



Current Affairs of the Day

Covishield-Covaxin mix gives better protection, says ICMR

1. A combination of Covishield and Covaxin elicits better immunogenicity than two doses of the same vaccine, the Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR) said.
2. The council released its findings which suggest that immunisation with a combination of an adenovirus vector platform-based vaccine followed by an inactivated whole virus vaccine was not only safe but also elicited better immunogenicity.
3. The immunisation programme against COVID-19 in India started with two vaccines — AstraZeneca's ChAdOx1-nCov-19 (named Covishield in India) and inactivated whole virion BBV152 (Covaxin). A homologous prime-boost approach was followed.
4. However, 18 individuals in Uttar Pradesh, under the national programme, inadvertently received Covishield as the first jab and Covaxin as the second.
5. In its study, the ICMR compared the safety and immunogenicity profile of these persons against that of individuals receiving only one of the vaccines — either Covishield or Covaxin.
6. The pre-print report titled "Serendipitous COVID-19 Vaccine-Mix in Uttar Pradesh, India: Safety and Immunogenicity Assessment of a Heterologous Regime," has not been certified by peer review and should not be used to guide clinical practice, the council said.
7. It, however, maintained that the findings have an important implication for the COVID-19 vaccination programme wherein heterologous immunisation will pave the way for induction of improved and better protection against the variant strains of SARS-CoV-2.
8. Such mixed regimens will also help to overcome the challenges of shortfall of particular vaccines and remove hesitancy around vaccines in people's minds that could have genesis in programmatic 'errors' especially in settings where multiple COVID-19 vaccines are being used. However, to conclusively prove these findings a multicentre RCT needs to be carried out," the ICMR said.



Previously the World Health Organisation had warned against the mixing of vaccines, saying there was very little information on the mix-and-match of vaccines.

Human rights at risk in police stations: CJI

1. Chief Justice of India N.V. Ramana said police stations pose the “highest threat” to human rights and dignity, which are “sacrosanct”.
2. The threat to human rights and bodily integrity is the highest in police stations. Custodial torture and police atrocities still prevail despite constitutional guarantees, he said.
3. Lack of effective legal representation at police stations is a huge detriment to arrested or detained persons. The first hours of arrest or detention often decide the fate of the case for the accused, the CJI said.
4. He was speaking at the release of the National Legal Services Authority’s legal services app and vision statement at Vigyan Bhavan.
5. Chief Justice Ramana had a word of advice for his fellow judges. He noted that if the judiciary wants to gain the trust of the poor and the vulnerable, it has to assure the marginalised that it exists for them.

Digital divide

1. Chief Justice Ramana said the digital divide has not helped the cause of easy access to justice. Rural and remote areas suffer from a lack of connectivity.
2. Accessing justice in India is not merely an aspirational goal. We need to work hand in hand with various wings of the government to make it a practical reality.
3. The Chief Justice said he has already written to the government about the urgent need to bridge the digital chasm “on a priority basis”.

Adoption not limited by religion: Delhi HC

1. The Delhi High Court has declared a Christian couple, both U.S. citizens, as ‘adoptive parents’ to a minor girl born out of Hindu parents while reprimanding them for trying to adopt the child under the wrong law.



2. The High Court reiterated that Christian and Muslim couples could not adopt a Hindu child under the Hindu Adoptions and Maintenance Act (HAMA), as was sought to be done in this case.
3. The Adoption Deed drawn up under the HAMA is invalid as the parties are Christians and not Hindus, the court said, taking note of the fact that the child, now more than six years old, had been under custody of the adoptive parents since her birth.
4. This right to adopt had been brought under the HAMA, which laid down certain limitations on who could adopt and who could be adopted and what were the other conditions for a valid adoption. HAMA was applicable only to Hindus and specifically provided that it applied to “any other person who is not a Muslim, Christian, Parsi or Jew by religion”.
5. However, Justice Menon said that a person interested in adopting a child was not limited by his or her religion if adoption was sought under the Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act.

INS Vikrant: Made-in-India carrier

India's first indigenous aircraft carrier (IAC-1), a freshly minted warship displacing 40,000 tonnes, set out to sea for its maiden set of trials recently, propelling India to a select group of nations capable of designing and building a complex platform such as this. It marked a watershed.

INS Vikrant:

1. The vessel, to be named Vikrant after the first carrier operated by the Indian Navy, is the largest and the most complex platform so far designed by the Directorate of Naval Design, and is slated to join the Navy next year
2. The IAC-1 is an advanced platform in comparison with Vikramaditya, the only aircraft carrier in service with the Indian Navy, in terms of capabilities, automation and net-centricity. And its degree of indigenisation is about 76%.
3. Unlike Vikramaditya, which is steam-propelled, Vikrant is propelled by four gas turbines that were produced by GE but integrated and commissioned by its Indian partner, the public sector Hindustan Aeronautics Ltd (HAL).



4. Similarly, the COGAG (combined gas and gas) gearboxes from Germany were integrated by an Indian company named Elecon.
5. About 550 Indian companies, including about 100 medium and small scale industries (MSME), had a role to play in the construction of the carrier.

How will the digital voucher payment system work?

The story so far:

1. Recently, Prime Minister launched a new digital payment system to send the government's monetary benefits directly to beneficiaries' mobile phones.
2. The e-RUPI platform, developed by the National Payments Corporation of India (NPCI), the Department of Financial Services, the National Health Authority and the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, is said to be 'leak-proof' and offers non-transferable monetary service to citizens.
3. The e-RUPI system is accessible to anyone with a mobile phone, even if the recipient does not have a bank account. It comes in the form of one-time use e-vouchers to access government health services.
4. It could gradually be implemented to cover welfare services a beneficiary is already receiving from different government agencies.

What is the need for this?

1. The e-RUPI is a digital voucher that can be redeemed by beneficiaries to avail themselves of a specific service. The digital platform does not require a card, app or internet access to redeem an e-voucher.
2. The e-vouchers can be issued by the government or private entities to the beneficiaries through QR codes or long-string SMS.
3. The service is aimed at plugging holes in the existing welfare payment disbursement system. The idea here is to track and trace how the subsidies and benefits given to citizens are used.
4. Secondly, with e-RUPI, government agencies can keep track of how much of the allocated funds have been disbursed to citizens. Otherwise, carrying out reconciliation for unused subsidies could be an accounting "nightmare for the government".



How does e-RUPI work and where can it be used?

1. The contactless prepaid payment system can be issued by both government agencies and corporate entities to a specific individual to avail a targeted service.
2. The Union government plans to use e-RUPI for its COVID-19 vaccination drive for citizens and gradually implement it as part of other government schemes.
3. To begin with, the NPCI has tied up with more than 1,600 hospitals where e-RUPI can be redeemed. The transaction begins with a QR code or a long-string SMS pushed into a beneficiary's mobile device.
4. The beneficiary will then need to show it to the welfare service provider to authenticate the transaction. Citizens do not have to carry any printout, and as these vouchers are created for a specific purpose, they cannot be transferred or cashed out.
5. e-RUPI is powered by the NPCI's UPI platform, and the service has authorised 11 banks to issue digital vouchers. These include both private and public banks.
6. Beneficiaries will be identified by their mobile numbers, and the e-vouchers will be sent to their phone through the bank's voucher management system. The digital voucher can only be issued by a government agency or a corporate entity. It cannot be issued by one person to another.

Is it a digital currency?

1. The e-RUPI is built for a specific transaction to avail a service at a particular welfare centre. The digital vouchers have a one-time use case and they can't be transferred.
2. This puts e-RUPI within a voucher-based payment system rather than a virtual currency. But the government's move could be a good starting point to experiment with digital currency.

What are some of the challenges in implementation?

1. A 2018 research by Harvard University revealed a 33-percentage point gender gap in mobile phone ownership in India. In their study titled 'A tough call: Understanding barriers to and impacts of women's mobile phone adoption in



India,' the authors point to the economic and normative barriers as important drivers of the mobile gender gap.

2. They also note that the disparity exists across Indian society, and is not limited to rural, less educated or poorer groups. In the same study, even among men, only 71% owned a cell phone, an essential device to access digital schemes like the e-RUPI vouchers.
3. Online data portal Statista pegs India's smartphone penetration rate at 42% in the financial year 2020 and estimates it to reach 51% by 2025. Closing the mobile gender gap and enabling a large proportion of citizens to own a mobile phone will remain a problem to be solved.

Ladakh glacier retreat due to warming, low winter precipitation, finds study

The Pensilungpa Glacier located in Ladakh's Zaskar Valley is retreating due to an increase in temperature and decrease in precipitation during winters, a recent study has found. Since 2015, the Wadia Institute of Himalayan Geology (WIHG) at Dehradun, an autonomous body under the Department of Science and Technology, has been working on various aspects of glaciology – glacier health (mass balance) monitoring, dynamics, discharge, past climatic conditions, speculation for future climate change and its impact on glaciers in this region.

Rate of decline

1. The study also said that field observations for four years (2015–2019) showed that the glacier is now retreating at an average rate of 6.7 plus/minus 3 metres per annum.
2. In the study published in the journal Regional Environmental Change, the team attributes the observed recession trends of the Pensilungpa Glacier to an increase in the temperature and decrease in precipitation during winters.
3. The study also suggests that due to continuous rise in the air temperature in line with the global trend, the melting would increase, and it is possible that the precipitation of summer periods at higher altitudes will change from snow to rain, and that may influence the summer and winter pattern.



The legality of PM Cares Fund challenged

1. An appeal challenging the legality of the PM Cares Fund in the Supreme Court has alleged that “oceans of money” are being diverted from Ministries, government agencies, departments and other bodies to the fund as “contributions” every day.
2. Petitioner alleged that “unimaginable and unfathomable amounts of public money is pumped unabatedly every day, into the coffers of the Fund”.
3. Shockingly, the money even from government-controlled funds such as ‘Assistance related to Bhopal Gas Leak Disaster’ meant for the victims of the Bhopal Gas Tragedy, has not been spared and is also being drained into the said Fund, the petition
4. There was a compelling need for transparency and accountability in the affairs of the Fund formed to monetarily help the fight against the pandemic, it stated.
5. The ideals of democracy can never be realised unless there is transparency, accountability and responsiveness in the affairs of governance. The citizen’s right to information is increasingly being recognised as an important mechanism to promote openness, transparency and accountability in the affairs of the state.