



EVERYDAY CURRENT AFFAIRS – MAY 18, 2026

NATIONAL

His Tamil pride helped the return of Chola plates

- The return of the centuries-old Anaimangalam copper plates from the Netherlands has drawn attention to the behind-the-scenes efforts of one man – researcher and documentary filmmaker Hemanth Thiru – whose work is learnt to have played a major role in strengthening the case for their restitution.
- The copper plates, associated with the reigns of Rajaraja Chola and Rajendra Chola, had remained in the Netherlands for nearly 300 years and were preserved at Leiden University. Their return to India was officially announced during Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit there, marking a major moment in the recovery of India's cultural heritage.
- Hemanth, who travelled to Leiden University in 2023 to document and study the copper plates, described the development as an emotional milestone. According to him, the visit had left a deep impact and strengthened his determination to see the artefacts returned to Tamil Nadu, which he called "their rightful home."
- Following his return from the Netherlands, Hemanth said he actively explored ways to support the retrieval process. He held discussions with legal experts, researchers and historians while also consulting noted epigraphist and archaeologist Santhalingam on the historical significance of the plates.

India, Netherlands ink 17 pacts; stress on defence, minerals

- Driven by shifting global geopolitics, India and the Netherlands elevated their ties to a strategic partnership and inked 17 agreements to boost cooperation in defence, critical minerals and other key sectors during talks between Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his Dutch counterpart Rob Jetten.
- the two Prime Ministers expressed deep concern over the situation in West Asia, especially its serious implications for the region and beyond in view of disruptions caused to the global energy supplies and trade networks.
- Modi and Jetten also called for freedom of navigation and global flow of commerce through the Strait of Hormuz, while opposing any “restrictive” measures, and reaffirmed their support for ongoing initiatives in this regard.
- The two leaders also discussed the situation in Ukraine - marked by the ongoing conflict with Russia and regional security developments.
- As he left for Sweden on Sunday, Modi said in a social media post: “My Netherlands visit has added new momentum to India-Netherlands ties. From elevating our relationship to a strategic partnership to expanding cooperation in water resources, semiconductors, innovation, defence, sustainability and mobility, we have charted an ambitious roadmap for the future,” the Prime Minister said.
- Following the Modi-Jetten talks in The Hague on Saturday, India and the Netherlands unveiled a “strategic partnership roadmap” to boost ties in trade and investment, defence and security, critical and emerging technologies. The two leaders also launched an ambitious “India-Netherlands roadmap on the development of green hydrogen”.
- Modi and Jetten agreed to explore possibilities of establishing a defence industrial roadmap to ensure joint manufacturing of defence equipment, systems, components and other key capabilities through transfer of technology and setting up of joint ventures.

Why Indian Gur Is Becoming a Global Alternative to Refined Sugar

- India produces over 70% of the world’s jaggery (gur), with 20-30% of sugarcane output used for jaggery, supporting nearly 2.5 million rural livelihoods through farming, processing, transport and micro-enterprises.

- India's jaggery exports surged from USD 197 million (2015-16) to USD 406.8 million (2024-25), with major buyers including Indonesia, USA, UAE, Nigeria and Nepal, reflecting rising global demand.
- Viewed as a healthier alternative to refined sugar, jaggery retains minerals like Iron, Calcium, Magnesium and Potassium, earning recognition as "medicinal sugar" among health-conscious consumers worldwide.
- With roots in the Vedic period, India's jaggery sector is strengthened through schemes like PMFME, PM Kisan SAMPADA, ODOP, AGMARK and GI tagging, including Kolhapur, Muzaffarnagar and Marayoor Jaggery.

President Approves Increase in Supreme Court Judge Strength from 34 to 38

- Droupadi Murmu approved an ordinance increasing the Supreme Court of India judge strength from 34 to 38, including the Chief Justice of India, aiming to improve judicial efficiency and speed up disposal of pending cases.
- The amendment, confirmed by Arjun Ram Meghwal, was implemented through The Supreme Court (Number of Judges) Amendment Ordinance, 2026, after earlier approval by the Union Cabinet led by Narendra Modi on 5 May 2026.
- The increase is expected to reduce workload pressure on judges, enable faster constitution of benches, quicker hearings and more timely justice delivery amid rising litigation and complex constitutional matters in India.
- Under Article 124(1) of the Constitution, Parliament can determine Supreme Court strength, which has gradually risen from 10 judges in 1956 to 37 judges excluding the CJI in 2026, with expenses funded through the Consolidated Fund of India.

TRADE IN TROUBLED TIMES

- North America, NorthEast Asia, and Latin America together accounted for over 35% of India's merchandise exports, reflecting a gradual shift towards a more diversified and resilient global trade structure
- \$441.78bn india's merchandise exports in 2025-26 - 0.93% Growth over the Previous Year
- \$97.7bn to North America - 22.1% of exports , 1.3% Growth
- \$41.6bn to North-East Asia - 9.4% of exports , 21.6% Growth
- \$16.4bn to Latin America - 3.7% of exports , 7.8% Growth

- \$12.6bn to East Africa – 2.9% of exports , 13.7% Growth
- \$8bn to North Africa – 1.8% of exports , 14.8% Growth
- \$774.98bn Merchandise imports during FY26 (as compared to \$721.20bn during FY25)

STATE

Sikkim to Implement Anand Marriage Act, 1909 from June 1, 2026

- The Sikkim government will implement the Anand Marriage Act, 1909 from 1 June 2026, allowing Sikh couples to legally register marriages conducted through the traditional Anand Karaj ceremony under a dedicated Sikh legal framework.
- The move became possible after the notification of the Sikkim Anand Marriage Registration Rules, 2026, ending the long-standing practice where many Sikh couples had to register marriages under the Hindu Marriage Act, 1955 due to lack of separate state rules.
- The implementation provides Sikh marriages with clearer legal recognition, easier documentation and stronger acknowledgment of Sikh religious and cultural traditions, including ceremonies conducted before the Guru Granth Sahib in Gurudwaras.
- The reform gained momentum after the Supreme Court of India highlighted administrative gaps in the Amanjot Singh Chadha vs Union of India case in September 2025 and urged states to establish proper registration systems for Anand Karaj marriages.

IMPORTANT DAYS

World AIDS Vaccine Day 2026

- World AIDS Vaccine Day 2026 is observed on 18 May to raise awareness about the urgent need for an effective HIV vaccine and to honour scientists, healthcare workers, researchers and volunteers fighting the global AIDS epidemic.
- Also known as HIV Vaccine Awareness Day, the observance began after a 1997 speech by Bill Clinton, who stressed that only a preventive vaccine could significantly reduce the threat posed by HIV/AIDS.

- Developing an HIV vaccine remains extremely challenging because the virus mutates rapidly, attacks the immune system directly and can hide within human cells, making long-term immunity difficult to achieve.
- Researchers are currently exploring advanced approaches such as mRNA technology, broadly neutralising antibodies (bNAbs), T-cell immunity and mosaic vaccines, while global estimates from World Health Organization indicate that nearly 40 million people continue to live with HIV worldwide.

