**Conclusion:** Britain — a financial and diplomatic big-hitter plus a major NATO power — is the first member state to leave the EU, which was set up to forge unity after the horrors of World War II. Brexit has dominated British politics since the country's narrow vote to leave the bloc in June 2016, opening deep political and social wounds which remain raw. But both sides are now keen to move on to a new future.

## 'India must raise the bar on anti-money laundering systems'

### Highlights:

1. The Financial Action Task Force (FATF) had deferred its once-a-decade evaluation of India's anti-money laundering regime scheduled for this year, citing the COVID-19 pandemic, and indicated that the onsite review to be conducted by global experts may now take place in early 2021.
2. The FATF undertakes peer reviews of each member on an ongoing basis to assess the implementation of its recommendations and provides a detailed analysis of each country's system for preventing criminal abuse of the financial system.
3. A major challenge in identifying suspicious transactions was the sheer volume in India's banking system, he pointed out. SBI itself has 43 crore accounts, so the number of transactions is 15 crore to 20 crores a day. The load is immense, so the quality of transaction monitoring does suffer.
4. India's banks, he said, had already begun using artificial intelligence and machine learning tools to identify transactions that don't follow the usual pattern.



## Non-food bank credit grew 6% in November

### Highlights:

1. Non-food credit growth of banks stood at 6% in November compared with 7.2% a year earlier, RBI data showed.
2. Reversing the downtrend, credit growth to agriculture and allied activities accelerated to 8.5% in November 2020 from 6.5% in November 2019, the data on Sectoral Deployment of Bank Credit — November 2020, released by the Reserve Bank, showed.
3. There was a contraction in credit to large industries by 1.8% in November 2020 (versus a 3% growth a year earlier), though a credit to medium industries registered a robust 20.9% growth vis-a-vis a contraction of 2.4%, the RBI said.