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November 5, 2026 - Dinamani Newspaper - Tit bits

1. US Midterm Elections: President Trump's Republican Party Suffers Defeat

- The Republican Party of US President Donald Trump suffered a major defeat in the US midterm elections. The main opposition Democratic Party secured a landslide victory and captured control of both Houses of Congress. The election results dealt a significant political setback to Trump.

(i) Conduct of the Midterm Elections

- Midterm elections were held on Tuesday for all 435 seats in the US House of Representatives (Lower House), 35 seats in the Senate (Upper House), 36 gubernatorial positions, and certain local government posts.

(ii) Significance of the Elections

- The midterm elections were held halfway through President Donald Trump's term and were crucial in determining the majority in both Houses of Congress.
- Around 21 crore (210 million) people were eligible to vote in these elections.
- Vote counting began immediately after polling concluded, and the results were announced.

(iii) Republican Party Suffers a Major Defeat

- President Trump's Republican Party suffered a major defeat in the elections.
- The Democratic Party needed 218 seats to secure a majority in the House of Representatives, which has a total of 435 seats.
- The Democrats won 234 seats, while Trump's Republican Party secured only 139 seats.
- Results for 62 seats were yet to be declared.
- Consequently, the House of Representatives came under the control of the Democratic Party.

(iv) Results in the Senate

- Of the 35 Senate seats contested, the Democratic Party won 20 seats, while the Republican Party secured 13 seats.
- Vote counting for two seats was still underway.

(v) Democratic Majority in the Senate

- With 50 seats required for a majority in the Senate, the number of Democratic members increased to 54.
- The Republican Party had only 44 members in the Senate.

(vi) Congress Comes Under Democratic Party Control

- In the US midterm elections, the ruling Republican Party lost its majority in both Houses of Congress, while the Democratic Party secured a majority.
- As a result of this electoral victory, both Houses of Congress came under the control of the Democratic Party.
- This defeat does not require Trump to resign from the Presidency. However, he may find it difficult to take independent decisions during the remaining two years of his term.
- Securing Congressional approval for his decisions is likely to become increasingly difficult.
- Congress has the power to legislate and approve the release of funds to Government departments.
- Therefore, Trump may find it difficult to function independently or implement decisions without the support of the opposition Democratic Party.
- The newly elected members of Congress are scheduled to assume office on January 3, 2027.

2. The Union Cabinet approved a two-year extension of service for Agniveers recruited into the three Armed Forces under the Agnipath Scheme. It also approved an opportunity for permanent recruitment, subject to specified eligibility conditions and the individual's willingness.

(i) Major Changes to the Agnipath Scheme

- Through these significant changes, the service period of Agniveers will be extended from four years to six years.
- The revised scheme also creates an opportunity for a greater number of Agniveers to secure permanent appointments in the Armed Forces.

(ii) Background to the Revision

- Around 18,000 personnel recruited under the Agnipath Scheme were due to complete their four-year service and leave the Armed Forces by the end of the following month.
- Against this backdrop, the government decided to revise the scheme.

(iii) Introduction of the Agnipath Scheme

- The Agnipath Scheme, which recruits personnel into the Indian Armed Forces on a four-year contractual basis, was implemented in June 2022.
- Under the scheme, candidates aged between 17½ and 21 years are recruited as Agniveers.
- According to the original provisions, 25% of Agniveers completing their four-year service period would be retained in the Armed Forces.
- The remaining personnel would have to leave military service.
- This provision attracted strong opposition from various sections, including opposition parties.
- Large-scale violent protests were also organised against the scheme.

(iv) Extension of Service for Agniveers

- Approximately 18,000 Agniveers recruited under the scheme were due to complete their service and leave the Armed Forces by the end of the following month.
- The scheme is now being revised to provide them with an additional two years of service.

(v) Union Cabinet Approval

- The approval for these changes was granted at a Union Cabinet meeting chaired by Prime Minister Narendra Modi in New Delhi.

3. Union Cabinet Approves Expansion of Fast Track Special Courts and Other Major Development Initiatives

The Union Cabinet approved an increase in the number of Fast Track Special Courts dealing with cases involving sexual offences against women and children from 779 to 850. It also approved measures to strengthen these courts.

(i) Fast Track Special Courts for Women and Children

- Following a Supreme Court directive, the scheme for establishing Fast Track Special Courts to deal with cases involving sexual offences against women and children was launched in 2019.
- So far, more than 4 lakh cases have been disposed of through these special courts.
- These include rape cases and cases registered under the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act.

(ii) Extension of the Scheme Until March 2031

- At a Union Cabinet meeting chaired by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, approval was granted to:
    - Extend the Fast Track Special Courts scheme until March 2031.
    - Increase the number of courts from the existing 799 to 850.
- Union Information and Broadcasting Minister Ashwini Vaishnaw made the following announcements to the media:

Key announcements:

- The Central Government is committed to dealing firmly with crimes against women and children.
- Accordingly, the Government has decided to continue the Fast Track Special Courts scheme until 2031 with a financial allocation of ₹3,788 crore.
- Of this amount, the Central Government will contribute ₹2,353 crore from the Nirbhaya Fund.
- The remaining amount will be contributed by the State Governments and Union Territory administrations.

- The Department of Justice under the Union Ministry of Law and Justice will monitor the effective implementation of the scheme in coordination with the State Governments.

(iii) ₹14,500 Crore Scheme for Electricity Storage

- The Union Cabinet approved a scheme with an estimated outlay of ₹14,500 crore to provide financial support for large-scale energy storage, with the objective of accelerating the integration of renewable energy generation into the national power grid.

Key features:

- The scheme will be implemented until 2030–31.
- It will provide financial support for the following energy storage systems:
    - Battery Energy Storage Systems (BESS) with a capacity of 30 GWh.
    - Pumped Storage Projects (PSPs) with a capacity of 60 GW.
    - Advanced energy storage technology projects with a capacity of 2 GW.
- These initiatives are expected to strengthen India's renewable energy integration and electricity storage infrastructure.

(iv) Improvement of the Statistical System

- The Union Cabinet approved a scheme with a financial allocation of ₹4,371 crore to improve India's official statistical system.

Key features:

- The scheme is titled 'Statistics for Viksit Bharat: Development, Analysis and Research' (VISTAR).
- It will be implemented until 2030–31.
- According to Union Minister Ashwini Vaishnaw:
    - The scheme aims to ensure greater accuracy in statistical data.
    - It seeks to modernise and strengthen the country's overall statistical system.
    - It will make the statistical framework more responsive to future requirements.

(v) ₹2,814 Crore Scheme to Promote the Extraction of Critical Minerals

- The Union Cabinet approved a capital support scheme with a financial allocation of ₹2,814 crore to encourage domestic extraction of critical minerals such as lithium and nickel.

Key features:

- The scheme will be implemented until 2030–31.
- It aims to establish four mineral extraction plants:
    - Two lithium extraction plants.
    - Two nickel extraction plants.
- Capital subsidies covering up to 30% of the investment will be provided for establishing these plants.
- The maximum financial assistance will be:
    - Lithium extraction plant: Up to ₹500 crore.
    - Nickel extraction plant: Up to ₹900 crore.

Significance:

- Critical minerals are essential for economic growth, national security and modern technologies.
- India currently depends heavily on foreign countries to meet its demand for critical minerals.
- The scheme aims to strengthen domestic mineral extraction capacity and reduce dependence on imports.
- Union Minister Ashwini Vaishnaw highlighted the importance of the scheme, which was also welcomed by Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

4. SC upholds 1974 ruling backing states' power to levy additional sales tax

(i) Supreme Court 7-Judge Bench Verdict

- A 7-judge Constitution Bench of the Supreme Court unanimously held on Wednesday that its 1974 verdict confirming State Governments' power to levy

additional sales tax under the old tax regime remains valid.

- The bench was headed by Chief Justice Surya Kant and included Justices K.V. Viswanathan, S.V.N. Bhatti, Jayamalya Bagchi, N.V. Anjaria, Arun Palli, and V. Mohana.
- Chief Justice Surya Kant authored the primary opinion on behalf of himself and five colleagues, while Justice K.V. Viswanathan authored a separate concurring opinion agreeing with the decision.

(ii) Core Legal Ruling & State Taxing Powers

- The court ruled that an additional tax calculated on the basis of payable sales tax merely increases the rate of sales tax rather than taxing a trader's income.
- The judgment reaffirmed that state legislatures hold constitutional authority under Entry 54 of List II (State List) in the Seventh Schedule to impose an additional sales tax or surcharge.
- The bench rejected arguments by traders claiming that additional sales tax constitutes an income tax falling under Parliament's exclusive domain under Entry 82 of List I (Union List).

(iii) Historical Case Background & The 1999 Odisha Law

- The 1974 Benchmark Case: In the landmark 1974 S. Koder v. State of Kerala case, a 5-judge Constitution Bench established that State Governments have constitutional powers to impose an additional tax or surcharge on traders' regular sales tax.
- The Odisha Government passed a tax amendment in 1999 levying an additional 10% tax on traders with an annual turnover of ₹10 lakh to ₹1 crore, and 15% on traders with a turnover exceeding ₹1 crore.
- Traders challenged the Odisha law in the Supreme Court, pointing out conflicting interpretations across past rulings and questioning state jurisdiction, which prompted the reference to a 7-judge bench 27 years ago.

(iv) Impact of GST Implementation & Redundancy

- The Supreme Court noted that the rollout of the Goods and Services Tax (GST) in 2017 completely transformed India's tax legal framework.
- Because challenged provisions were amended or repealed under GST, examining the questions referred to the larger bench 27 years ago has become practically redundant.
- During hearings in September, Solicitor General Tushar Mehta stated on behalf of the Central Government that the 2017 GST implementation resolved most of the underlying tax controversy, leaving very few issues pending.

5. Astronomical events are not an aesthetic spectacle!

(i) Celestial Event Overview & Timing

- A rare celestial occultation of Jupiter by the Moon occurred in the early morning hours of November 3.
- Jupiter, the largest planet in the solar system, passed behind Earth's natural satellite (the Moon) for a few minutes before re-emerging from behind the lunar disk.
- Stargazers began observing the phenomenon from approximately 2:00 AM IST onwards on November 3.
- The exact duration and visual appearance of the occultation varied depending on the observer's geographic position on Earth.

(ii) Regional Visibility Across Tamil Nadu

- In northern and central districts of Tamil Nadu—including Chennai, Tiruchirappalli, and Thanjavur—stargazers were unable to view the event directly due to early morning rain and cloud cover.
- In southern districts such as Tirunelveli, favorable weather enabled enthusiasts to observe the event clearly using telescopes and binoculars.
- The observation underscored the significant impact of local weather, atmospheric clarity, and light pollution on visual astronomical events.

(iii) Jovian Moons & Scientific Characteristics

- High-powered telescopes also allowed observers to track the staggered occultation and reappearance of Jupiter's four major Galilean moons, discovered by Galileo Galilei in 1610:
    - Io: Characterized by intense volcanic activity.
    - Europa: Believed to harbor a liquid water ocean beneath its icy crust.
    - Ganymede: The largest moon in the solar system, exceeding the planet Mercury in size.
    - Callisto: An ancient moon marked by numerous meteor impact craters.
- Tracking the distinct occultation times of each moon helps astronomers study their individual orbital paths and dynamics.

(iv) Key Astronomical Takeaways

- The event demonstrated how an observer's location on Earth affects the visual perspective of lunar occultations, where some regions experience a full occultation while others observe a close conjunction.
- Astronomers highlighted the necessity of checking local weather forecasts in addition to astronomical calculations when planning stargazing observations.
- The event served as a practical example of how celestial phenomena act as natural laboratories for understanding the physical laws of the universe.