DAILY CURRENT AFFAIRS

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- ❖ **Avoidable tragedy at Hathras - Crowd Disasters**
- ❖ **Smart City Mission**
- ❖ **An overview of French Elections**

1. AVOIDABLE TRAGEDY- CROWD DISASTERS

What happened?

- ❖ A Satsang was hosted by the local preacher Narayan Sakar Vishwa Hari on July 2 in Hathras, where thousands more than expected turned up at the event and 121 people died in a stampede.

- ❖ There have been at least **half-a-dozen such incidents** in the last 20 years.

Avoidable tragedy

Gatherings should be tightly regulated to prevent Hathras-type stampedes

The stampede on Tuesday at a religious congregation at Hathras in western Uttar Pradesh, claiming over 120 lives, is only the latest in a series of such tragedies in the country. There have been at least half-a-dozen such incidents in the last 20-odd years. In this instance, at least a lakh of people flocked to Fulrai village to listen to an address by a preacher Suraj Pal, also known as Narayan Sakar Hari or "Bhole Baba". There are reports that there were over 2.5 lakh participants at the venue, which could accommodate no more than 80,000. The preacher is said to have followers in States such as Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Haryana too. Most of the deceased, mainly women and children, were from the economically vulnerable sections of society, and were in search of spiritual solace. While only a fair investigation can find out the cause for the stampede, the reasons being cited include overcrowding, and the bid by some to collect soil from around the feet of the preacher. Not surprisingly, the responses, particularly from the field-level public health system, have exposed how ill-prepared the Uttar Pradesh administration is. Visuals of bodies lying outside the place of post mortem and of the kin desperate for help, as well as an inadequate number of ambulances and medical staff have become the common features of such tragedies. What has made it worse is the preacher and his aides reportedly leaving the site even as panic-stricken people were dying.

Crowd Disasters- Reasons

- ❖ **Structural:**
  - ☛ Collapse of Improper/ unauthorised structures or bridge collapse due to panic triggered by rumours
  - ☛ **Difficult terrain- Muddy area/ hill top**
  - ☛ Narrow streets with very few entry/exits
  - ☛ Absence of emergency exits.
- ❖ **Crowd Control:**
  - ☛ **More than anticipated crowd at public gatherings (**There are reports that there were over 2.5 lakh participants at the venue, which could accommodate no more than 80,000.**)**
  - ☛ Underestimation of audience
  - ☛ Closed/locked exit, Sudden opening of entry door
  - ☛ Lack of adequate and strong railings
  - ☛ Lack of proper public address system to control the crowd etc.

- ❖ **Crowd Behaviour:**
  - ☞ A rush to reach towards entrance/exits
  - ☞ **Rush to reach/look at/touch the diety/ influential person**
  - ☞ Free distribution of gifts
  - ☞ Last minute change in platform for train arrival/departure resulting in lots of movements within short period of time etc.
- ❖ **Security:**
  - ☞ Under security staff and deployment of untrained staff
  - ☞ Inadequate rehearsals
  - ☞ **Ineptitude of the police/management in effectively managing the crowd**

What needs to be done?

- ❖ **Safety insurance** by the government
- ❖ Technology: **CCTV**, mobile control room with remote connectivity, drones for roof level surveillance and public address system
- ❖ Pre Evaluation: There should be proper evaluation of the capacity of a venue or structure before holding public gatherings.
- ❖ **Behaviour Management:** Emerging researches show that crowd behaviour in a given situation can be different, and less rational. There should public address system, whereby officials can stop rumours from getting out of hand.
- ❖ **Penalties:** Stricter penalties can ensure compliance. Certification and training of private security agencies should also be ensured.
- ❖ **Legislation/Rules and Regulations**: Supreme Court in Uphaar Cinema Tragedy observed that there is a need for a comprehensive legislation.

Smart Cities Mission period extended till March 2025

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

The Centre has extended the Smart Cities Mission (SCM) under the Union Urban Development Ministry till March 31, 2025.

Under the SCM, launched in June 2015, 100 cities were chosen through a competition to be developed as smart cities. The mission envisions developing areas within selected cities in the country as model areas based on an area development plan, which is expected to have a rub-off effect on other parts of the city and nearby cities and towns.

More than 8,000 multi-sectoral projects are being developed by the 100 cities amounting to around ₹1.6 lakh crore under the SCM.

As on July 3, the 100 cities have completed 7,188 projects (90% of total pro-

Under the SCM, 100 cities were chosen through a competition to be developed as smart cities.

jects) amounting to ₹1,44,237 crore as part of the mission.

The balance 830 projects amounting to ₹19,926 crore are also in advanced stages of completion, an official statement said on Wednesday.

The mission has an allocated a budget of ₹48,000 crore for the 100 cities. As on date, ₹46,585 crore or 97% of the allocated budget has been released.

Out of these funds released to the cities, 93% have been utilised as on date.

"The mission has been getting multiple requests from some States/city government representatives to grant some more time to complete the balance 10% projects. These balance ongoing projects are in advanced stage of implementation and got delayed due to various on-ground conditions. Taking cognisance of these requests, the Government of India has extended the mission period up to March 31, 2025 to complete these balance 10% projects," the statement said.

This extension has been informed to the cities that it would be without any additional cost, beyond the already approved financial allocation under the mission.

❖ The **Union Ministry of Urban Development** is responsible for implementing the mission in collaboration with the state governments of the respective cities.

❖ The mission that was to be completed in 2020, was given two extensions till June 2024.

Business Model of Governance:

❖ To make the mission effective, a business model of governance was adopted **bypassing the existing models of city governance** in the country.

❖ An **SPV (special purpose vehicle) led by a bureaucrat or a representative of an MNC,** and other major stakeholders was created and registered under the **Companies Act.** The elected council, thus, had little role in the governance structure.

The SCM had two main aspects:

❖ **Area-based development** consisting of three components —
  (a) redevelopment (city renewal)
  (b) retrofitting (city improvement), and
  (c) green field projects (city extension)

❖ These further comprised some six categories that would include **e-governance, waste management, water management, energy management, urban mobility, and skill development.** Around ₹2 lakh crore was kept aside for the mission, with **public-private partnerships** (PPP) an important driver of the same.

❖ Pan-city solutions based on ICT

Smart City Mission- Issues:

❖ The selection of 100 cities on a competitive basis was flawed due to the **diversity in existing urban realities**. The scheme did not take account of ground realities of urban India — the **urbanisation here is dynamic and not static like the West.**

❖ The SCM became an **exclusionary scheme** wherein not more than 1% of a city's geographical area was selected for development. For example, Chandigarh which received ₹196 crore in the first round under the SCM spent it on smart water meters, a Wi-Fi zone, and solid waste management programmes all ploughed into one pocket-sector 43.

❖ SPV model designed for smart cities was not aligned with the 74th Constitutional Amendment (Introduced Urban Local Bodies), which led to many cities objecting to the governance structure.

❖ Urban India, according to the World Bank has **more than 49% of the population living in slums.** In the name of executing smart city projects, there was displacement of people living in poorer localities.

An overview of the French elections

Why did French President Emmanuel Macron decide to dissolve parliament and call for snap elections? How did the far-right National Rally become so popular? How are the two rounds of elections conducted in France? Why have left-wing parties also formed a bloc?

EXPLAINER

Joan Sony Cherian

The story so far:

The first phase of the French elections conducted on June 30, after President Emmanuel Macron's sudden decision to dissolve parliament, has placed the far-right National Rally (RN) and its allies in the lead with a 33% vote share. The New Popular Front, a left-wing coalition, came second with 28%, while Mr. Macron's centrist bloc got only 20.7% of the vote share. The second phase will be held on July 7.

Why elections now?

On June 9, Mr. Macron stated that he was dissolving parliament, three years too soon, observing that "France needs a clear majority if it is to act in serenity and harmony". This announcement came after his bloc's devastating defeat at the hands of the RN in the European Parliament elections. While the decision came as a shock to most of his party members and allies, Marine Le Pen, the RN leader, welcomed the decision, claiming, "we're ready for it".

Experts say Mr. Macron's decision was an attempt to stop the rise of the RN. His gamble was that the French public, faced with the choice of having a far-right party in power, would consolidate against the right-wing wave. However, if that was indeed the reasoning, it seems as if Mr. Macron placed the wrong bet. Almost all opinion polls by major outlets were predicting a lead for the RN (but short of an absolute majority), while Mr. Macron's approval ratings hit rock-bottom to 36%, as per a Toluna-Harris Interactive poll.

The sudden call for elections and the high stakes involved in the race has energised the electorate, with the Interior Ministry stating that 59.4% of registered voters had cast a ballot as of 5 p.m. on June 30, as compared to the 39.4% at the same time two years ago.

How are elections in France conducted?

There are 577 seats in the French parliament, which include 13 overseas districts and 11 constituencies that represent French citizens abroad. So to hold an absolute majority in parliament, a party needs 289 seats.

The first phase of the elections is equivalent to a qualifying round wherein candidates must at least get 12.5% of locally registered votes in order to stay in the race and not get eliminated. If a candidate gets more than half of the total votes cast in the first round itself, they will automatically win. If not, candidates who have met the qualifying criteria will move on to the second phase. At this stage of the elections, 'horse-trading' is a common practice wherein parties form blocs among themselves and drop candidates in constituencies which may split the vote and favour a rival party/alliance.

The 2024 snap elections are mainly a three-way battle between the RN and its allies, the New Popular Front, the left-wing coalition which include the Socialists, the Greens, the Communists and France Unbowed, and Ensemble, which is Mr. Macron's bloc.

What is at stake?

The RN, founded as the National Front (FN), was established by Ms. Le Pen's father, Jean Marie Le Pen. The FN was an offshoot of a fascist organisation created as a reaction against the Algerian war, the formation of the Fifth French republic and the protests of May 1968 in France.

However, under Ms. Le Pen, the party has undergone a significant rebranding wherein she has sought to whitewash the party's fascist roots as well as her father's Holocaust denial and anti-Semitism. By changing the name of the party from FN to RN, Ms. Le Pen also softened the organisation's once hardcore policies such as leaving the EU and opting out of the euro, the region's currency. Additionally, ever since the Russia-Ukraine war and the subsequent energy crisis, the party has actively distanced itself from Russian President Vladimir Putin with whom Ms. Le Pen once kept close ties.

However, in other aspects, the RN is as far-right as it always was. The policy of 'national priority', which the RN espouses, gives French citizens the first choice when it comes to social housing, employment and social benefits – a scheme which goes against the French Constitution. Similarly, the RN is completely opposed to immigration. It calls for the deportation of all 'illegal' immigrants and strict border controls, and characterises immigrants as destroying the 'European way of life'. The party has also promised to abolish citizenship by birth to children born to parents of foreign descent.

Thus, the RN has risen to popularity within the French republic due to fears of culture clashes, a cost-of-living crisis and Mr. Macron's unpopular policies such as increasing the age of retirement. It increased its seat share in the French

A polarised nation: People hold up a sign which reads "All anti-fascists" as a protest against the National Rally party, following partial results in the first round of the elections at the Place de la Republique in Paris, France on June 30. REUTERS

parliament from seven to 89 in 2022 and now hopes for it to jump as high as anywhere between 240 to 300 seats. Moreover, the party has also been able to tap into the electorate in the provincial towns and villages of southern France, mostly composed of blue-collar workers who have often felt neglected by the political elites of Paris.

Mr. Macron's political gamble could potentially lead to France being ruled by a far-right party for the first time since the end of the Second World War. Already there have been reports of a rise in racist attacks, along with anti-far-right protests in many parts of Paris on June 30, some of which ended in violence and arson. The political uncertainty has stoked fear in immigrants and minority communities, particularly among Muslim groups who have often been attacked by the RN.

What happens next?

As the date for registering the final list of candidates who will be contesting from various constituencies is over, more than 200 candidates from the centre and left alliances have dropped out of the race in order to consolidate votes against the RN.

The sudden formation of the New Popular front (a reference to the 1936 Popular Front where Socialists and Communists allied against far-right rioters), is part of a practice known as the "republican front", wherein centrist and left parties' team up to keep right-wing parties out of power. However, whether the 'front' will hold this time is

questionable, especially considering the presence of leftist leader Jean-Luc Mélenchon, a controversial figure who was accused of anti-Semitism by his rivals.

The president of the RN and its Prime Ministerial candidate, Jordan Bardella, has stated that he won't enter into an alliance with any of the other blocs. He said he didn't want to be the "President's assistant" and that he would rather be a 'cohabitation Prime Minister' as accorded by the French Constitution. A cohabitation is where the President is part of one party and Parliament is ruled by a party not of the President's. Here, domestic policy is governed by the Prime Minister and his Cabinet while defence and foreign policy are handled by the President's office. Mr. Bardella, like his patron Ms. Le Pen, promises that he would prioritise French citizens and bring more purchasing power into their hands by reducing VAT on essential products such as fuel, food, etc.

The last time a snap election was called was in 1997, when centre-right President Jacques Chirac dissolved the National Assembly to consolidate his party's dominance after a slew of unpopular policies surrounding fiscal austerity. However, his gamble backfired as a new left-wing government came to power inadvertently entering him into a cohabitation alliance. By next week, one would know whether Mr. Macron's decision will also go the same way, and whether his party will be, as Ms. Le Pen stated, "wiped out" by the RN.

French Elections:

- ❖ Three Prominent Parties or bloc in France
  - ☞ Far-right National Rally (RN)
  - ☞ New Popular Front, the left-wing coalition
  - ☞ Mr. Emmanuel Macron's centrist bloc (Renaissance)
- ❖ Story —Rise in Right wing influence , so Mr Macron called **snap elections** for parliament 3 year ahead.
- ❖ Snap elections are elections called before the set time.

An Overview of French Election

- ❖ **French Political System**
  - ☞ France is a **semi-presidential**, representative parliamentary democracy, with **clearly defined roles for the President and the Prime Minister.**
  - ☞ **Bicameral Legislature: National Assembly and Senate**
  - ☞ The **National Assembly is the Council of Ministers**' superior.
  - ☞ The premier(PM) must offer the resignation of the government to the President when the National Assembly passes a vote of censure or rejects the government's programme or statement of general policy.
  - ☞ On the other hand, the President is in charge of both the government and the state.
  - ☞ He has significant legislative, financial, and judicial authority
  - ☞ He is the military's chief of staff. He **has the power to oust the National Assembly.**

The President:

- ❖ **The President,** elected for a term of five years, serves as the head of the state and Commander of the Armed Forces.
- ❖ Enjoys **regulatory power**, exercising **control of all decisions on matters of foreign policy and defence.**
- ❖ Until 2000, the President enjoyed seven-year terms, which was then reduced to five-year terms.
- ❖ The President **can be impeached** by the Parliament for willfully violating the Constitution or the national laws.

Prime Minister/The premier

- ❖ In contrast, the parliament, headed by the Prime Minister, is responsible for **all domestic policy decisions.**
- ❖ The Prime Minister himself cannot be dismissed by the President, but his resignation can be requested.

Cohabitation or Double Headed Executive:

- ❖ The **French PM,** unlike that in India and Britain, is **assistant to the President.** There is a **division of functions**, rather than the division of power between the two positions.
- ❖ This can lead to **Cohabitation or double headed executive:**
  - ☞ This system can lead to situations where the French legislature is dominated by a coalition/party opposing the President.
  - ☞ Cohabitation is very rare in France, and has historically been marred with controversy. There have only been three such instances.

Similarities:

- India and France **both have written constitution**.
- It has been noted that **governments elect heads during their separate mandates** in both the French and Indian constitutions.
- Under the terms of the French and Indian Constitutions, the **amendments** may be passed with more than 50 percent **majority.**
- India and France **both** have elected heads of state and are **republics.**
- The constitutions of France and India **both contain provisions for the imposition of emergency power.**
- **Fundamental Rights are enshrined in both** constitutions.

Differences:

- **India is Federal** Democratic Republic whereas **France is Unitary** and **semi presidential type.**
- France is Unitary with Centralized power whereas in India we have division of powers under article 246 of the constitution (Union State and Concurrent)
- France president elected by direct vote ,in India indirectly by Electoral College
- Unlike India, **France has Two round of election System**
- French Constitution emphasizes secularism (**negative secularism**: **Complete separation** between State and Religion); India adopts a more positive approach accommodating diverse religious practices (state promotes all religions).
- The **Indian President holds a more ceremonial role** with limited powers, while the **French President possesses more substantial executive authority**. This reflects the semi-presidential system in France.