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1. India's marginalized Parliament in budgetary affairs

Context: The Budget is more than just numbers; it shows a country's priorities, economic plans, and way of governing. In many democracies, parliaments have a big role in deciding how money is spent, keeping finances in check, and ensuring transparency. But in India, Parliament has very little say in the Budget. The government controls the process, and lawmakers have little chance to review or influence financial decisions. To change this, Parliament must go beyond just approving the government's financial plans and take an active role in shaping economic policies. This requires key reforms, such as holding discussions before the Budget and setting up a Parliamentary Budget Office (PBO).

Key points

- **Overview:** The current budgetary process limits the influence of elected representatives, weakening democratic accountability.
- **Budget:** Budgeting is a key democratic process that distributes public money and sets government priorities. Across history, legislatures have fought to gain control over public finances to prevent excessive executive power.
- **Legislative Influence on Budgets:** *High Influence* - Parliaments actively draft and modify budgets. *Moderate Influence* - In-depth committee discussions shape budget decisions. *Low Influence* - Legislatures mainly approve budgets with minimal changes.
- **Role of parliament:** Parliament's involvement in budget formulation is mostly symbolic. The Finance Ministry alone prepares the Budget, keeping even Cabinet Ministers in the dark until its presentation. Unlike other bills, the Budget is not debated thoroughly in the Cabinet before being introduced in Parliament.
- **Rajya Sabha's role:** India allows a finance minister to be from Rajya Sabha, yet they cannot vote on the Budget in Lok Sabha.
- **Concerns with the parliamentary authority over budget:** Budget debates in Parliament are brief and lack depth. Parliamentary committees have limited impact on financial oversight. MPs cannot amend or significantly influence budget proposals.
- **Pre-Budget discussions:** To restore Parliament's influence in the Budget-making process, two critical reforms are needed - Pre-Budget Discussions & Establishment of a Parliamentary Budget Office (PBO).
 - *Institutionalising Pre-Budget Discussions* - Strengthens parliamentary input in budgeting. Enhances public involvement and transparency. Democratizes the Budget-making process. Allows MPs to voice public concerns and suggest fair resource allocation. Promotes trust in financial governance.
 - *Establishing a Parliamentary Budget Office (PBO)* - Currently, Indian legislators lack access to independent, non-partisan budget analysis. A PBO would ensure that government spending and policies are evaluated based on data, not just executive claims.
- **Conclusion:** The way the budget is currently decided reduces the power of elected representatives, making the process less democratic. By including discussions before the Budget and creating a Parliamentary Budget Office (PBO), Parliament can have a bigger role in shaping financial decisions instead of just approving them. These changes are not just technical fixes but important steps toward a stronger democracy.

2. Charting a route for IORA under India's chair ship

Context: The Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) is a top regional group that encourages cooperation among countries in Asia, Africa, and Australia connected by the Indian Ocean. India, currently the Vice-Chair, will take over as Chair in November 2025. During its two-year leadership, India will focus on three main goals: increasing funding for IORA, using technology for better data and policymaking, and developing maritime-related courses through academic collaborations.

Key points

- **Overview:** New Delhi must strengthen the foundation for meaningful and ground-level governance.
- **Issues faced by IORA:** *Great Power Competition* - The Indian Ocean region is mostly free from major power rivalries but faces its own challenges.
Funding Challenge - IORA's budget depends on member contributions, which are limited.
Member Economies - Apart from Singapore, UAE, and France, most IORA members are developing Asian and African countries.
Budget Size - Estimated to be just a few million dollars, much smaller than the \$1.3 billion budget of the Indian Ocean Commission (2020-25).
Funding Gap - Insufficient funds hinder IORA's work in maritime security, fisheries, disaster management, technology, and the blue economy.
- **Suggestions for India:** India's Security and Growth for All (SAGAR) vision aligns with the objectives of the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA). To maximize its potential, India should leverage its strong ties with IORA member states to develop effective solutions for regional challenges.
- **Contributions of some IORA members:** *Australia* - Leading research in marine science and technology.
France & Singapore - Strong capabilities in marine-related technologies.
UAE & Oman - Potential investors in key marine sectors
Sri Lanka, Seychelles, Mauritius - Rich in traditional knowledge for sustainable marine governance.
- **Marine and Maritime-Related Employment:** The marine and maritime sectors will continue to expand, creating new employment opportunities. Industrial leaders must; Collaborate with educational and research institutions. Provide real-world problem statements for research and innovation. Develop industry-relevant courses.
 - *Marine Accounting Course* - Establish a foundation for the blue economy
 - *Industry-Academia Collaboration* - Enhance skill development and innovation in maritime sectors.
- **Conclusion:** India's upcoming chair ship of IORA presents a crucial opportunity to strengthen regional governance, enhance funding, and integrate technology for better policymaking. By fostering private sector participation, promoting collaboration, and addressing institutional challenges, India can drive IORA toward greater relevance, ensuring sustainable development, security, and economic growth in the Indian Ocean Region.

3. Five Covid lessons

Context: This month marks five years since the world stopped. On March 11, 2020, the WHO declared Covid a pandemic. In March 24, the Government of India declared a nationwide lockdown. There are five lessons from the pandemic that are relevant. We need global systems that continually monitor these threats and explore strategies to deal with them. However, the pandemic induced a paranoia that was exacerbated by political winds that have weakened rather than strengthened these global institutions. A lot of unique opportunities will be available to create international collaborations in which India could and should take a lead.

Key points

- **Requirements of Global Systems:** *Interconnected Threats* - Diseases, natural disasters, and crises (e.g. pandemics, tsunamis) transcend borders.
Need for Global Monitoring - Strengthened international institutions (e.g., WHO) are critical for threat detection and response.
Weakened Global Collaboration - U.S. withdrawal from WHO and dismantling of the Famine Early Warning System Network.
Positive Developments - India's genomic dataset initiative fostering global biomedical collaboration.
Implication - India should lead in building international alliances to address transnational threats.
- **Need for local solutions:** *Context-Specific Responses* - Solutions must adapt to local realities (e.g. population density, infrastructure).
Implication - Prioritize resource allocation (masks, ventilators) to high-risk areas during emergencies.
- **Preparedness & planning:** *Systems Over Ad Hoc Measures* - Pre-existing systems (e.g. PDS) mitigated starvation during lockdowns.
Implication - Develop disaster plans at local, state, and national levels, including resource coordination frameworks.
- **Data as a Governance Tool:** *Key Arguments* - Lack of census data hampered migrant crisis management in India. Erosion of data credibility (e.g. U.S. halting vaccine hesitancy studies).
Implication - Institutionalize data collection and analysis as core governance practices.
- **Trust in Government:** *Public Compliance* - Trust enables adherence to emergency measures (e.g. lockdowns).
Surveys - 85% supported lockdowns in Delhi-NCR. 80% nationwide approval in retrospect (IHDS 2022–24).
Implication - Governments must prioritize transparency and equity to maintain trust during crises.
- **Conclusion:** The COVID-19 pandemic underscored five pillars for future disaster resilience. India, with its mixed successes during the pandemic, has an opportunity to model these principles for global leadership in disaster preparedness.

4. Why scientists were surprised to find life under Antarctic ice shelf

Context: Scientists have discovered dozens of new species on the newly exposed seafloor left behind by the A-84 iceberg, which broke away from the George VI Ice Shelf on January 13, 2025. The mission was a part of Challenger 150, a UNESCO-endorsed global initiative for deep-sea research. The discoveries were announced on Thursday. The findings provide new insights into how ecosystems function beneath floating sections of the Antarctic ice.

Key points

- **Overview:** Researchers have discovered life under the ice shelves of the Antarctic — in extremely cold and harsh conditions.
- **Life beneath the Antarctic:** Scientists have discovered sessile sponges — a pore bearing multicellular organism and other alien species — attached to the sides of rock beneath the ice sheets. The unidentified species are estimated to be related to sponges, ascidians (sea squirts), hydroids, barnacles, cnidarian or polychaete. All of these looks like bristle worms.
- **Scientific Discoveries Under George VI Ice Shelf:** Remotely Operated Vehicle (ROV) SuBastian explored the seabed 1,300 meters deep.

Diverse ecosystem - Found icefish, giant sea spiders, corals, sponges, and octopi.

New species - Scientists believe they discovered previously unknown marine species.

Jellyfish discovery - A giant phantom jelly was recorded, growing up to a meter wide.

Unusual nutrient supply - Despite being cut off from surface nutrients for centuries, life thrives—possibly due to ocean currents or glacial meltwater transporting essential nutrients.

- **Organisms discovered:** *Sponges* - They are multicellular organisms that have bodies full of pores and channels allowing water to circulate through them, consisting of jelly-like mesohyl sandwiched between two thin layers of cells.

Ascidians - Ascidians, or sea squirts, are invertebrate chordates that belong to the earliest branch in the chordate phylum. Ascidians are found all over the world, usually in shallow water with salinities over 2.5‰.

Hydroids - Hydroids are a life stage for most animals of the class Hydrozoa, small predators related to jellyfish. Some hydroids such as the freshwater Hydra are solitary, with the polyp attached directly to the substrate.

Barnacles - Barnacles are a highly specialized group of crustaceans. A barnacle is a type of arthropod related to crabs and lobsters.

Cnidarians - Cnidarians, also called coelenterate, any member of the phylum Cnidaria (Coelenterata), a group made up of more than 9,000 living species.

- **George VI Ice Shelf:** Lies between Alexander Island and the Antarctic Peninsula. Covers 24,000 sq. km, making it the second-largest ice shelf in the region. Situated at the -9°C mean annual air temperature isotherm, a critical threshold beyond which ice shelves are prone to collapse.

Ice flow - Receives ice from both the Antarctic Peninsula and Alexander Island.

5. Call to provide a safe environment to sparrows

Context: World Sparrow Day was celebrated on Thursday here with calls to protect all indigenous birds while providing a safe environment to the sparrows. A programme was organized by the Regional Agriculture Research Station, Assam Agriculture University, North Lakhimpur under the Agriculture Ornithology Programme of Indian Council of Agriculture Research (ICAR). The winner of Asom Gaurav award for her conservational works to protect the endangered vultures, Phuleswari Dutta of Dhakuakhana was felicitated on the occasion and was also presented the Parvesh Mitra.

Key points

- **Overview:** World Sparrow Day, celebrated on 20th March, raises awareness about the declining sparrow population and emphasizes the need to preserve these vital birds for ecological balance.
- **World Sparrow Day:** It was initiated by "Nature Forever" in 2010 (a bird conservation organization) and is celebrated in over 50 countries.
2025 Theme - "A Tribute to Nature's Tiny Messengers".
- **Significance of Sparrows:** They help control insect populations by feeding on various bugs and pests. Key players in pollination and seed dispersal. Their presence enhances biodiversity, making them crucial for the health of both rural and urban ecosystems.
- **Threats:** Unleaded petrol has led to toxic compounds and pesticide use in agriculture harm the insects; sparrows depend on for food. The increasing presence of crows and cats, along with a lack of green spaces has added to the problem. Urbanization has also taken away their natural nesting spaces.
- **Conservation Efforts:** *Save the Sparrow campaign* - Led by environmental conservationist Jagat Kinkhabwala.
Initiative by Koodugal Trust in Chennai - Involved school children in creating sparrow nests. Children build small wooden houses, providing food and shelter for sparrows.
Early Bird campaign - Introduces children to the world of birds, in Mysuru, Karnataka. The program includes a library, activity kits and trips to villages to observe birds.