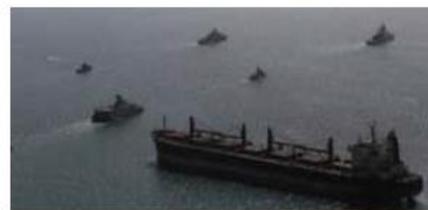


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RISING TENSIONS

Iran and U.S. raise military posture

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UN REPORT

Israel, Hamas committed atrocities in Gaza conflict

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FREEBIES DEBATE

SC flags 'appeasement' in poll-time largesse

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UNDER SCRUTINY

From Washington to Delhi, shadow of Epstein

Political access and governance questions

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Karnataka to meet J&K in the final

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INSIDE



Cong. releases its 'chargesheet' on the BJP in Assam

GUWAHATI
Congress MP Priyanka Gandhi Vadra on Thursday released a "people's chargesheet" against

SIR in 22 States and U.T.s expected from April: EC

Poll body directs Chief Electoral Officers in States, U.T.s to complete preparatory work for special intensive revision; EC in talks with Census authorities on using resources in a staggered manner

Sreeparna Chakrabarty
NEW DELHI

The Election Commission (EC) has informed State poll authorities that the special



Bihar was the first State to undergo the SIR process last year, just before its Assembly election.

Following this, on October 27, 2025, the poll body ordered the second

India sees future, not fear, in AI, says Prime Minister at plenary session of summit

Aroon Deep
NEW DELHI

Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Thursday said India did not fear artificial intelligence (AI) but saw its future in the technology.

"I declare this with ut





Established by **UN** in **2007**, (first observed 2009).

The day highlights **efforts to address poverty, exclusion, and inequality while promoting fair labour, gender equity, and access to resources globally.**

Theme 2026: ***“Renewed Commitment to Social Development and Social Justice.”***

Tackle poverty, unemployment, and exclusion through solidarity and equal opportunities.

Promote decent work, social protection, and human rights for all.

India aligns via Constitution (**Articles 14-16 on equality**) and schemes like **PM Garib Kalyan Anna Yojana.**

SIR in 22 States and U.T.s expected from April: EC

Poll body directs Chief Electoral Officers in States, U.T.s to complete preparatory work for special intensive revision; EC in talks with Census authorities on using resources in a staggered manner

Sreeparna Chakrabarty
NEW DELHI

The Election Commission (EC) has informed State poll authorities that the special intensive revision (SIR) of voter lists in the 22 States and Union Territories, where it has not yet been conducted, is expected to begin in April.

The 22 remaining States and U.T.s are Andhra Pradesh, Arunachal Pradesh, Chandigarh, Dadra and Nagar Haveli and Daman and Diu, Haryana, Himachal Pradesh, Jammu and Kashmir, Jharkhand, Karnataka, Ladakh, Maharashtra, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, the National Capital Territory of Delhi, Odisha, Punjab, Sikkim, Tripura, Telangana, and Uttarakhand.

In a letter to the Chief Electoral Officers of these States and U.T.s, the EC asked them to complete all preparatory work related to the SIR at the earliest, as the exercise "is expected to start from April 2026". This preparatory work in-



People summoned for hearings under the special intensive revision of electoral rolls in Nadia, West Bengal. PTI

cludes mapping the existing voters with the electoral roll of 2002-2004, when the last SIR was conducted, and training the booth-level officers (BLOs) to carry out the exercise.

Census and SIR

While announcing the schedule, the EC will have to factor in the Census exercise, which is also scheduled to begin in April.

The first phase of the Population Census 2027, the house listing operation, is scheduled to begin on April 1, with the deploy-

ment of 30 lakh enumerators, most of whom are teachers from government schools. However, the BLOs who carry out the door-to-door enumeration for the SIR are also largely government school teachers.

Sources had earlier indicated that the poll body had held meetings with the Registrar-General of India as well as the Census Commissioner over how to use the common pool of administrative resources in a staggered manner for both the SIR and the Census.

Bihar was the first State to undergo the SIR process last year, just before its Assembly election.

Following this, on October 27, 2025, the poll body ordered the second phase of the SIR in 12 States and U.T.s, which is under way now.

These States are Kerala, Tamil Nadu, West Bengal, Gujarat, Uttar Pradesh, Puducherry, Andaman and Nicobar Islands, Chhattisgarh, Goa, Lakshadweep, Madhya Pradesh, and Rajasthan. The SIR process in these States has seen multiple extensions, with Uttar Pradesh getting the most extra time to complete the exercise.

In Assam, a special revision was conducted instead of SIR, due to legal hurdles posed by an incomplete National Register of Citizens process in the State.

After announcing last June that the SIR would be conducted in all States and U.T.s, the EC had, in a letter dated July 5, 2025, asked all States to initiate the pre-revision exercise for the SIR.

What is SIR?

The Election Commission of India's **Special Intensive Revision (SIR)** is a **door-to-door enumeration exercise** to *completely rebuild and update voter lists in a state when the existing rolls are deemed outdated or erroneous.*

Purpose:

- ✓ Ensure **no eligible citizen is left out.**
- ✓ Ensure **no ineligible person remains on the rolls.**

Why SIR?

- ✓ Rapid urbanization
- ✓ Migration
- ✓ Young citizen becoming eligible to vote
- ✓ Non-reporting of deaths
- ✓ Issue of foreign illegal immigrants

Legal and Constitutional Framework

- ✓ ECI's **Mandate under Article 324 of the Constitution** to conduct "**free and fair elections,**" *including updating electoral rolls.*
- ✓ **SIR vs. Routine Revision:** Unlike routine annual roll updates, **SIR entails complete re-enumeration without reference to earlier lists.**
- ✓ **Judicial Oversight:** The **Supreme Court on 28 July 2025 refused to stay SIR but directed ECI to accept Aadhaar, EPIC, and ration cards** as proof, underscoring the right to vote as a constitutional guarantee

SIR in 22 States and U.T.s expected from April: EC

Election Commission directs 22 remaining States/UTs (*Andhra Pradesh, Arunachal Pradesh, Chandigarh, Dadra & Nagar Haveli/Daman & Diu, Haryana, Himachal Pradesh, J&K, Jharkhand, Karnataka, Ladakh, Maharashtra, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Delhi, Odisha, Punjab, Sikkim, Tripura, Telangana, Uttarakhand*) **to prepare for Special Intensive Revision (SIR) of voter lists starting April 2026.**

Phase 1: Bihar first (pre-2025 election)

Phase 2 (Oct 27, 2025) ongoing in 12 States/UTs (*Kerala, Tamil Nadu, West Bengal, Gujarat, UP, Puducherry, A&N Islands, Chhattisgarh, Goa, Lakshadweep, MP, Rajasthan*) with extensions (*UP longest*).

In Assam Special revision instead of SIR due to NRC legal issues.

SIR in 22 States and U.T.s expected from April: EC

EC has directed state authorities *to map current voters to 2002-2004 rolls; train Booth Level Officers* (BLOs, mostly teachers) immediately.

SIR *timing aligns with Census 2027 house-listing from April 1* (30 lakh enumerators, also teachers); EC coordinating with Registrar-General for staggered use of staff.

India sees future, not fear, in AI, says Prime Minister at plenary session of summit

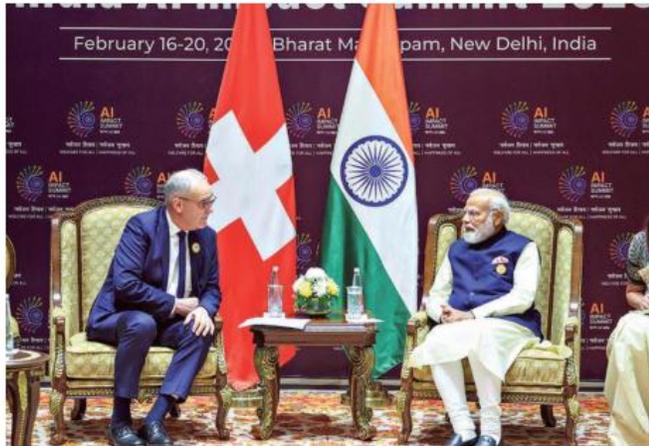
Aroon Deep

NEW DELHI

Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Thursday said India did not fear artificial intelligence (AI) but saw its future in the technology.

“I declare this with utmost responsibility and immense pride,” he said. “We harbour no fear. India envisions its destiny in artificial intelligence, a future that is clearly and profoundly visible for our great nation.” Mr. Modi was speaking at the plenary session of the AI Impact Summit.

“India is diligently constructing a resilient ecosystem spanning from semi-conductors and chip making to quantum computing,” he said, hailing “clear policies” around AI and electronics manufacturing. “This comprehensive effort includes establishing secure data centres, a robust IT back-



Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Switzerland President Guy Parmelin during a meeting on the sidelines of the AI Summit. ANI

Bill Gates pulls out of keynote address

Suhasini Haidar

NEW DELHI

Under a cloud over his relationship with American sex-offender Jeffrey Epstein, Microsoft

He was among the big names expected to attend the conference, and had been billed as one of the “global visionaries” at the event, in the conference publicity material and



AI IMPACT SUMMIT

भारत 2026 INDIA



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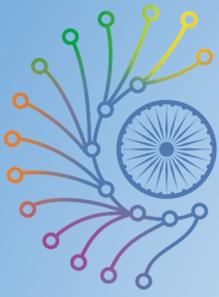


By Pankaj Ajeete

'सर्वजन हिताय, सर्वजन सुखाय'

AI
IMPACT
SUMMIT

भारत 2026 INDIA



AI
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भारत 2026 INDIA

- ✓ The **India AI Impact Summit 2026** is a major global event hosted by India, focusing on **AI's role in development, ethics, and innovation.**
- ✓ Scheduled for **February 16-20, 2026, at Bharat Mandapam in New Delhi**, it marks the **first such summit in the Global South.**
- ✓ India organizes this summit under the **IndiaAI Mission**, aligning with PM Modi's vision of tech for public good.
- ✓ It gathers **leaders, policymakers, innovators, and experts from 30+ countries to discuss AI in sectors like healthcare, education, agriculture, and governance.**

The Three Sutras

The India - AI Impact Summit will be anchored on three foundational pillars, known as 'Sutras'—a Sanskrit term meaning guiding principles or essential threads that weave together wisdom and action. These three Sutras define how AI can be harnessed through multilateral cooperation for collective benefit



The People Sutra envisions AI as a force for human progress—respecting cultural diversity, preserving dignity, and ensuring inclusion in its design and deployment. It affirms that technology must remain human-centred, advance people-first development while upholding safety, trust, and shared benefit.



The Planet Sutra calls for AI that advances innovation responsibly—reducing its resource footprint while accelerating climate resilience and environmental protection. It upholds that technological progress must align with planetary stewardship, ensuring AI strengthens rather than undermines global sustainability.



The Progress Sutra envisages AI as an engine for inclusive growth—aligning its benefits with global development priorities and equitable access to opportunity. It emphasizes democratizing key AI resources and applying AI to accelerate socio-economic progress across sectors such as health, education, governance, and agriculture.



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The Seven Chakras

Seven Chakras represent focused domains of international collaboration that translate the broader principles of People, Planet, and Progress into concrete areas of action:

- ✓ Human Capital
- ✓ Inclusion for Social Empowerment
- ✓ Safe and Trusted AI
- ✓ Resilience, Innovation, and Efficiency
- ✓ Science
- ✓ Democratizing AI Resources
- ✓ AI for Economic Growth and Social Good



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Before this

- ✓ **Bletchley Park AI Safety Summit (2023, UK):** First global AI summit addressing catastrophic risks; led to AI Safety Institutes and Bletchley Declaration signed by 28 countries including India.
- ✓ **AI Seoul Summit (2024, South Korea):** Continued focus on AI safety and governance.
- ✓ **AI Action Summit (2025, Paris, France):** Co-chaired by France and India; shifted to action, ethics, human rights, environment, and work impacts.

After this...

- ✓ **The Artificial Intelligence (AI) Impact Summit in 2027** will be held in **Geneva**, Switzerland's President **Guy Parmelin** confirmed.

India sees future, not fear, in AI, says Prime Minister

PM Narendra Modi declared India embraces AI as its future, not fearing it, speaking at AI Impact Summit plenary.

India developing semiconductors, chips, quantum computing, secure data centers, IT backbone, startups with clear AI/electronics policies.

Urged moving *AI from machine-focused to human-sensitive, democratized for Global South inclusion/empowerment.*

AI as civilization's turning point, like rare epochs reshaping progress—its full impact often unseen during transition.

Tech Showcase: Speech *livestreamed in 7 Indian languages + English via AI (first time)*; previous real-time translation at Kashi Tamil Sangamam used BHASHINI.

India sees future, not fear, in AI, says Prime Minister

M *Moral/Ethical AI*

A *Accountable governance*

N *National data sovereignty*

A *Accessible/Inclusive tools*

V *Valid/Legitimate uses*

India sees future, not fear, in AI, says Prime Minister

Prime Minister

February 19, 2026 | Bharat Mandapam, New Delhi, India



Britain's former Duke Andrew arrested over connections with Epstein

Sriram Lakshman

LONDON

Britain's former Duke of York, Andrew Mountbatten-Windsor (formerly, 'Prince Andrew'), was arrested and taken into custody early on Thursday morning, over his connection to Jeffrey Epstein, the deceased American child sex offender and financier.

The extraordinary arrest of a member of the Royal Family, which has not occurred in centuries, underlines the gravity and reach of the unfolding Epstein scandal, which has shaken both the family and the Keir Starmer government.

Mountbatten-Windsor,

the younger brother of Britain's King Charles, who turned 66 on Thursday, was arrested on suspicion of misconduct in public office – in connection with passing on confidential official documents to Epstein, when he served as an unpaid trade envoy for the U.K. between 2001 and 2011.

Release of files

The revelations have emerged from the release of files running into millions of pages related to Epstein by the U.S. Department of Justice.

The alleged sharing of documents is just one of several ways in which Mr. Mountbatten-Windsor's

name has surfaced in connection with Epstein. In 2021, an American woman, Virginia Giuffre, said that Epstein and his former girlfriend Ghislaine Maxwell had allegedly trafficked her to Mr. Mountbatten-Windsor for sex when she was 17. Giuffre died by suicide in April 2025. In 2022, the former prince, who has repeatedly denied any wrongdoing, reached an out-of-court settlement with her.

A photograph of a man who appeared to be Mr. Mountbatten-Windsor, kneeling on all fours over a fully clothed woman lying on the carpet, was among the images released on January 30 by the U.S.



Ongoing issue: Andrew Mountbatten-Windsor, formerly known as Prince Andrew, was stripped of his titles in October 2025. AP

authorities.

The tranche of documents also suggested a possible payment from Epstein to Peter Mandelson, former U.K. envoy to Wash-

ington, who resigned in November over his friendship with Epstein. The revelations also led to Mr. Mandelson's resignation from the Labour Party ear-

lier this month and calls for Mr. Starmer to step down.

For the royals, as fresh revelations around his links with Epstein emerged, Mr. Mountbatten-Windsor was stripped of his titles in October 2025 and asked to leave the Royal Lodge, his official residence in Windsor. He recently moved into Wood Farm, on the Sandringham Estate in Norfolk, which is privately owned by King Charles.

The British press reported that police cars arrived at the estate around 6 a.m. on Thursday, with the police releasing a statement around 10 a.m.

"We have today arrested

a man in his sixties from Norfolk on suspicion of misconduct in public office and are carrying out searches at addresses in Berkshire and Norfolk," the Thames Valley Police said in a statement, adding that they were not naming the individual as per national guidance, when people are normally only named when charged.

Searches were also going on at Royal Lodge, where the former prince lived until earlier this month. It was unclear where the suspect was being questioned.

'Full and fair process'

The King called for a "full, fair and proper process"

and offered his "whole hearted support and co-operation", as per a statement released by Buckingham Palace.

"Let me state clearly: the law must take its course," he said, adding it would not be appropriate to comment further at this point in time.

The family of Giuffre also reacted to the news via a statement.

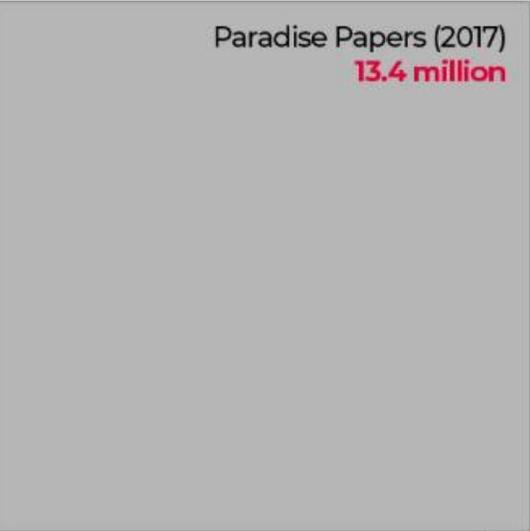
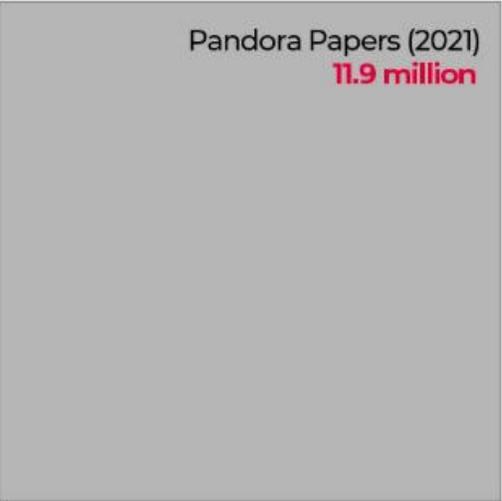
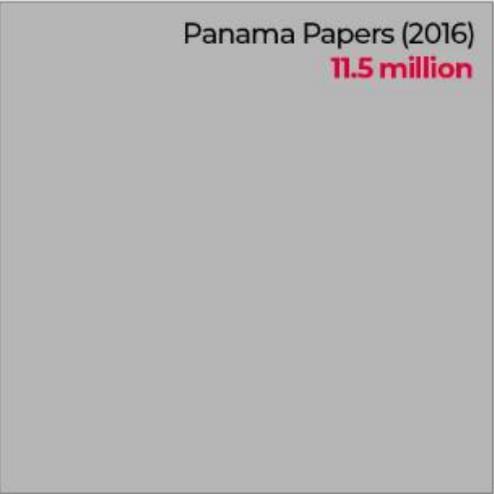
"At last today our broken hearts have been lifted at the news that no one is above the law, not even royalty," they said, thanking the Thames Valley Police and adding, "He was never a prince. For survivors everywhere, Virginia did this for you."

What are Epstein Files?

- ✓ Thousands of pages from two US probes, including ***flight logs, emails, recordings, and photos of Epstein's network.***
- ✓ ***First release (Dec 19, 2025):*** Hundreds of thousands of docs; new Clinton photos and celeb pics, but heavily blacked out; survivors and lawmakers (both parties) slammed it.
- ✓ ***Second release:*** Added 30K pages; notes Trump flew on Epstein's jet in 1990s (no crime alleged).
- ✓ ***Final big drop (Jan 30, 2026):*** 3 million more pages by DOJ—called the "last major batch."

■ Sized by the number of documents released

An additional 3 million pages
have not yet been released



Epstein Files Transparency Act

✓ ***Epstein Files Transparency Act***: Passed House **427-1** on Nov 18, 2025; Senate approved; Trump signed—forced DOJ to release files.

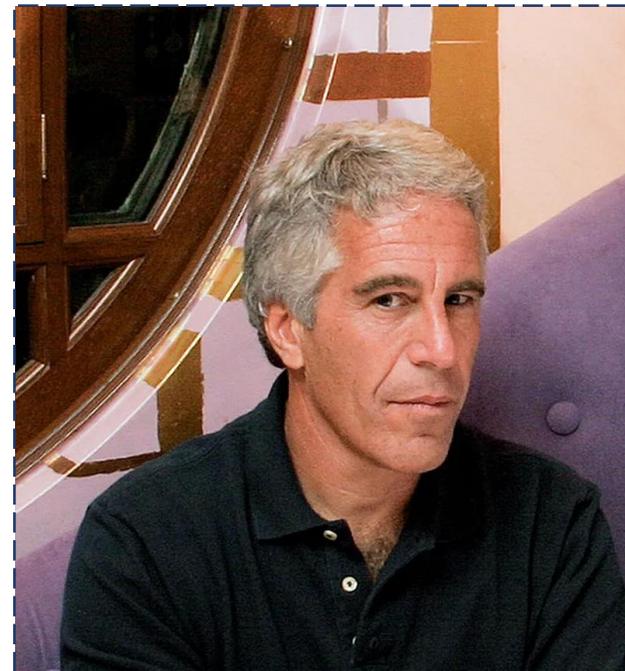
✓ The ***Epstein Files Transparency Act mandated the full public release of DOJ-held documents on Jeffrey Epstein's crimes.*** Passed with overwhelming bipartisan support in late 2025, it aimed to expose elite connections amid public outcry.

Who was Epstein ?

Jeffrey Epstein was a US financier and convicted sex offender who used his vast wealth and high-profile social connections to orchestrate a decade-long sex trafficking ring involving dozens of underage girls.

Epstein was **convicted in 2008 of sex offences but avoided federal charges**, which could have seen him face life in prison – by doing a deal with prosecutors.

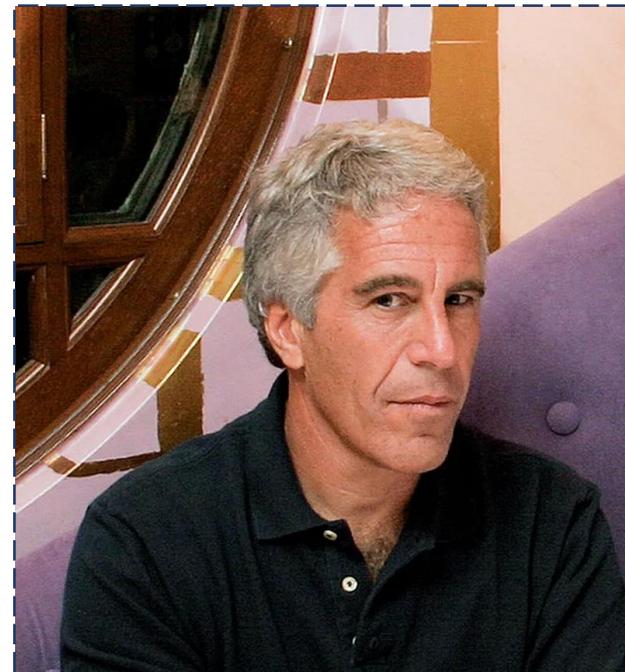
Instead, he **received an 18-month prison sentence**, which allowed him to go on “work release” to his office for 12 hours a day, six days a week. He **was released after 13 months**.

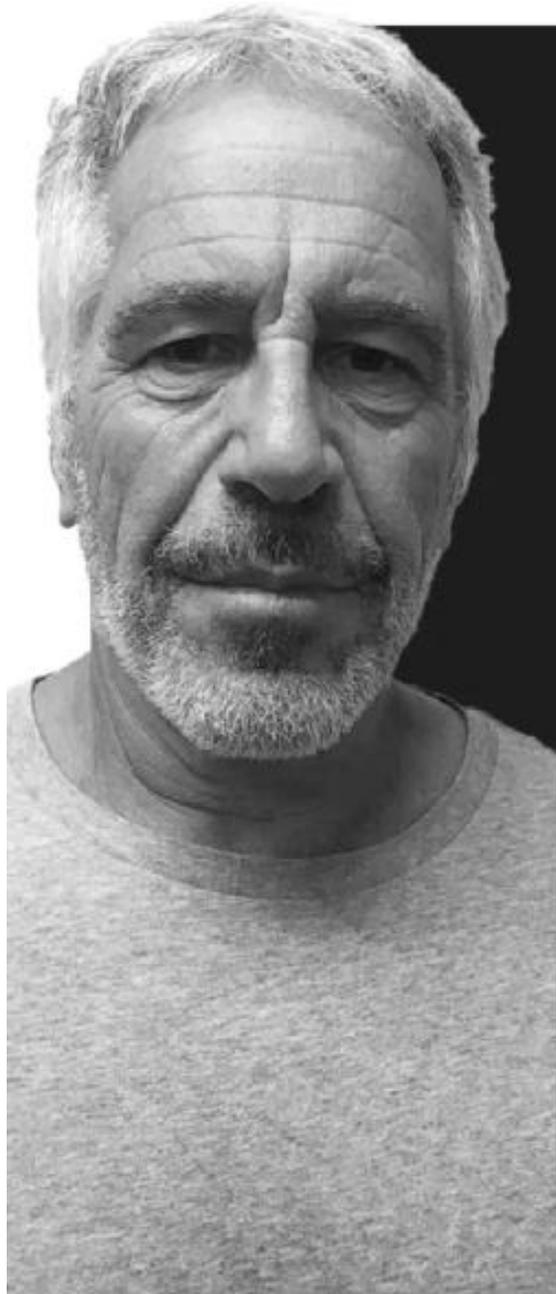


Who was Epstein ?

In 2019, he was arrested again on charges including the sex trafficking of minors. But he died by suicide in a Manhattan jail cell in 2019 before his trial could commence.

Now more has been revealed about the disgraced financier's sexual abuse of young girls and his interactions with wealthy and powerful figures from the world.





- **1953:** Born in Brooklyn, New York
 - **1969–74:** Attended Cooper Union and NYU, but left without obtaining a degree
 - **1974–76:** Taught mathematics and physics at the elite Dalton School
 - **1976–81:** Worked at the investment bank Bear Stearns, left following a regulatory violation
 - **1980s:** Founded his financial management and consulting firm
 - **1991:** Met Ghislaine Maxwell, who became his primary coconspirator
-
- **2005:** Investigated by police in Florida for the sexual abuse of a 14-year-old girl
 - **2008:** Pleaded guilty to procuring a child for prostitution and soliciting a prostitute; served 13 months in a county jail
 - **2019:** Arrested on federal charges of sex trafficking of minors and conspiracy
 - **2019:** Found dead in his cell awaiting trial; ruled a suicide by hanging

Who is Maxwell ?

Ghislaine Maxwell, was a socialite who met Epstein in the early 1990s and became his romantic partner and close aide.

She managed his households across New York, Florida, New Mexico, and his private island, using her elite connections to lure victims.

She was involved in actively recruiting and grooming underage girls, some as young as 14.

Has been sentenced for 20 years in prison.



Where was Epstein's private islands?

- ✓ **Little Saint James (1998):** Bought by Epstein for \$8M in US Virgin Islands; ultra-isolated (boat/helicopter access only); main home and trafficking hub. It was central site as per files—blueprints, photos, logbooks, boat trip records released.
- ✓ **Great Saint James (2016):** Epstein bought neighboring larger island to expand holdings.

Britain's former Duke Andrew arrested over connections with Epstein

A **UK police force** has arrested **Andrew Mountbatten-Windsor** on **suspicion of misconduct in public office**.

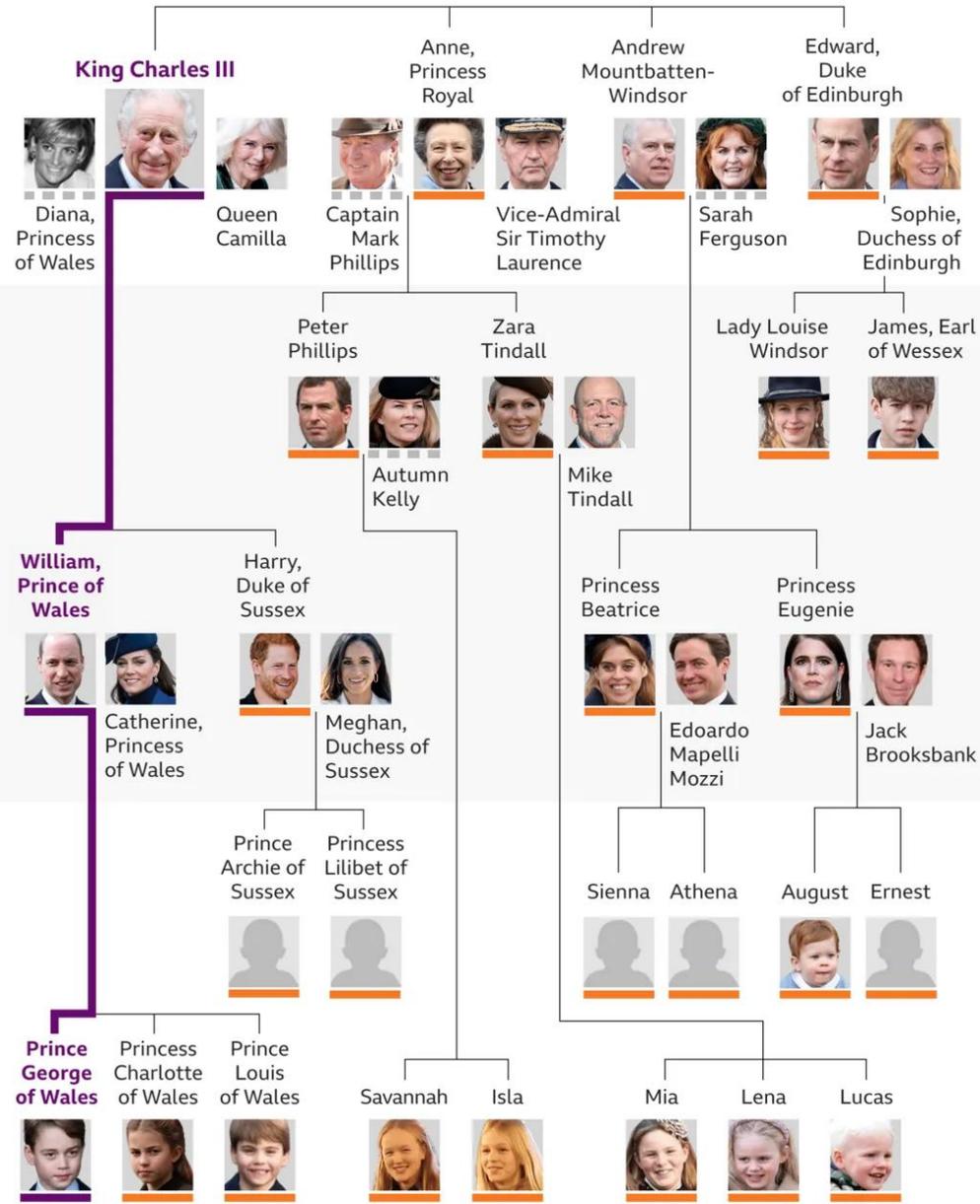
The **Thames Valley Police** was “**assessing**” reports that the former Prince Andrew Mountbatten-Windsor **sent trade reports to convicted sex offender Jeffrey Epstein in 2010**.

He has allegedly **passed on confidential official documents to Epstein**, when he served as an unpaid trade envoy for the U.K. between 2001 and 2011.

For the royals, as fresh revelations around his links with Epstein emerged, **Mountbatten-Windsor was stripped of his titles in October 2025 and asked to leave the Royal Lodge**, his official residence in Windsor.



— Succession line — Also in line — Divorced



Britain's former Duke Andrew arrested over connections with Epstein

Peter Mandelson: Fired as *UK Ambassador to the U.S. and later resigned from the Labour Party and House of Lords* over his self-described "best pal" relationship.

Thorbjørn Jagland: *Former Prime Minister of Norway*, charged with "aggravated corruption" on February 12, 2026, regarding gifts, loans, and travel received in connection with his official positions.

Mona Juul & Terje Rød-Larsen: The *former Norwegian ambassador and her husband* are under investigation for aggravated corruption after being named as beneficiaries in a will Epstein signed just before his death.

SC slams unchecked freebies, questions ‘appeasement’

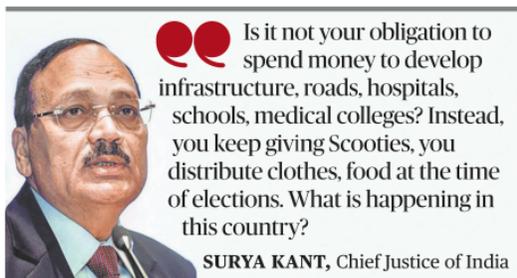
Top court says States must prioritise welfare and development over largesse; asks if they have a tested mechanism to distribute welfare effectively to those who actually need a ‘helping hand’

Krishnadas Rajagopal
NEW DELHI

The Supreme Court on Thursday chastised State governments for distributing freebies indiscriminately without even distinguishing between the haves and the have-nots, questioning whether they are following an “appeasement” policy without a thought for the public exchequer ahead of elections.

Chief Justice of India Surya Kant, heading a three-judge Bench, said States, even those that are revenue-surplus, must prioritise welfare and development over irrational largesse. Despite running on deficit, the Chief Justice said, States seemed to still have money to randomly splurge on largesse. The court asked whether States had a tested mechanism to distribute welfare effectively, to those who actually need a “helping hand”.

“Is it not your obligation to spend money to develop



infrastructure, roads, hospitals, schools, medical colleges? Instead, you keep giving Scooties, you distribute clothes, food at the time of elections. What is happening in this country,” the Chief Justice asked.

The court said largesse was distributed in such a way that the most affluent get them first.

“It is understandable that some people cannot afford, the State has to provide. There are children who cannot afford education. You must provide. It is their fundamental right. There are many bright children who cannot afford higher education. It is the

state’s duty to extend a helping hand to them. That is welcome. But for people who do not deserve, those who are affluent, why give them freebies? Why do freebies come to their pockets first? Is it not high time for the States to revisit these policies,” Chief Justice Kant asked.

The Bench, including Justices Joymalya Bagchi and Vipul M. Pancholi, was hearing a writ petition filed by Tamil Nadu Power Distribution Corporation Limited (TNPDC), represented by senior advocates Gopal Subramaniam and P. Wilson, challenging the constitutional validity of

Rule 23 of the Electricity (Amendment) Act, 2024.

Mr. Subramaniam said the gap in revenue from electricity and expenditure has expanded over the years. In Tamil Nadu, the gap has touched ₹50,000-odd crore annually, which the government was absorbing.

The senior counsel said Rule 23 would financially stretch the State government to such an extent that it would have to pass on the tariff burden to the consumers.

“The Rule, if implemented, would result in an exponential tariff shock, adversely affecting electricity consumers and placing an unsustainable burden on the public exchequer,” the TNPDC petition submitted.

The Chief Justice asked why the State’s policy did not allow the government to generate profits from the power sector by making the affluent sections pay for the electricity they consume.

SC slams unchecked freebies, questions 'appeasement'

SC rebuked States for indiscriminate freebies (scooties, clothes, food) before elections, calling it "appeasement" without fiscal responsibility or targeting the needy.

Even revenue-surplus States should prioritize infrastructure over largesse (roads, hospitals, schools); affluent get benefits first, not poor deserving children/education.

TNPDCL filed petition challenging **Rule 23, Electricity (Amendment) Act 2024**—**which causes ₹50,000 crore annual revenue gap**, forces tariff hikes on consumers.

Why no mechanism to aid only have-nots? Why not make affluent pay market power rates for profit, easing public exchequer burden?

SC slams unchecked freebies, questions 'appeasement'

Rule 23, Electricity (Amendment) Rules, 2024

Purpose: Ensures power tariffs are cost-reflective—revenue from tariffs must nearly match approved costs (Annual Revenue Requirement or ARR).

Key Provisions	Details
Gap Limit	Tariff revenue gap \leq 3% of ARR (except natural calamities).
Liquidation	Any gap + carrying costs repaid in max 3 equal yearly instalments; existing regulatory assets in 7 instalments.
Impact	Forces discoms (like TNPDC) to raise tariffs if subsidized; prevents endless losses (~₹50,000 cr/year gap claimed).

TNPDC Challenge: Violates Electricity Act by overriding State Electricity Regulatory Commissions' (SERCs) tariff-setting powers under Sections 61-63; retrospective effect illegal. SC hearing ongoing.

Privacy, transparency

There must be no information asymmetry between state and citizens

In Monday, the Supreme Court of India referred a series of petitions challenging the amendment to Section 8(1)(j) of the Right to Information (RTI) Act by Section 44(3) of the Digital Personal Data Protection (DPDP) Act, 2023, to a Constitution Bench, recognising its “constitutional sensitivity”. The Chief Justice of India even remarked that the Court might “have to lay down what is meant by ‘personal information’”. The RTI Act, 2005 was enacted to create an informed citizenry and ensure state accountability, which is vital for a democracy. Over two decades later, the DPDP Act has delivered a body blow by diluting one of its foundational sections. Section 8(1)(j) originally allowed the withholding of personal information only if it had no relationship to any public activity or interest, or if its disclosure resulted in an unwarranted invasion of privacy. Crucially, the section included a “public interest override” as an integral feature of the 2005 Act, permitting disclosure if a Public Information Officer was satisfied that the larger public interest justified it. The DPDP amendment removes this override and prohibits the disclosure of “any information which relates to personal information”, amounting to a blanket ban. This enables rejecting requests concerning officials, procurement records, audit reports or public spending. In its campaign for the RTI, the Internet Freedom Foundation has highlighted a “legitimate uses” paradox here: while Section 7 of the DPDP Act allows the state to process personal data without consent, the RTI amendment prevents citizens from using similar principles to seek transparency from the state. Thus, while the government can monitor the citizen, the citizen is denied the ability to scrutinise the government.

This amendment also creates a severe “chilling effect” on the press. As argued in one of the writ petitions by The Reporters’ Collective, journalists could be classified as “data fiduciaries” under the DPDP Act and its Rules when collecting information for investigative reports. Non-compliance with the Act can attract fines up to ₹250 crore. Such a legal framework threatens reducing journalism to just publishing government releases. It is ironic that the DPDP Act provides exemptions to startups but omits similar protections for journalism. This is in sharp contrast with the European Union’s General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), which balances privacy and transparency to ensure accountability. The Constitution Bench must refer to the judgment, *Central Public Information Officer* (2019), which held that personal information should remain private unless disclosure is necessary for the larger public interest. It is known that the RTI has significantly reduced state-citizen (this includes the poor) information asymmetry over two decades. Ensuring its survival is essential for a responsive government.

Privacy and transparency: On the RTI Act amendment, petitions

SC has referred a series of petitions challenging to the 2023 change in Section 8(1)(j) of the RTI Act (done via Section 44(3) of the DPDP Act) to a Constitution Bench, calling it a constitutionally sensitive issue.

Earlier, Section 8(1)(j) allowed denial of personal information only if it had no link to public activity/interest or caused an unwarranted invasion of privacy, and even then could be disclosed if there was a larger public interest (“public interest override”).

The **DPDP amendment removes this public interest override** and now bars disclosure of any personal information, creating an almost blanket ban.

Because of this, **RTI requests about officials, contracts, procurement, audits or public spending could be rejected by labelling them as involving “personal information”.**

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There is a **“legitimate uses paradox”**: the **DPDP Act lets the state process citizens’ personal data without consent** in many situations, but the **RTI amendment stops citizens from accessing information about the state using similar principles**.

This makes **government monitoring of citizens easier, while making it harder for citizens to scrutinise the government**, weakening democratic accountability.

The change also creates a **“chilling effect” on the press**: journalists collecting data for investigations may be treated as “data fiduciaries” and face huge penalties (up to ₹250 crore) for non-compliance with DPDP rules.

This risk **could push journalism towards only carrying official press releases**, since independent investigative work becomes legally dangerous.

The law **gives exemptions to startups but not to journalism**, unlike the EU’s GDPR, which explicitly balances privacy, transparency and media freedoms.

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The *Constitution Bench* should rely on the 2019 Supreme Court ruling (Central Public Information Officer case), which said ***personal information can be disclosed when larger public interest demands it***, and that ***protecting RTI is vital to keep reducing information gaps between state and citizens and to keep the government responsive.***

Flight overreach

Disruptive behaviour must not be confused with airing of grievances

A disturbing phenomenon in aviation is unruly passenger behaviour. The International Air Transport Association (IATA) has pointed out that in 2023, there was one incident for every 480 flights, from one for every 568 flights in 2022. In India, the Directorate General of Civil Aviation (DGCA) is proposing to amend rules such that airlines can directly impose a flying ban of up to 30 days without referring the matter to the competent authority. The DGCA has broadened the concept of unruly behaviour too with six new categories: smoking on board, consumption of alcohol on domestic flights, tampering with emergency exits, unauthorised use of life-saving equipment such as life jackets, engaging in protests or sloganeering, and unruly conduct arising from intoxication. Currently, airlines must report disruptive passengers to an independent committee, headed by a retired district and sessions judge, which will decide within 45 days whether to add them to the official no-fly list. Unruly behaviour would now be monitored by airlines from the check-in counter although the focus is on the flight since such behaviour can impact passenger safety and comfort.

It would seem tolerance levels are dipping with several incidents such as attempts to open emergency exits and accessing lifesaving equipment without reason. Reports also cite passengers abusing crew and fellow travellers, and the loud chanting of prayers and bhajans. The amendments seek to empower airlines and cabin crew act immediately, unlike before, when such behaviour was overshadowed by lengthy No-Fly List procedures that focused on more serious issues such as national security. Whether the proposed changes would lead to high-handedness and offset the balance of power between passengers and airline staff is a moot point. Aviation experts stress that the cabin crew's primary role is for flight safety. However, a credible argument against the proposed amendments would cite the IndiGo fiasco where the airline's response to pilot deployment rules was found to be influenced by revenue considerations, leading to much anger among passengers. It would seem that the amendments would empower airlines against "unruly" behaviour arising from legitimate anger over unfair practices too. So, while the amendments may be necessary in the overall interest of flight safety and a smooth passenger experience, they should not serve other purposes such as deflecting passenger grievances. One safeguard would be to make a distinction between "unruly" behaviour on the ground versus disruptive behaviour during flight. Safeguards are needed to allow redress against airline overreach.

Flight overreach

IATA (International Air Transport Association) reports unruly passenger behavior hit 1 per 480 flights globally in 2023 (up from 1/568 in 2022); India seeing more cases like emergency exit tampering, alcohol abuse, crew fights.

DGCA proposed to amend rules, *which allowed airlines to directly ban disruptive passengers up to 30 days—no need for independent committee (currently a retired judge heads it, decides in 45 days).*

6 new unruly acts—smoking onboard, alcohol on domestic flights, tampering exits/life gear, protests/sloganeering, intoxication-fueled chaos.

Airlines track from check-in, focus on flights for safety; empowers crew to act fast vs. old security-focused process.

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May lead to airline high-handedness; IndiGo pilot row shows revenue bias; could punish legit anger over delays/unfairness.

Distinguish ground vs. flight disruptions; allow appeals to balance power, prevent grievance deflection while prioritizing safety.