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Nudges From the Court, Silence from the Commission

Context

The Supreme Court of India has recently raised serious concerns over the **Special Intensive Revision (SIR)** of electoral rolls being conducted in **Bihar**. While the **Election Commission of India (ECI)** portrays this as a routine update, the methodology and implications suggest a deeper issue that threatens the integrity of India's democratic system.

Key Concern: From Inclusion to Exclusion

Break from Democratic Tradition

India's electoral system has historically followed a **presumption of inclusion**—citizens were considered eligible voters unless proven otherwise.

However, the **Bihar SIR marks a reversal**, requiring **fresh documentary proof of citizenship** such as:

- **Birth certificates**
- **Passports**

These documents must be submitted **within just one month**, or individuals risk being **removed from the electoral rolls**.

Shift in Administrative Philosophy

- The stated aim is to improve accuracy, but the **underlying shift is ideological**—moving from **facilitating** voting to **restricting** it through **bureaucratic hurdles**.
- For **marginalised groups**—the poor, illiterate, remote, or disaster-affected populations—producing these documents is nearly impossible.
- Common documents like **Aadhaar cards** and **ration cards**, widely held by the poor, are **not accepted**.
- **In Bihar alone, over 6.5 million people could be disenfranchised.**

A Violation of Constitutional Principles

Founding Vision

- India's commitment to **universal adult suffrage**, regardless of caste, gender, literacy, or wealth, was a landmark moral and political decision.
- Despite significant logistical challenges, the **first elections** in India were designed to be **inclusive** under the leadership of **Sukumar Sen**, the first Chief Election Commissioner.

Contemporary Deviation

- Under the leadership of the **current Chief Election Commissioner, Gyanesh Kumar**, the ECI appears to have **abandoned this inclusive legacy**.
- By mandating hard-to-obtain documentation, the voting process is no longer a **guaranteed right**, but a **privilege contingent on bureaucratic proof**.

Historical Parallels: Bureaucracy as a Tool of Suppression

The current developments draw comparisons with:

- The **Jim Crow era in the U.S.**, where African-Americans were disenfranchised through literacy tests and poll taxes.
- Though legal on paper, such systems were designed to **suppress marginalised communities**.

Judicial Precedents Ignored

- Supreme Court rulings like:
 - **Rahim Ali vs. State of Assam (2024)**
 - **Lal Babu Hussein vs. Electoral Registration Officer (1995)**clearly **oppose arbitrary disenfranchisement**.

- Yet, current practices often ignore the spirit of these judgments, prioritising **technical compliance** over **constitutional morality**.

Wider Implications: A Slow-Moving Constitutional Crisis

What is occurring is **not just administrative negligence**, but what could be termed a “**quiet emergency**”:

- There is **no open suspension of democracy**, but millions are **silently excluded**.
- The state is **weaponising documentation and deadlines**, making the **right to vote conditional** on navigating **complex systems**.

This **gradual erosion of democratic rights** requires immediate and broad-based resistance—by the **judiciary, civil society, and citizens**.

Judicial Role: Time for Assertive Action

- The **Supreme Court's questioning** of the ECI is a **positive step**.
- However, in the face of such a systemic threat, **passive nudges are inadequate**.
- The judiciary must now **intervene decisively** to uphold the **constitutional guarantee of universal suffrage**.

The Broader Picture: Reclaiming the Republic

Historian **Ornit Shani** reminds us that India's adoption of universal franchise was **not a mere administrative act**, but a **moral and political milestone**.

Voting as a Right, Not a Privilege

- Voting must not become a **license issued by bureaucrats**, but a **symbol of citizenship**.
- The shift from **presumed inclusion** to **presumptive exclusion** challenges the very idea of democratic belonging.

Marginalised Communities at Risk

- In a deeply unequal society, voting is often the **only form of empowerment** for marginalised groups.
- If the right to vote is tied to documents they don't possess, it becomes an **exclusive privilege** of the urban, educated, and well-documented elite.

Conclusion: A Fight for Democratic Survival

This issue is not just about updating voter rolls—it is a **struggle over power**:

- **Who holds it**
- **Who gets to claim it**
- **Who gets shut out**

If these exclusionary practices go unchecked, India risks **becoming a democracy in form, not in substance**.

Call to Action

- The **ECI must be reminded** of its constitutional responsibility: **to enable, not obstruct**, electoral participation.
- The **Supreme Court must act boldly**, and
- **Citizens must reclaim their right to vote** as an **unquestionable birthright**, not a **privilege granted through paperwork**.

Transforming Early Childhood Care and Education

Context

The **National Education Policy (NEP) 2020** represents a significant shift in India's educational approach, especially concerning **Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE)**.

Historically, early education in India has suffered from inequity and limited public-sector access. By formally integrating ECCE into government schools, the NEP aims to bring structural reform—enhancing both equity and quality in foundational learning.

NEP 2020's Vision: Correcting Long-Standing Gaps

Previous Scenario

- Until now, **government schools admitted children only from Class 1**.
- Children aged **3–6 years** were largely served by **Anganwadi centres**, which prioritized **nutrition and care** but lacked structured educational content.
- In contrast, **private schools offered nursery programs**, providing a head start to more privileged children and **reinforcing socio-economic disparities**.

NEP's Objective

- To **bridge this gap**, NEP proposes integrating **Balvatika (preschool classes 1, 2, and 3)** within the formal school system.
- The goal is the **universalisation of ECCE by 2030**, levelling the playing field for children across socio-economic backgrounds.

Three Structural Shifts in ECCE Implementation

1. Expansion of ECCE Infrastructure

- The first change involves a **systematic expansion** of ECCE facilities within public schools.
- Previously, ECCE was limited to about **14 lakh Anganwadi centres**.
- Now, with support from **Samagra Shiksha**, states and UTs are establishing preschool classes in schools.

However:

- **Implementation is uneven**—some states are behind in setting up or operationalising these classrooms.
- Success depends on the **training, recruitment, and support of ECCE educators**. Without well-prepared personnel, the expansion risks being superficial.

2. Migration from Anganwadis to Schools

- A growing number of parents are choosing **government schools over Anganwadis** for their children's early education.
- This preference, seen in areas like **Dadra and Nagar Haveli and Daman and Diu**, is driven by the belief that schools offer a **better learning environment**.

Implications:

- Children aged **4–6 are leaving Anganwadis**, which may undermine their relevance for this age group.
- The Anganwadi system must **redefine its role** within the ECCE ecosystem.

Policy Initiatives:

- The **Ministry of Women and Child Development** has launched **Poshan Bhi Padhai Bhi**, promoting a **combined approach to nutrition and education**.
- Yet, ground-level challenges persist:
 - **Training and support** for Anganwadi workers remain inadequate.
 - There is a risk that **schools may over-academicise preschool**, focusing on rote learning rather than **play-based, age-appropriate methods**.

3. Reorienting Anganwadis Towards the 0–3 Age Group

- The most transformative change could be a **redefinition of Anganwadis' focus** towards **infants (0–3 years)** and their caregivers.
- This could involve **structured home visits** by Anganwadi workers.

Supporting Evidence:

- Studies like the **Perry Preschool Project** and the **Yale-Pratham study in Odisha** highlight the enormous developmental benefits of **intervention in the first three years**.

Current Limitations:

- Anganwadi workers are often **overburdened**, and typically focus on children who physically attend (3–6 years), neglecting home-based services for infants and toddlers.

Opportunity Ahead:

- As government schools assume responsibility for 3–6 year-olds, **Anganwadis could pivot to serve the 0–3 population** more effectively.
- This would involve:
 - **Home-based care**
 - Support for **pregnant and lactating women**
 - Enhanced focus on **nutrition, health, and cognitive stimulation** in the first 1,000 days

A **clear division of roles** between schools and Anganwadis, if thoughtfully executed, could **radically improve India's early childhood outcomes**.

Conclusion: A Cross-Sectoral Effort for Long-Term Transformation

The **NEP 2020** offers a visionary and equity-oriented roadmap for **revamping early childhood education**. However, the transformation will not occur automatically. Each structural shift—expansion, migration, and reorientation—introduces specific challenges:

- **Infrastructure gaps**
- **Educator training needs**
- **Changing parental expectations**
- **Policy clarity and coordination**

Key Success Factors:

- **Effective inter-departmental coordination** (between education, health, and nutrition sectors)
- **Empowerment of frontline workers**, especially Anganwadi workers and preschool educators
- **Responsive state- and district-level governance**

If these challenges are addressed with **intentionality and equity**, NEP's reforms could dramatically reduce **foundational learning disparities**, and help build a **healthier, more capable, and just India**.

India's Digital Sovereignty: The Overlooked Casualty in the India-UK Free Trade Agreement

Context: India-UK Free Trade Agreement (FTA)

The recently concluded **India-United Kingdom Free Trade Agreement (FTA)**, formally titled the **Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement (CETA)**, has been widely praised as a model for future trade deals.

While the Indian government has assured that **critical sectors like agriculture and labour-intensive manufacturing remain protected**, there has been **little attention**—both officially and in media discourse—to the **digital sector**, which holds immense strategic importance for India's national growth and autonomy.

This **omission raises concerns** over the long-term implications of the FTA for **India's digital sovereignty**—its ability to independently govern its digital infrastructure, data, and technology.

Key Digital Concessions in the India-UK FTA

1. Reversal on Source Code Disclosure

- India has **surrendered its right to demand pre-emptive access to source code** from foreign digital service providers.
- This is a **major policy reversal** from India's longstanding stance at international forums like the **World Trade Organization (WTO)**, where it supported the **regulatory right to inspect**

source codes to ensure **security, compliance, and safety**, especially in sensitive sectors like **telecom, AI, and healthcare**.

- Ironically, even the **United States**, a global advocate for banning source code disclosures in trade pacts, has recently begun **moderating its position** to align with domestic regulatory needs.
- India's move is thus not only unaligned with global trends but **weakens its digital regulatory autonomy**.

Misuse of Open Government Data Provisions

- The FTA includes a commitment to **non-discriminatory access for UK entities to India's "Open Government Data."**
- Traditionally, this term meant access to **public statistics and transparency-related datasets**, but in the digital age, **government-held data** has evolved into a **strategic economic and technological asset**, particularly for **AI development**.
- By offering access to this data, India risks:
 - **Compromising national security**;
 - **Losing competitive advantage** in emerging technologies;
 - And setting a **precedent** that treats sovereign data as a tradable commodity.
- Though the clause is **non-binding**, it may **erode India's ability to control or restrict access in future agreements**.

Undermining Future Data Policy through Consultative Clauses

- The FTA does **not fully concede** on critical digital issues such as **data localisation** or the **free flow of data**, but it does include a clause that **requires India to consult the UK** if similar concessions are granted to other nations.
- This clause creates **diplomatic and policy constraints**, weakening India's negotiating leverage in future trade talks.
- The inclusion of such a clause reflects a **gradual shift** away from India's assertive digital policy, especially at a time when countries like the **U.S. are recalibrating towards digital protectionism** due to growing geopolitical and technological concerns.

Lack of Political Advocacy for Digital Sovereignty

- A key reason for these digital concessions is the **absence of a strong political constituency** for digital sovereignty in India.
- Unlike sectors like agriculture or manufacturing, which have **well-organized interest groups and vocal political support**, the digital domain lacks:
 - Widespread public awareness,
 - Political urgency,
 - Or stakeholder resistance to foreign influence.
- This vacuum has enabled **far-reaching digital trade concessions** without national debate or scrutiny.
- The article warns that, much like how colonial-era trade exploited India's natural resources, the nation now risks becoming a **"data colony"**—supplying raw data to foreign tech giants without having the domestic capacity to benefit from it.

Way Forward: Developing a Strategy for Digital Sovereignty

To prevent further erosion of its digital autonomy, **India must urgently:**

- **1. Formulate a Comprehensive Digital Sovereignty Policy**
- This policy must define:
 - **Strategic red lines** in digital trade,
 - Rules around **data governance**,
 - And guidelines for **digital industrialisation**.

- It should act as a blueprint for future trade negotiations involving digital issues.
- **2. Institutionalise Expert Input in Trade Talks**
- **Digital policy experts**, especially those specialising in **tech, law, cybersecurity, and geopolitics**, must be:
 - Included in trade negotiation teams;
 - Given **direct access to senior political leadership**;
 - And consulted regularly to ensure **national interests are protected**.

Conclusion

The **India-UK FTA** marks a **critical turning point** in India's digital journey—not for its traditional trade clauses, but for what it **quietly concedes** in the digital domain. India's decision to step back from core principles such as **source code access and data sovereignty** risks:

- **Undermining its control** over its digital ecosystem,
- **Weakening its position** in future trade negotiations,
- And allowing **foreign entities** to shape India's digital future.

Without immediate course correction and a **clear digital sovereignty framework**, India may find itself relegated to the role of a **passive data supplier**, rather than an active **digital superpower** in the 21st-century global order.

Mangroves: A Critical Driver of Climate Resilience and Economic Growth

Context: Mangroves Amidst the Climate Crisis

As climate change intensifies—bringing rising sea levels, erratic weather, and environmental degradation—**blue carbon ecosystems** like **mangroves** have emerged as powerful natural assets. They play a vital role in **carbon sequestration, biodiversity conservation, and sustaining community livelihoods**.

Despite their immense ecological and economic value, **mangroves remain absent from national financial accounts and underrepresented in policymaking**.

To change this narrative, the **Mangrove Coalition** proposes a **comprehensive approach** involving **technological advancements, community participation, and inclusive monitoring systems**.

Key Measures to Realise the Full Potential of Mangroves

1. Leveraging Technology to Map Natural Capital

- Innovations in **satellite imaging, drones, and geospatial AI** now allow highly accurate mapping of mangrove forests.
- Such data is crucial for **quantifying mangrove value**, guiding **restoration efforts**, and shaping **informed policies**.
- **Economic valuation** showcases their worth:
 - In India, mangrove value ranges from ₹3,535 million in **Pichavaram (Tamil Nadu)** to ₹664 billion in the **Sundarbans (West Bengal)**.
 - The **carbon storage** of the Sundarbans alone contributes ₹462 million per year.
- These figures demonstrate the urgent need to **integrate mangroves into economic planning and development strategies**.

2. Centering Local Communities in Conservation

- Technology alone cannot protect mangroves—**community involvement** is essential.
- **Local populations**, especially **fishing communities**, possess **generational knowledge** and rely directly on mangroves for **livelihoods**.
- Their inclusion in conservation and restoration efforts ensures:
 - **Equitable benefit-sharing**,

- **Stronger implementation** through local stewardship,
- And **resilience in ecosystem management**.
- For fisherfolk, mangroves serve as **nurseries for young fish**, directly linking ecosystem health with **food security** and **economic stability**.
- In urban centers like **Mumbai** and **Chennai**, mangroves are threatened by **pollution and neglect**, reducing their ability to sustain biodiversity and support human wellbeing.
- Empowering communities can reverse degradation. When people see tangible benefits—**cleaner air, flood mitigation, and better fish yields**—they become active protectors of these ecosystems.

Promoting Citizen Science and Inclusive Monitoring

- Training locals to track and interpret environmental indicators **complements formal science** and **democratizes conservation**.
- Community-based monitoring fosters a **culture of ecological responsibility** and encourages **evidence-based decision-making**.
- Effective monitoring should evaluate both **ecological** and **social parameters**, such as:
 - **Mangrove cover changes**,
 - **Freshwater flow patterns**,
 - **Biodiversity indicators** (birds, mollusks, fish),
 - And **community dependence** on ecosystem services.
- These comprehensive insights help tailor conservation actions to specific needs.
- Initiatives like **Mangrove Mitras (Friends of Mangroves)** act as public engagement hubs, linking **urban populations** with **wetlands and mangrove systems**.
- Through **hands-on experiences**, these platforms build **empathy, awareness, and a sense of responsibility**.

Conclusion: A Collective Responsibility for Mangrove Stewardship

Protecting mangroves must go beyond top-down directives—it requires a **collaborative, inclusive model** where **ecosystem health** and **community wellbeing** reinforce one another.

For policymakers and businesses, the perspective must evolve:

- **Mangroves are not just biodiversity zones**; they are essential **climate infrastructure**.
- Their protection and restoration are **economically sound, ecologically urgent, and socially just**.

A successful future demands a coalition that bridges:

- **Science and technology**,
- **Local knowledge and experience**,
- And **economic pragmatism**.

By embracing innovation, empowering local actors, and nurturing broad-based engagement, **we can secure the survival of mangroves**—and, with them, a path to **sustainable and climate-resilient development**.

India's Indigenous Democratic Traditions: Revisiting the Chola-Era Electoral Legacy

Context

In his address at **Gangaikonda Cholapuram on July 27, 2025**, Prime Minister **Narendra Modi** spotlighted India's ancient democratic roots, emphasizing that participatory governance in India predates Western models such as the **Magna Carta**. This article delves into the **Chola dynasty's electoral systems**, revisiting their relevance to **contemporary democratic discourse**.

Reclaiming India's Ancient Democratic Heritage

- The notion that **democracy in India is a colonial legacy** is historically inaccurate. India's **participatory governance** dates back to **civilizational times**, long before British rule or Western constitutional frameworks.
- While the influence of the **British parliamentary model** and the **American Bill of Rights** is acknowledged, India's own traditions—such as those of **Vaishali (5th century BCE)** and references to **samghas** in **Kautilya's Arthashastra**—offer evidence of long-standing **indigenous democratic institutions**.

The Uthiramerur Inscriptions: A Codified System of Governance

- Dating back to around **920 CE**, during the reign of **Parantaka Chola**, inscriptions at the **Vaikuntaperumal Temple** in **Uthiramerur, Tamil Nadu**, document a **detailed and structured model of local self-governance**.
- These inscriptions lay out:
 - The **constitution of wards**
 - **Eligibility criteria and disqualifications**
 - The **structure and functioning** of administrative committees
 - Provisions for the **removal (recall)** of corrupt or non-performing members.

The Kudavolai System: An Ancient Ballot Mechanism

- The Chola-era **electoral process** was known as the **Kudavolai system** ("ballot pot" method).
- **Mechanism:**
 - Names of eligible candidates were written on **palm leaves**.
 - These leaves were placed in a pot and **drawn randomly by a child**, ensuring **neutrality and fairness**.
 - Selected members held office for **one-year terms**, after which fresh elections were conducted.
- This process upheld:
 - **Transparency**
 - **Impartiality**
 - **Direct citizen involvement**

Strict Moral and Administrative Standards: A Model Code of Conduct

- The Chola system enforced **high ethical and administrative standards** through clearly defined **qualifications and disqualifications**.

Eligibility Requirements:

- Age between **35–70 years**
- Must **own and reside** on **tax-paying land**
- Should be **educated** in either **sacred texts** or **administrative skills**

Grounds for Disqualification:

- **Debt defaulters**
- **Alcoholics**
- Individuals with a **tainted moral record**
- **Corrupt individuals**, including their **close relatives**
- Disqualified individuals could face bans that extended for **generations**

Chola-Era vs. Modern Politics: A Stark Contrast

- In contrast to today's political landscape, where **convicted politicians often return to public office**, the Chola system enforced **lifetime or generational bans** on wrongdoers.
- The **Chola electoral legacy** embodied:
 - **Transparency**
 - **Accountability**

- Moral leadership
- Active civic participation

Modern-Day Relevance of India's Ancient Democratic Model

- These ancient practices reinforce that **Indian democracy is not an imported concept**, but rather an **inherently homegrown system**.
- They serve as a **counter-narrative** to the global democratic decline, underlining **India's resilience, originality, and civilizational continuity**.

Conclusion

India's democratic journey is deeply **indigenous**, structured, and **civilizationally entrenched**. The **Chola period's electoral mechanisms**, particularly those documented at **Uthiramerur**, highlight how **codified, ethical, and participatory** governance thrived in ancient India.

Reclaiming this legacy is vital to fostering a **more ethical, accountable, and citizen-centered polity** in the present day.

Strengthening Disability Rights in India

Introduction

- As per the **2011 Census**, only **2.21%** of India's population is recorded as having disabilities — a figure widely regarded as a **gross underestimation**.
- In contrast, the **2019 WHO Disability Model Survey** found that **16%** of Indian adults experience **severe disabilities**, highlighting the **urgent need for reliable data** to inform inclusive and rights-based policy decisions.
- Without credible statistics, building responsive frameworks and delivering justice-oriented interventions remains a significant challenge.

India's Global Commitments and Legal Progress

- India **ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD)** in **2007**, endorsing a **rights-based approach** that emphasizes **dignity, equality, and full societal participation**.
- To align with this international commitment, India enacted the **Rights of Persons with Disabilities (RPWD) Act, 2016**, replacing the outdated **1995 Act** and embracing a more comprehensive human rights framework.

Key Provisions of the RPWD Act, 2016

1. Expanded Definition of Disability

- The Act broadens the scope of recognized disabilities to **21 categories**, including:
 - Autism spectrum disorders
 - Thalassemia
 - Muscular dystrophy
 - Parkinson's disease
 - Acid attack survivors

2. Empowered State Commissioners

- Appointed with **quasi-judicial authority** to:
 - Investigate rights violations and breaches of policy.
 - Launch **suo motu** (on their own initiative) inquiries.
 - Recommend policy amendments.
 - Oversee the implementation of welfare schemes and reservation quotas across government departments.

Implementation Challenges at the State Level

1. Appointment Delays and Structural Issues

- Many states have **failed to appoint State Commissioners**, despite judicial interventions like in **Seema Girija Lal vs Union of India**.
- Often, appointees are **serving bureaucrats** from nodal departments, raising concerns about **conflicts of interest**.
- Only **8 states** have appointed individuals with **non-bureaucratic, professional backgrounds**, limiting independence.

2. Ineffective Use of Statutory Powers

- **Suo motu powers** are seldom exercised, reducing the commissioner's role as an effective watchdog.
- **Limited outreach and public awareness** efforts weaken civic engagement and access to justice.

3. Institutional and Capacity Gaps

- State Commissioner offices often lack:
 - Adequate **training** in conducting inquiries and handling quasi-judicial duties.
 - Skills to analyze data related to scheme effectiveness.
 - Sufficient **staffing, infrastructure, and financial resources**.

Best Practices from Leading States

Karnataka: A Model of Innovation

- **Mobile Adalats**: Legal grievance redressal camps conducted in **rural regions**.
- **District Disability Management Review (DDMR)**: A **decentralized framework** to monitor scheme performance at the district level.
- **Collaborations with Law Schools**: Improve legal capacities and access to justice.
- **Deputy Commissioners for Disability**: District Magistrates designated to ensure implementation of disability rights at the grassroots.

Delhi: Responsive Governance

- Known for:
 - **Efficient case resolution**
 - **Active partnerships** with **disability rights organizations**

Way Forward: Strengthening Disability Governance

1. Transparent and Inclusive Appointments

- Appoint **experts** in disability law, rehabilitation, education, and human rights.
- Ensure **gender representation** and inclusion of **persons with disabilities** to address intersectional concerns.

2. Institutional Capacity Building

- Mandate **regular training** in:
 - Quasi-judicial processes
 - Disability law and policy interpretation
- Build partnerships with:
 - **NGOs**
 - **Law schools**
 - **International bodies** like the **UNDP** and **WHO** for capacity development and knowledge exchange.

3. Accountability and Data Transparency

- Create **public dashboards** to display:
 - Real-time data on cases filed, resolved, and pending.
- Publish **annual reports** that include:
 - Quantitative insights
 - Evaluation of scheme implementation

- Policy suggestions for course correction

4. Promote Research and Evidence-Based Policymaking

- Invest in **interdisciplinary studies** exploring:
 - Disability and **social security**
 - Disability and **climate adaptation**
 - Disability and the **care economy**

Conclusion

- The **RPWD Act, 2016** offers a **strong legal foundation** for disability rights in India. However, **uneven implementation** due to administrative and structural issues continues to hinder its impact.
- Enhancing the **independence and capability** of State Commissioners, ensuring **timely and expert appointments**, and **replicating best practices** from states like Karnataka and Delhi are key to systemic reform.
- India's commitment to the **UNCRPD** must be backed by **domestic resolve**, ensuring that **rights-based, participatory, and inclusive governance** becomes standard practice in every state.

The Jhalawar Tragedy and India's School Infrastructure Crisis

Introduction

- The recent **school building collapse** in **Jhalawar district, Rajasthan**, which resulted in the deaths of **seven children** and injuries to several others, is not an isolated incident but a stark reflection of the **systemic neglect** in school infrastructure nationwide.
- Despite repeated warnings from the local community regarding the **deteriorating condition** of the structure, authorities failed to act—making this a case of **avoidable and criminal negligence**.
- This incident calls for **urgent nationwide reform** to ensure safe learning environments for all children in India.

India's Widespread School Infrastructure Deficit

Findings from official surveys highlight alarming deficiencies:

- According to the **ASER 2022 report**, **22% of schools** across **12 states** are in a **dilapidated state**.
- Many lack essential facilities such as:
 - **Separate toilets** for boys and girls.
 - **Safe drinking water**.
 - **Functional classrooms**, libraries, proper lighting, and ventilation.
 - **Stable roofing** and basic structural safety.

Policy Neglect and Poor Execution

- The **New Education Policy (NEP) 2020** advocates:
 - Creation of **safe, inclusive, and engaging** school environments.
 - Regular **infrastructure audits**.
 - Increased **public investment** in education.
- However, on-the-ground implementation has been **patchy and inadequate**, failing to pre-empt infrastructure-related disasters.

Monsoon Season Exposes Structural Risks

- The rainy season reveals the **fragility of neglected school buildings**:
 - **Cracks, leaks, waterlogging**, and unsafe electrical systems create serious hazards.
- Failure to conduct **pre-monsoon safety inspections** is a major lapse in **preventive governance**.

Unsafe Schools Violate Basic Human Rights

- The **Right to Education (RTE) Act, 2009** mandates minimum infrastructure standards for all schools.
- Unsafe schools violate:
 - The **RTE Act**, which guarantees quality and equitable access to education.
 - **Article 21** of the Constitution, which protects the **Right to Life**.
- Infrastructure deficits are a key reason behind **low enrolment** and **high dropout rates**, especially in government schools.

Impact on Enrolment and Trust in Public Education

- In **Rajasthan**, government school enrolment for children aged **6–14** stands at **approximately 60%**, below the **national average**.
- Repeated incidents of school infrastructure failure erode **public confidence**, pushing parents toward:
 - **Costly private schooling**.
 - **Higher dropout rates**.
 - **Widening educational inequality** between urban and rural, rich and poor.

Governmental and Judicial Responses

- The **Rajasthan High Court** took **suo motu cognisance** of the Jhalawar tragedy, demanding accountability reports from concerned authorities.
- The **Central Government** has ordered a **nationwide safety audit** of school infrastructure.
- For these measures to be effective, they must ensure:
 - **Transparent execution** through **independent agencies**.
 - **Strict timelines** for compliance.
 - **Dedicated funding** for renovation and new construction.

Root Causes of the Infrastructure Crisis

a) Insufficient Budget Allocation

- Many states, including Rajasthan, have **not prioritised school maintenance** in their budgets.
- Public expenditure on education in most states remains **below the 6% of GDP** recommendation by the NEP.

b) Administrative Negligence

- Poor coordination among **district education officials, engineers, and school heads** leads to oversight.
- Absence of **real-time grievance redress systems** contributes to weak accountability.

c) Lack of Systematic Monitoring

- Infrastructure inspections are often **irregular, formalistic, or symbolic**.
- **Education departments lack trained technical staff** to evaluate building safety or structural integrity.

Strategic Solutions and the Way Forward

a) Mandatory Comprehensive Safety Audits

- Every school should undergo **annual structural and electrical inspections**.
- Audits should be conducted by **state PWD engineers** or **certified third-party experts**.

b) Creation of Dedicated Infrastructure Funds

- Introduce a separate budget line for:
 - Repairing unsafe buildings.
 - Modernizing classrooms and sanitation.
 - Routine maintenance of facilities.

c) Empowering Local Stakeholders

- **School Management Committees (SMCs)** must be empowered to:
 - Identify and report safety issues.

- Act as **community watchdogs** in the infrastructure monitoring process.

d) Strict Enforcement of RTE Norms

- The central government must ensure **state-level compliance** with RTE infrastructure mandates.
- Schools failing to meet safety criteria should face:
 - **Time-bound corrective actions.**
 - **Administrative penalties** or even **temporary closure.**

e) Technology-Based Monitoring

- Deploy **mobile apps** to report and track infrastructure issues.
- Use **geo-tagging and real-time monitoring** to oversee the physical condition of school facilities.

f) Disaster Preparedness and Safety Training

- Schools must conduct **emergency drills** for students and staff.
- Teachers should be trained in:
 - **Basic first aid.**
 - **Fire safety procedures.**
 - **Evacuation protocols** during natural or structural emergencies.

Conclusion

- The **Jhalawar school building collapse** is not just a tragic accident—it is a **symbol of chronic administrative neglect** in public education infrastructure.
- Protecting children's safety in schools is not optional—it is both a **legal imperative** and a **moral responsibility.**
- If India aims to realise its **demographic dividend** and fulfill the **vision of the NEP 2020**, then ensuring the **safety, dignity, and well-being** of every school-going child must be made **non-negotiable.**

The Missing Link in India's Battery Waste Management

Context

- India's ambitious Net Zero target by 2070 and its push towards decarbonisation have significantly accelerated the adoption of electric vehicles (EVs) and renewable energy technologies. Consequently, the demand for lithium-ion batteries is expected to surge—from 4 gigawatt-hours (GWh) in 2023 to nearly 139 GWh by 2035.
- While this transition marks a positive shift towards clean energy, it also introduces a pressing environmental and economic challenge: managing the disposal and recycling of lithium batteries sustainably. Without an effective recycling infrastructure, India's green ambitions risk being compromised.

The Urgency of Battery Waste Management

- Lithium batteries are crucial not only for EVs but also for battery energy storage systems (BESS) that stabilize renewable power supplies. However, their improper disposal can cause severe environmental harm. Toxic chemicals leaking into soil and water, coupled with the growing volume of battery waste—700,000 metric tonnes of lithium batteries out of 1.6 million metric tonnes of e-waste in 2022—call for immediate action.
- To address this, the Indian government introduced the Battery Waste Management Rules (BWMR) in 2022, centered on Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR). Under EPR, manufacturers are responsible for ensuring the collection and recycling of end-of-life batteries.

The Challenge of EPR Floor Pricing

- A core component of this recycling system is the EPR certificate, which producers must obtain as proof of compliance. These certificates are issued by recyclers who require a minimum floor price to sustain their operations.
- Currently, India's EPR floor price is too low to cover the high costs associated with safe battery recycling, including advanced technology, skilled labor, and secure logistics. Lithium-ion batteries also contain valuable minerals such as cobalt, lithium, and nickel, whose efficient recovery could reduce India's dependence on imports. However, without fair compensation, legitimate recyclers struggle to remain viable.

Corporate Non-Compliance and Global Double Standards

- The situation is further complicated by the reluctance of large producers—especially multinational corporations—to fully comply with recycling norms in developing countries like India. These companies often apply stringent environmental standards in developed markets while neglecting similar obligations in emerging economies.
- This dual approach weakens local regulations and hampers the growth of a robust battery recycling ecosystem in the Global South.
- Interestingly, fears that raising the EPR floor price will increase consumer costs lack evidence. Despite recent drops in global metal prices, producers have not passed savings to consumers, indicating that Original Equipment Manufacturers (OEMs) can absorb higher recycling costs without raising prices.

Global Benchmarks

- For comparison, the UK requires producers to pay up to ₹600 per kilogram for EV battery recycling—roughly four times the proposed floor price in India, even after adjusting for purchasing power parity. This highlights the need for India to establish a globally competitive and realistic EPR pricing model.
- A fair EPR floor price should account for all recycling costs—from collection and transport to safe material recovery—and evolve into a market-driven system as the industry matures. Additionally, producers should be encouraged to audit recyclers regularly, promoting accountability, preventing fraud, and driving innovation in recycling technologies and logistics.

Policy Recommendations

Integrating the Informal Sector

- India's battery recycling has long relied on informal workers who often operate outside regulatory oversight using unsafe methods. However, their involvement is critical to scaling up recycling capacity. Formalising this sector through training, regulation, and incentives can enhance safety, efficiency, and sustainability.
- Formalisation not only mitigates environmental risks but also creates green jobs, making it a vital social and environmental priority.

Strengthening Enforcement and Governance

- Policy effectiveness hinges on strong enforcement. India must deploy robust digital tracking for EPR certificates, implement rigorous audit protocols, and impose stringent penalties for non-compliance and fraud. Such measures will increase transparency and reduce malpractices.
- Constructive and immediate dialogue among policymakers, producers, and recyclers is essential to establish a balanced and effective EPR framework.

Conclusion

India's rapid growth in EVs and renewable energy demands a comprehensive battery recycling system. Revisiting the EPR floor price, enforcing regulations, and integrating the informal sector are crucial to turning battery waste management from a looming crisis into an opportunity.

If implemented well, this can drive sustainable growth, promote environmental goals, and bolster economic self-reliance through the recovery of critical resources.

India's Pandemic Toll Remains Elusive

Context

The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed significant vulnerabilities and inefficiencies within health systems worldwide. In India, the official death count of around 533,000 has been widely questioned by researchers and international bodies. Analysis of data from India's Civil Registration System (CRS) and Medical Certification of Cause of Death (MCCD) points to a large gap between official figures and the actual death toll. This makes it crucial to examine excess mortality during the pandemic years, highlight shortcomings in existing mortality tracking, and push for urgent reforms.

Excess Mortality: Revealing the True Impact

Excess mortality—deaths exceeding the expected baseline under normal conditions—has become a key measure for understanding the pandemic's real toll.

- CRS data shows deaths rising from 7.64 million in 2019 to 8.11 million in 2020, and then surging to 10.2 million in 2021.
- This sharp increase suggests the actual COVID-19 death toll is far higher than official numbers.
- The World Health Organization estimates India's pandemic deaths at about 4.7 million, a figure initially rejected by the government but increasingly supported by observed excess deaths.

Challenges in Medical Certification and Death Registration

Despite valuable insights from CRS data, its reliability is undermined by incomplete death registration and poor medical certification:

- In 2021, only 23.4% of registered deaths had medically certified causes, limiting accurate cause-of-death classification.
- In 2020, 45% of deaths occurred without any medical attention, up from pre-pandemic levels.
- Such gaps enable misclassification or under-reporting of COVID-19 fatalities.

A Kerala field study found increased cremations outside designated COVID facilities and only 22.8% of deaths with medically documented causes, highlighting systemic data flaws.

The Hidden Toll: Indirect Deaths and Systemic Disruption

Beyond direct COVID-19 fatalities, the pandemic caused many indirect deaths due to socio-economic disruption and healthcare challenges:

- Fear of infection, supply shortages, hospital bed scarcity, and lockdowns led to healthcare avoidance.
- Complications following infection and worsening chronic diseases also contributed.
- Kerala's research attributed 34% of deaths to indirect causes and noted 9% possible misclassification.

Given Kerala's relatively strong health system, these figures imply even greater undercounting in states with weaker infrastructure like Gujarat and Madhya Pradesh.

Structural Flaws in Mortality Surveillance

The pandemic highlighted major weaknesses in India's mortality tracking systems:

- Civil registration was not designated an essential service during the 2020 lockdown, causing significant reporting delays.
- The National Family Health Survey-5 found nearly 29% of deaths from 2016–2020 went unregistered.
- Uneven medical certification and regional disparities further obscure true mortality figures.

These systemic flaws undermine data quality, weaken public health policy, and reduce preparedness for future crises.

The Way Forward: Reform and Inquiry

The stark gap between reported and actual deaths demands urgent reform:

- Policymakers should initiate a large-scale independent investigation into pandemic mortality, including integrating mortality questions in the upcoming Census and conducting retrospective surveys.
- India must strengthen death registration, enforce universal and timely medical certification, and improve public health data systems.

Such reforms are critical not only to accurately measure COVID-19's impact but to build resilience for future health emergencies.

Conclusion

- India's pandemic experience has laid bare the deep deficiencies in mortality reporting. Under-registration, indirect fatalities, and data gaps have distorted the official picture, hiding the full human cost.
- Going forward, transparent and comprehensive mortality surveillance must become a cornerstone of India's public health framework. Addressing these shortcomings is essential—not only to honour the pandemic's victims but also to better protect future generations from similar crises.

Reimagining Labour and Value in the Age of Artificial Intelligence

Introduction

- Throughout human history—from the Palaeolithic era to the present Anthropocene age—the trajectory of civilization has been deeply shaped by the tools we have created.
- Whether it was the rudimentary stone hand axe or today's generative AI systems, each significant technological advancement has redefined how societies function.
- In the 21st century, artificial intelligence marks a new turning point. Machines are no longer just tools for physical labour; they now think, analyse, and predict, fundamentally altering our understanding of work.

Historical Context: Evolution of Tools and Labour

- **Palaeolithic Era (2.5 million years ago – 10,000 BCE):** Early humans used basic tools made from stone and bone for hunting and gathering, forming the foundation for survival and cooperation within nascent social groups.
- **Neolithic Revolution (from 10,000 BCE):** The domestication of plants and animals led to settled communities, property ownership, and a shift toward specialized labour.
- **Bronze and Iron Ages:** Metallurgical developments enabled more complex societies, facilitating state formation and deeper economic and class divisions.
- **Industrial Revolution (18th–19th centuries):** The mechanisation of work displaced many manual skills. Wage labour became dominant, and the nature of work began to shift, intensifying social and economic inequalities.
- **Digital and Information Age (20th century):** The rise of computing and the internet shifted economic value from manual to cognitive and informational tasks, transforming the labour market and redefining productivity.

AI and the Transformation of Work

- **Demis Hassabis's Perspective:** The CEO of DeepMind highlights that while AI may surpass human capabilities in areas like diagnosis or data processing, it cannot replicate the empathy, physical presence, or personal care provided by roles such as nurses or caregivers.
- **Tangible vs. Abstract Labour:**

- Jobs involving abstract cognitive skills (e.g., legal analysis, coding, investment banking) are increasingly susceptible to AI-driven automation.
- Conversely, hands-on and emotionally connected professions (e.g., teaching, caregiving, nursing) are gaining prominence due to their irreplaceable human component.
- **The Rising Value of Emotional Labour:** Tasks requiring compassion, empathy, and human connection are emerging as essential in the future job market, reshaping the boundary between skilled and unskilled work.

Rethinking Labour Hierarchies

- **Current Perceptions:** Cognitive and white-collar jobs command higher pay and social prestige. Roles such as domestic help, childcare, and eldercare are undervalued both economically and socially.
- **Market Value vs. Social Contribution:**
 - Caregiving and emotional labour are traditionally devalued, especially as they are often carried out by women and marginalised groups.
 - AI disrupts this dynamic by replacing “high-skill” jobs, thereby spotlighting the irreplaceable value of care-based professions.
- **Shifting Demands:** In the future, professionals like nannies, cooks, or nurses may be in higher demand than mid-level software developers, as machines increasingly absorb cognitive functions.

Socio-Economic and Ethical Considerations

- **Economic Redistribution:** With elite professional roles becoming automated, new sectors—particularly in the care and service domains—must be accorded greater economic recognition and investment.
- **Social Equity:** Elevating the value of work traditionally performed by women and underprivileged communities could pave the way for a more equitable social framework.
- **Education Reform:** Educational institutions must begin to prioritise soft skills—like empathy, communication, and adaptability—on par with technical expertise.
- **Gender Dynamics:** As caregiving roles gain prestige and recognition, more men may be drawn into these professions, challenging long-standing gender-based occupational divides.

The Future of Employment: Rise of the “Care Economy”

- **Global Trends:** The World Economic Forum projects that jobs in healthcare, education, elderly care, and early childhood development will become central due to shifting demographics and technological disruptions.
- **UNESCO's Advocacy:** UNESCO and other global agencies emphasise the need to invest in the ‘care economy’, highlighting both ethical responsibility and economic necessity.
- **Required Policy Interventions:**
 - Implementing minimum wage protections for care workers.
 - Expanding social security for domestic and gig economy workers.
 - Offering targeted training programs in emotional intelligence and human-centered services.

Barriers to Embracing New Labour Values

- **Institutional Inertia:** Existing labour laws, corporate hierarchies, and educational systems have been slow to adapt to and recognise the significance of non-cognitive, emotionally driven labour.
- **Cultural and Societal Bias:** Long-held assumptions about what constitutes “real work” continue to devalue emotional labour, despite its growing economic and social importance.
- **Technological Unemployment:** As AI displaces white-collar roles, many in the middle class may experience crises related to job loss, identity, and income insecurity.

Conclusion

- The rise of artificial intelligence signals a possible end to the dominance of cognitive elitism and heralds a renewed appreciation for the human touch—empathy, care, and physical presence.
- This transition offers an opportunity to redefine what counts as valuable work and who deserves societal respect and financial reward.
- By shifting cultural and institutional values to recognise emotional and tangible labour, both India and the global community can take meaningful steps toward building a more inclusive, compassionate, and human-centric society—one that values not just intellect, but also kindness, care, and connection.

India-US Space Collaboration and the Launch of the NISAR Satellite

Introduction

- On **July 30, 2025**, ISRO and NASA jointly launched the **NASA-ISRO Synthetic Aperture Radar (NISAR)** satellite.
- As one of the most advanced and costly Earth observation satellites to date, NISAR incorporates state-of-the-art dual-band radar technology.
- This mission symbolizes a new depth in **India-US scientific and strategic collaboration**, particularly in the field of space exploration.

Technical Highlights and Capabilities of NISAR

- **Pioneering Dual-Frequency Radar Technology:**
 - NISAR is the first satellite globally to carry **both L-band (25 cm wavelength)** and **S-band (10 cm wavelength)** radar systems.
 - The L-band penetrates deeper surfaces like forests and soil, while the S-band captures finer surface-level details such as agricultural fields or terrain alterations.
- **Satellite Architecture:**
 - Comparable in size to a **pickup truck**, it features a **12-meter-wide deployable mesh radar antenna**.
 - The satellite revisits and maps the Earth's surface every **12 days**, providing highly detailed global imagery.
- **Data Volume and Access:**
 - NISAR produces **terabytes of data daily**, contributing to one of the most comprehensive Earth observation datasets.
 - This information is made **freely accessible** to researchers worldwide, promoting transparency and global scientific collaboration.
- **Range of Applications:**
 - Crucial for tracking **glacier retreat, land subsidence, crop patterns, forest biomass, coastal erosion, earthquakes, and natural disasters**.
 - Plays a key role in **disaster resilience, ecosystem conservation, and climate change projections**.

NISAR's Significance for India and the Global Community

- **Demonstrating India's Space Capabilities:**
 - Follows the historic success of **Chandrayaan-3** in August 2023.
 - Confirms ISRO's technical proficiency in handling **cryogenic propulsion** and executing complex satellite missions.
- **Global Climate Monitoring Leadership:**
 - Enables precise measurement of **GHG emissions, forest loss, wetland degradation, and rising sea levels**.

- A valuable tool for both developed and developing nations to shape **evidence-based climate policies**.
- **Agriculture and Water Management:**
 - Enhances monitoring of **soil moisture, crop yields, and groundwater shifts**—vital for ensuring **food and water security** in agrarian nations like India.
- **Disaster Preparedness:**
 - Provides early warning systems for **floods, landslides, earthquakes, and cyclones**.
 - Strengthens implementation of global frameworks like the **Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction (UNDRR)**.

Strategic Evolution of India-US Space Relations

- **From Denial to Partnership:**
 - In the 1990s, the US blocked cryogenic technology transfers to India.
 - Ironically, NISAR was launched on India's **GSLV rocket** with an **indigenous cryogenic engine**, reflecting the transformation of mistrust into collaboration.
- **Milestone Collaborations:**
 - **2008:** NASA's **Moon Mineralogy Mapper** flew on Chandrayaan-1.
 - **2023:** ISRO astronaut **Shubhanshu Shukla** conducted research aboard the **International Space Station**.
 - **2025:** India formally joins the **Artemis Accords**, supporting space missions beyond Earth.
- **Joint Space Vision (2023):**
 - Outlines cooperation in areas such as **deep space missions, planetary defense, GNSS interoperability, and space safety protocols**.

Prospective Avenues for Future Collaboration

- **Human Spaceflight:** Indian astronauts receive training at NASA for the **Gaganyaan** mission. Potential for **joint crewed missions** in the next decade.
- **Exploration of Deep Space and Planets:** Proposed partnerships on missions to **Mars, Venus, and asteroid resource exploration**. Plans for collaborative work in **lunar mining** and planetary infrastructure.
- **Industrial Partnerships:** Companies like **SpaceX, Blue Origin**, and Indian startups such as **Skyroot, Agnikul, and Dhruva Space** may co-create satellite systems and **reusable rockets**. Scope exists for joint manufacturing of **launch vehicles, payloads, and orbital platforms**.
- **Private Sector Engagement:** With India liberalising its space economy through **IN-SPACe**, US investors can now partner with Indian space-tech firms. Collaborations expected in **satellite communications, geospatial mapping, and space debris tracking**.
- **Regulations and Space Sustainability:** Emphasis on shared research in **orbital traffic management and debris control**. Contributions to global agreements under **UNOOSA** and the **Outer Space Treaty**.

Geopolitical and Economic Dimensions

- **Strategic Trust and Soft Power:** Amidst trade tensions and regional rivalries, space remains a **mutually beneficial and apolitical domain** in India-US relations. Strengthens India's **strategic autonomy** while deepening partnerships with **technologically advanced allies**.
- **Artemis Accords Participation:** Reinforces India's place among the **world's premier spacefaring nations**. Opens doors to cooperative efforts in establishing a **lunar base** and future **Mars expeditions**.
- **Balancing China's Advancements:** China's rapid progress—**Tiangong station, Chang'e lunar missions, and the Beidou navigation system**—necessitates continued Indo-US coordination to maintain space parity.

Challenges and Strategic Considerations

- **Data Sovereignty Concerns:** Open-access data policies must be balanced with national interests in **remote sensing and strategic information**. Clear frameworks are needed to govern **data ownership** and **usage protocols**.
- **Avoiding Technological Dependence:** India must ensure its focus on **domestic innovation** while maintaining strong global partnerships.
- **Administrative Bottlenecks:** Speedier regulatory clearances are essential for smoother **foreign investments** and **joint mission approvals**.
- **Technology Transfer Hurdles:** Despite warming relations, **US ITAR regulations** still limit the extent of collaborative hardware or software sharing.

Conclusion

- The success of NISAR represents a **blueprint for multilateral cooperation** in an era of rapid space expansion and planetary challenges.
- By fostering **joint innovation, knowledge sharing**, and **open access to technology**, India and the US can play a central role in ensuring that space exploration remains a **peaceful, scientific, and inclusive global pursuit**.
- As humanity ventures deeper into space, the India-US partnership stands as a model for **equitable development, climate resilience, and shared prosperity** beyond Earth.

India's Global Posture Amidst a Fractured Geopolitical Landscape

Context

- India currently finds itself at a critical juncture in the evolving international order, striving to assert its rightful global influence while contending with systemic constraints.
- As leading powers recalibrate alliances and policies, India faces a series of **diplomatic and strategic setbacks** that underscore the complex reality of pursuing sovereignty, influence, and economic progress simultaneously.

Operation Sindoor: A Sobering Test of Diplomatic Support

- **Operation Sindoor** highlighted the limitations India faces in rallying global backing against cross-border terrorism.
- Following the **April 22, 2025 Pahalgam terror attack**, in which three **Lashkar-e-Taiba operatives** were neutralised, India presented substantial evidence linking the attack to Pakistan-based elements.
- However, many of India's strategic allies hesitated to **publicly condemn Pakistan**, despite its harbouring of **UN-designated terrorists**.
- The situation was further muddled when U.S. President **Donald Trump** claimed credit for brokering a ceasefire through economic means—an account that conflicted with the Indian narrative.
- In a perplexing diplomatic move, the U.S. welcomed **Field Marshal Asim Munir of Pakistan** post-operation. Nonetheless, some support was forthcoming:
- The **U.S. designated The Resistance Front (TRF)**—responsible for the Pahalgam attack—as a **Foreign Terrorist Organisation**.
- The **UN Security Council Monitoring Team** also acknowledged TRF's role. Yet, the response represented only a **partial and insufficient consensus** around India's security concerns.

India-U.S. Tensions: Trade, Security, and Strategic Trust

Despite being long referred to as "natural allies", **India-U.S. relations have grown increasingly strained:**

- On the day India launched the landmark **NISAR satellite**, President Trump **imposed a 25% tariff on Indian goods**, using trade as leverage tied to India's **continued import of Russian oil**.
- The U.S. stance appeared **inconsistent and opportunistic**—criticising India's Russian energy ties, while seeking **re-engagement with Moscow** and allowing selective trade with China.
- Trump also urged **U.S. companies to halt investments in India**, advocating instead for "America First" hiring policies.
- These developments coincided with **India's growing exclusion** from broader **Indo-Pacific** and **global trade-security frameworks**, challenging the depth of trust in bilateral ties.

The European Front: Economic Leverage and Asymmetries

Even as India works toward a trade agreement with the **European Union**, it faces mounting pressure:

- The EU recently **sanctioned a Russian-linked refinery in India**, despite knowing this move could **inflate global energy prices**.
- This action came even as **EU members like Hungary, Slovakia, and Belgium** continued importing Russian oil through formal exemptions.
- Additionally, **EU-imposed carbon border taxes** and **digital trade barriers** have been perceived as disproportionately harsh toward India—especially when contrasted with Europe's **lenient treatment of its own Russia-bound trade**.

China's Expanding Regional Footprint and Strategic Tensions

China's Assertive Neighbourhood Strategy

China continues to mount pressure on India through multi-pronged tactics:

- Its proposed **trilateral alliance with Pakistan and Bangladesh** aimed to marginalize India, although **Bangladesh has thus far resisted**.
- China supported military upgrades in the region, notably helping **revive Bangladesh's Lalmonirhat airbase**, and **backed Pakistan militarily during Operation Sindoor**.
- **Standardising place names in Arunachal Pradesh** and planning a **mega dam on the Yarlung Zangbo (Brahmaputra)** reflect China's intent to dominate **border narratives and resource flows**.
- Meanwhile, its control over **critical supply chains**—including **rare earths, APIs, and industrial machinery**—gives Beijing significant leverage over India's economy.

India's Strategic Restraint: Silence or Autonomy?

- India has deliberately chosen to **abstain from strong positions** in volatile global crises—such as **Israel-Gaza, Israel-Iran**, and the **Russia-Ukraine conflict**—often refraining from taking sides at the **UN**.
- This policy of **strategic non-alignment** is intended to preserve **autonomy** and avoid entanglements.

However, the trade-off is a **diminished geopolitical voice**, leading to India being frequently **sidelined in major global negotiations**.

- The belief that India can quietly focus on becoming the **world's third-largest economy** overlooks the reality that **strategic alignment increasingly shapes economic outcomes**. Global fragmentation, trade coercion, and declining faith in institutions like the **WTO** are redefining the rules of engagement.

Navigating the Future: India's Multi-Alignment Strategy

Recognizing shrinking diplomatic space, India has begun to **push back against Western double standards**—particularly the **hypocrisy in U.S. and EU energy dealings with Russia**, while criticizing India for similar actions.

India's **recent call for a Gaza ceasefire** marks a **shift toward assertive diplomacy**, aiming to protect national interests while engaging equitably with global powers.

Key forward-looking steps include:

- **Finalising a trade pact with the U.S.**
- **Reinvigorating multilateral partnerships** like **BRICS**—where India is set to host the **2026 summit**
- Deepening ties with the **Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO)**
- Revisiting relations with **East Asian economies** after having opted out of **RCEP** (Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership)

These initiatives form the cornerstone of India's evolving **multi-alignment strategy**, designed to enhance its negotiating power across platforms.

Conclusion

India's journey through today's **shifting geopolitical terrain** demands more than adaptability—it calls for **assertive pursuit of national interests**.

Through diversified partnerships, decisive diplomacy, and unflinching defence of its **economic and security priorities**, India must redefine its place in the emerging world order.

The era of focusing solely on economic growth while maintaining diplomatic caution has ended. India must now act as a **proactive and sovereign force**, shaping not only its future, but the **norms and power structures** of a transforming international system.

The Promise and Perils of Technocratic Governance

Introduction: Efficiency vs. Ethics in Digital Welfare

- At first glance, the digitisation of welfare delivery appears to be a boon — offering increased efficiency, broader reach, and the elimination of leakages like ghost beneficiaries. The state champions these outcomes as markers of enhanced targeting and improved coverage.
- However, this transformation prompts deeper concerns about the **true purpose of welfare**, raising questions about whether democratic principles are being overshadowed by **algorithmic efficiency and managerial logic**.
- The rise of data-centric governance may be reconfiguring welfare not as a moral right but as a **calculable administrative task**.
- **Political Polarisation and the Technocratic Turn**
- Emerging research in **political theory and game theory** reveals that technocratic governance tends to flourish in **environments of high political polarisation**.
- In such scenarios, democratically elected leaders—regardless of their ideological leanings—often delegate **complex and unpopular policy decisions to data-driven systems**.
- This shift reframes public discourse:
- Instead of asking, **"Who deserves support, and why?"**, the emphasis is placed on **"How can we optimise coverage while minimising leakages?"**
- Though this seems rational and efficient, it often **sidesteps constitutional nuances** and the **lived realities** of vulnerable populations.

Theoretical Frameworks: Habermas, Foucault, and Agamben

This shift toward technocracy can be critically examined through several influential theoretical lenses:

- **Jürgen Habermas's** idea of *technocratic consciousness* and **Michel Foucault's** concept of *governmentality* highlight how state systems become increasingly **measurable, auditable, and resistant to political challenge**.
- Flagship schemes such as **E-SHRAM** and **PM-KISAN** embody this shift, privileging **innovation and auditability** over **democratic ambiguity or pluralism**.

- Participatory methods — like **community feedback loops and deliberative planning** — which have historically anchored democratic welfare, are now in decline.

Perhaps most alarmingly, **Giorgio Agamben's concept of *homo sacer*** finds resonance in this context. The citizen is transformed into a **mere data point** — an **auditable beneficiary** without political agency or meaningful voice, whose recognition by the state is entirely **conditional on algorithmic visibility**.

Democratic Erosion and Shrinking Social Investment

The consequences of data-driven welfare are not abstract — they are materially visible in budgetary trends and institutional decline:

- In 2024–25, **India's social sector spending fell to 17%**, down from an average of 21% over the previous decade.
- The most affected are programmes for **minorities, labour welfare, nutrition, and social security**, which saw a steep drop in their share of spending—from 11% before COVID-19 to just 3% post-pandemic.

These numbers represent **real deprivation** for the most vulnerable populations.

Meanwhile, the **Right to Information (RTI) framework**, once a cornerstone of transparency, is in crisis:

- Over **400,000 RTI cases remain pending** across state and central commissions.
- Key leadership roles remain unfilled, and the RTI system's efficacy has sharply declined.

This erosion of transparency mechanisms further deepens the **democratic deficit** within welfare governance.

Algorithmic Centralisation and Accountability Gaps

The **Centralised Public Grievance Redress and Monitoring System** is emblematic of the technocratic state's strengths and weaknesses.

While it streamlines complaint registration and tracking, it also **concentrates visibility without ensuring corresponding accountability**.

The reliance on algorithmic processes creates a **buffer that insulates power**, making it harder for citizens to demand explanations or enforce accountability.

This **technocratic insulation** undermines one of the key pillars of democracy: the ability to hold institutions and leaders **answerable to the public**.

Reimagining Welfare: Toward Democratic and Antifragile Systems

Acknowledging these issues should not imply a rejection of **digital innovation**. Rather, it calls for a **reimagining of welfare governance** that embraces both **efficiency and democratic resilience**.

What is needed is a **bottom-up approach** that empowers:

- **Local knowledge systems**
- **Participatory bodies like gram sabhas**
- **Frontline workers with discretion and reflexive judgment**

Promising avenues for reform include:

- **Community-based social audits**
- **Support for platform cooperatives**
- **Well-designed offline fallback systems**

Additionally, embedding **legal rights to explanation and appeal** within digital systems is critical to combating the **opaqueness and rigidity** that plague current automated structures.

Drawing on successful models like **Kerala's Kudumbashree** and global best practices, a **pluralistic and citizen-centred welfare state** is well within reach.

Re-Centring the Citizen: From Data Point to Decision-Maker

At the heart of this challenge lies a simple but profound idea: a welfare system that works efficiently but ignores **democratic deliberation** ends up excluding **those it is meant to serve**.

For India to realise the vision of a **Viksit Bharat**, digitisation must evolve beyond managerialism. The goal should be to **re-centre the citizen** — transforming people from **ledger entries** into **active participants** in governance.

Only then can digital governance truly reflect **democratic values** and serve the public good.

Conclusion: Technology as a Democratic Ally, Not a Substitute

India now stands at a turning point where the **pursuit of technological efficiency** must be balanced against the **imperatives of justice, agency, and democratic accountability**.

The challenge is not to **slow innovation**, but to **guide it** — ensuring that technological tools reinforce, rather than replace, **participatory governance**.

The goal must be to **deepen democracy**, expand civic involvement, and secure the **dignity and rights** of every citizen in the digital age.

RBI's Monetary Policy Review – Balancing Growth Optimism with Inflationary Caution

Context:

This article discusses the Reserve Bank of India's (RBI) recent Monetary Policy Committee (MPC) meeting, focusing on its evaluation of inflation trends, GDP growth forecasts, external trade challenges, and the outlook for future monetary policy.

RBI's Monetary Policy Stance:

- The RBI decided to keep the repo rate unchanged and maintained a neutral policy stance.
- Since February 2025, the central bank has already reduced the policy rate by 100 basis points (bps).
- Given that Consumer Price Index (CPI) inflation is projected to exceed 4% in 2026, further rate reductions are unlikely in the current cycle.

Inflation Outlook:

- **Current Trends:** CPI inflation experienced a sharp decline to about 2% in June 2025 and is forecasted to remain around 2.5% for the following two quarters. The CPI inflation projection for FY26 has been revised downward to 3.1%, driven by statistical base effects and deflation in vegetable prices.
- **Vegetable Price Volatility:** Vegetable inflation was very high in 2024, averaging 27%, but has recently seen significant deflation, averaging -15% over the last three months. The vegetable price sub-index, which carries a 6% weight in the overall CPI, remains highly volatile. Excluding vegetable prices, CPI inflation stayed within a 3-4% range throughout FY25 and continues in that range in Q1 FY26.
- **Future Projections:** Due to the reversal of the base effect, CPI inflation is expected to cross the 4% mark in Q4 FY26. For FY27, CPI inflation could average above 4.5%, consistent with RBI's estimates.

Growth Projections and Domestic Factors:

- **GDP Outlook:** The RBI retained its GDP growth forecast for FY26 at 5%, signaling confidence in the country's growth trajectory.
- **Supportive Factors:** The outlook benefits from earlier interest rate cuts, robust agricultural output, a benign inflation environment, favorable monsoon conditions, and a reduced income tax burden.
- **Consumption and Employment Concerns:** Urban consumption remains subdued due to weak income growth and a slowdown in hiring, especially in the IT sector. The top five IT firms have reported stagnant employment levels, and employee cost growth across 670 companies declined sharply from 14% during FY19–FY24 to 5% in FY25.
- **Investment Trends:** Public capital expenditure surged by 52% in Q1 FY26, indicating strong government investment. However, private sector investment remains cautious amid ongoing economic uncertainties.

External Sector and Trade Dynamics:

- **External Risks:** Reciprocal tariffs imposed by the U.S. present risks to India's external sector. Merchandise exports are expected to contract in FY26, though service exports remain resilient.
- **Current Account and Forex Reserves:** India's current account deficit is forecasted to be manageable at 0.9% of GDP for FY26. Foreign exchange reserves stand at a comfortable \$689 billion, sufficient to cover 11 months of merchandise imports. This provides a broad insulation for India's external sector, though vigilance is necessary.

Policy Outlook – Wait-and-Watch Approach:

- With real interest rates low, approximately 1%, and liquidity conditions ample, the RBI is likely to pause further rate cuts.
- Any additional easing would depend on a significant growth slowdown triggered by external shocks.

Conclusion:

The RBI's approach balances cautious optimism, reflecting a nuanced understanding of the evolving macroeconomic landscape. Sustaining domestic demand, employing strategic policy adjustments, and maintaining alertness toward inflationary pressures and external risks will be vital for preserving economic stability through FY26 and beyond.

Decoding China: Lessons for a Vulnerable India

Context:

- The sudden recall of over 300 Chinese engineers from Foxconn's key iPhone 17 manufacturing facilities in Tamil Nadu and Karnataka is far more than an internal corporate reshuffle. It signals a deeper, strategic geoeconomic maneuver by China—intended to impede India's rise as a global manufacturing hub.
- Against the backdrop of shifting Asian geopolitics and trade dynamics, this incident reflects the growing anxiety of a dominant China facing the emergence of a potential regional rival. To grasp its full significance, India must analyze China's motivations, the broader strategic context, and the urgent reforms needed to strengthen its own manufacturing ambitions.

China's Calculated Withdrawal: A Deliberate Disruption

- The departure of highly skilled Chinese engineers from India's high-tech manufacturing sites is not a bureaucratic accident—it is a well-planned disruption. These engineers were central to setting up and optimizing complex production lines, a capability India still lacks during the early phase of its industrial transformation. By removing this expertise, China has tactically stalled India's learning curve in electronics manufacturing and slowed its path to self-reliance.
- Beyond personnel withdrawal, China has also implemented informal export restrictions on critical materials such as rare earth elements—essential for electronics and electric vehicles—and industrial equipment vital for India's manufacturing sector. These opaque barriers—enforced through administrative delays or verbal orders—are difficult to formally challenge but are effective in disrupting supply chains, increasing production costs, and generating economic uncertainty.

Beijing's Broader Strategic Intent

These are not isolated moves. They reflect a multi-layered Chinese strategy aimed at retaining its manufacturing superiority and protecting its dominance in global exports. India's growing reputation as an alternative manufacturing destination, especially with Western countries attempting to "friend-shore" away from China, is not merely economic competition in Beijing's eyes—it is a potential existential threat.

China's internal vulnerabilities deepen this fear:

- An ageing population
- Shrinking birth rates
- A prolonged property sector crisis
- Escalating social welfare obligations

These challenges place enormous fiscal pressure on the Chinese state. With declining domestic consumption, China's export dependence has only intensified. Its near-trillion-dollar trade surplus, often seen as a sign of strength, actually reflects overcapacity and insufficient internal demand. In this scenario, the emergence of any capable export rival—especially one like India, with geographic proximity and demographic advantages—amplifies China's strategic discomfort.

India's Structural Gaps and Missed Opportunities

An Underdeveloped Industrial Base

Despite aspirations, India's manufacturing sector remains far less advanced than China's. While China leads global supply chains in frontier industries like artificial intelligence, electric mobility, and quantum technology, India continues to rely on imports for core components such as semiconductors, sensors, and engines. Even the "Make in India" initiative depends heavily on foreign technological inputs, highlighting deep-rooted dependencies.

Infrastructure and Policy Bottlenecks

Chronic issues such as inadequate infrastructure, bureaucratic inefficiencies, and inconsistent policy execution compound these problems. India's ongoing reliance on "screwdriver technology"—assembling imported components without deep technological capacity—reveals its structural weaknesses. Recent U.S. decisions to raise tariffs on Indian goods (while exempting China) further expose India's fragile strategic positioning and the volatility of global alliances.

These developments underscore the importance of India embracing strategic autonomy grounded in resilience and self-sufficiency.

China's Global Economic Playbook

China's dominance is not coincidental—it is a product of deliberate, sophisticated economic statecraft. Beijing uses its industrial overcapacity to flood global markets with cheap goods, strategically undercutting competitors. Companies like BYD epitomize this tactic, using aggressive pricing to weaken rival firms and secure market share. Even its economic vulnerabilities become geopolitical assets. China's ability to leverage overproduction as a foreign policy tool enhances its global influence. While India grapples with internal inefficiencies, China is deepening its economic footprint through robust trade and infrastructure partnerships across Pakistan, ASEAN, Africa, and Latin America—securing market access and building long-term influence.

Conclusion: A Strategic Wake-Up Call for India

The removal of Chinese engineers from Foxconn is symbolic of a larger contest unfolding in Asia's manufacturing arena. It is a warning sign—and a strategic test—for India. To remain relevant, India must now master the rules of this game:

- Build robust infrastructure
- Streamline regulations
- Cultivate indigenous technology
- Establish a self-reliant industrial ecosystem

India must go beyond ambitious slogans and commit to sustained investments in capability development, innovation, and long-term policy vision. Only through such focused execution can India become a viable alternative to China's manufacturing supremacy. The overarching lesson is clear: India must take charge of its own economic destiny.

The Bihar Migrant Worker: A Scylla-Charybdis Moment

Context

Drawing from Homer's *Odyssey*, where King Odysseus had to navigate between the six-headed monster Scylla and the deadly whirlpool Charybdis, today's Indian democracy presents a similar dilemma for millions of migrant workers. During the Special Intensive Revision (SIR) of electoral rolls by the Election Commission of India (ECI), numerous migrant labourers, particularly from Bihar, have found their names omitted. Caught between rigid legal interpretations and political constraints, these citizens must now navigate a bureaucratic maze that threatens their fundamental right to vote.

Legal Foundation: Understanding 'Ordinarily Resident'

The Representation of the People (RP) Act, 1950 governs electoral roll inclusion in India.

- **Section 19:** Voters must be *ordinarily resident* in a constituency — a safeguard against false registrations and to maintain the electoral roll's integrity.
- **Section 20:** Clarifies that merely owning property doesn't qualify one as a resident, and short-term absences don't negate residency.
- **Section 20A** (added in 2010): Allows NRIs to vote based on their passport address.

Under SIR, voters absent during field verification or failing to complete necessary forms were classified as "permanently shifted/not found" and removed. However, this administrative approach doesn't reflect the socio-economic realities of migrant workers who, despite long absences, often maintain family ties, property, and habitual residence in their home constituencies.

The 1999 *Gauhati High Court* ruling (ECI vs Dr. Manmohan Singh) defined *ordinary residence* as a sustained, habitual link with a place, not just physical presence — a definition many migrants still meet in relation to their native areas.

Migrant Labour in India: Scope of the Challenge

According to the 2020–21 *Periodic Labour Force Survey*, approximately 11% of India's population — around 15 crore individuals — are migrant workers. Economic pressures force them to migrate, often alone, live in unstable accommodations, and frequently shift between states. Yet, their core social and political identity — including familial, property, and emotional ties — often remains rooted in their home states. This dichotomy between their physical and political identities complicates their eligibility under current legal standards.

Legal Avenues vs Political Realities

While the RP Act technically allows migrant workers to register at their place of current residence, real-world barriers make this difficult:

- **Lack of Documents:** Many migrants lack the formal address proof required for voter registration at their new location.
- **Political Resistance:** Host states often resist inclusion of migrants, fearing electoral distortion by transient populations unfamiliar with local issues.

This creates a paradox:

- In **home constituencies**, they risk removal due to prolonged absence.
- In **work constituencies**, they face resistance, bureaucratic obstacles, and suspicion.

Thus, while legally entitled to vote, many migrant workers are **effectively disenfranchised**.

Wider Democratic Context

This challenge mirrors broader democratic concerns:

- **Urban Voter Apathy:** In cities, despite proximity to polling stations, nearly half the electorate abstains from voting.
- **NRIs:** Legally allowed to vote but often unable to return during elections.

These examples suggest that **low voter turnout shouldn't justify exclusion**. Rather, the state must work to **facilitate participation** for all eligible voters, including migrants.

The Way Forward: Inclusive Solutions

India can improve migrant voting access without overhauling legal foundations:

1. **Polling Day Enforcement:** Strictly enforce statutory holidays for all eligible workers on election days.
2. **Transport Support:** Provide special trains, buses, and subsidised travel to enable return home for voting.
3. **Paid Leave:** Employers could offer paid time off for election participation.

Additionally, technological innovation offers promise:

- The **2023 pilot** of a Multi-Constituency Remote Electronic Voting Machine (RVM) by the ECI showed potential, allowing voters from up to 72 constituencies to vote remotely.
- Though political objections stalled the initiative, with further development, secure remote voting systems could **align mobility with franchise**.

Long-term, Parliament could consider amending the RP Act to explicitly protect the voting rights of migrant labourers, ensuring that the law evolves to reflect **economic migration patterns and social ties**.

Conclusion

Migrant workers today face an electoral conundrum akin to Odysseus's perilous voyage — caught between **the legal rigidity of electoral definitions** and **the political reluctance to accommodate mobility**. Though the law offers two avenues — voting from their native constituency or registering in their current location — both are littered with practical and political hurdles.

Securing the right to vote for India's migrant workers is not merely a legal formality; it is an affirmation of **equal citizenship and democratic participation**. The path forward is narrow, but with policy will, technological innovation, and inclusive governance, India can ensure that no citizen is left behind in its electoral journey.

Triple Disaster in Upper Bhagirathi Valley: A Wake-Up Call on Himalayan Climate Fragility and Governance Gaps

Context

- On **August 5, 2025**, the **Upper Bhagirathi (Ganga) river valley** in **Uttarkashi district, Uttarakhand**, experienced a sequence of **three back-to-back climate-related disasters** that devastated the towns of **Dharali, Harshil**, and surrounding settlements.
- This alarming series of events reflects the **escalating vulnerability of the Himalayan region to climate change**, the **increasingly unstable glacial systems** due to global warming, and a **continuing policy failure** in enforcing ecological safeguards.

The Disasters: Timeline and Impact

1. **Dharali Flood (Around 1:00 PM)** A suspected **cloudburst-triggered flood**—though denied by the Indian Meteorological Department (IMD)—swept through Dharali, damaging houses, shops, and local fairgrounds, the historic **Kalp Kedar temple** and roughly **20–25 hotels and homestays**.
2. **Flash Floods in Harshil (Around 3:00 PM)** A sudden deluge occurred in a narrow mountain stream valley downstream from Dharali, adding to the chaos.
3. **Flooding at Harshil Helipad (Around 3:30 PM)** A third event submerged **critical relief and evacuation infrastructure**, hampering rescue efforts.

Casualties and Emergency Response

- Official reports confirmed **four deaths**, with **60–70 individuals missing**, including **nine Army personnel**.
- Swift rescue operations were launched by over **100 Army personnel**, supported by **NDRF** (National Disaster Response Force), **SDRF** (State Disaster Response Force), **ITBP** (Indo-Tibetan Border Police) and Local police units

Scientific Insights: Geophysical and Climatic Triggers

- **Dharali** lies beneath steep, forested slopes, with **deodar trees** playing a critical role in stabilising the terrain and mitigating avalanche threats.
- The region houses **cirques** (glacial bowls or “hanging glaciers”) filled with old **glacial debris**.
- Multiple small **glacial streams** descend from these cirques with high velocity.
- **Rising temperatures** during the intense **summer monsoon** cause rapid melting of winter snow, triggering **massive avalanches** made of: Snow and ice, Rainwater and Glacial moraines
- The triple disaster was the result of **three successive avalanche-induced flash floods** within a span of just **2.5 hours**.

Policy and Governance Failures

Neglect of Eco-Sensitive Zone (ESZ) Regulations

- In **2012**, the Union Government notified the **Gaumukh-to-Uttarkashi watershed** as a **Bhagirathi Eco-Sensitive Zone (BESZ)**.
- The aim was to restrict unregulated development and preserve the ecological sanctity of the region.
- However, **poor enforcement** by both Central and State agencies has undermined the regulation, despite monitoring efforts by the **Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change (MoEF&CC)**.

Char Dham Highway Expansion

- Ignoring the ESZ guidelines, the **Union Ministry of Road Transport and Highways (MoRTH)** pushed plans to widen the **National Highway** in the ESZ to facilitate increased tourist traffic to **Gangotri**.
- The **Supreme Court-appointed High Powered Committee (HPC)** in **2020** recommended:
 - Avoiding disruption to fragile slopes.
 - Building **elevated riverside highways** to safeguard deodar forests.
- These recommendations were **ignored**, and over **6,000 deodar trees** were marked for felling, exacerbating slope vulnerability.

Recurring Warnings That Went Unheeded

This latest disaster follows a troubling pattern of ignored climate and geological warnings:

- **Kedarnath Floods (2013)** – Cloudburst and glacial floods.
- **Raunthi Gad Avalanche (2021)** – Destroyed Tapovan-Vishnugad Hydroelectric Project (HEP).
- **Joshimath Land Subsidence (2023)** – Cracks in buildings and ground due to unstable terrain.
- **Teesta Valley GLOF (2023)** – Glacial lake outburst flood in Sikkim.
- **Annual Monsoon Landslides** – Particularly in Himachal Pradesh, highlighting recurring risks.

Expert Recommendations for Future Resilience

To reduce vulnerability and ensure ecological safety, experts strongly recommend:

- **No hydroelectric projects (HEPs) in para-glacial zones.**
- Maintain **buffer zones** between **human settlements and flood-prone rivers/streams**.
- Avoid **road widening** on slopes exceeding **30° inclination**.
- Conduct **scientific carrying capacity assessments** before expanding infrastructure in Himalayan towns.

Conclusion

The **triple disaster in Uttarkashi** is not an isolated tragedy but a **symptom of a much deeper crisis**—a combination of climate change, fragile Himalayan geology, and poor regulatory oversight. Despite

clear scientific evidence and repeated warnings, policy negligence continues to place both ecosystems and human lives at risk. India must adopt a **climate-resilient, ecologically sensitive development model** rooted in **science, sustainability, and local community resilience**. Without immediate corrective action, such disasters are not only likely to repeat—but to worsen in scale and frequency.

Fast-Tracking Electric Vehicle (EV) Adoption in India

Introduction

NITI Aayog, India's premier policy advisory body, recently released a comprehensive report titled *"Unlocking a \$200 Billion Opportunity: Electric Vehicles in India."* This blueprint outlines a strategic pathway to expedite the country's shift to electric mobility. It identifies both the vast opportunities and significant challenges associated with EV adoption, while proposing policy innovations required to overcome them.

Beyond being an environmental necessity, electrification of transport presents an enormous economic opportunity — one that promises to drastically reduce fuel import bills, curb emissions, and catalyse employment generation across new industries.

Why Accelerating EV Adoption is Critical for India

- **Reducing Oil Dependency:** India currently imports around **85% of its crude oil** needs. A swift transition to EVs can substantially reduce this reliance, bolstering **energy security** and economic resilience.
- **Meeting Climate and Air Quality Goals:** India ranks among the **largest global emitters** of greenhouse gases. The transport sector contributes **approximately 13.5% of national CO₂ emissions**. EVs, with zero tailpipe emissions, offer a viable route to **cleaner air**, particularly in heavily congested metropolitan areas.
- **Generating Employment and Industrial Growth:** The EV ecosystem could create **millions of jobs** across the supply chain — from battery manufacturing and vehicle assembly to charging infrastructure and end-of-life recycling.
- **Strengthening Global Competitiveness:** With **China leading the global EV race**, India must scale up its EV efforts to remain competitive and protect its domestic auto industry from being outpaced in the mobility transition.

Current Status of EV Penetration in India

- **EV Sales Share (as of 2024):** EVs represent **only 7.6%** of total vehicle sales — significantly below the **2030 goal of 30%**.
- **Segment-Wise Performance**
 - **Three-Wheelers:** India has become a global leader in e-rickshaw deployment.
 - **Two-Wheelers:** Moderate gains, driven by policy subsidies and innovative startups.
 - **Electric Buses:** Adoption is rising, mainly via state transport undertakings.
 - **Cars and Trucks:** Minimal penetration, hindered by high costs and persistent range anxiety.
- **Global Comparison:** China dominates across all EV segments (except three-wheelers). India lags behind in **investment, technological depth, and manufacturing scale**.

Barriers to EV Growth: Key Challenges from the NITI Aayog Report

- **Financing Bottlenecks:** High upfront costs deter EV uptake, especially for commercial fleets like buses and trucks. Lack of tailored financing instruments and risk-sharing mechanisms.
- **Inadequate Charging Infrastructure:** Urban areas often lack a sufficient number of **public charging stations**. Where charging exists, **utilisation remains low**, revealing poor alignment between infrastructure rollout and user needs.

- **Consumer Awareness & Trust Deficit:** Both individuals and fleet operators remain sceptical about **EV performance, reliability, and battery lifecycle**. Misconceptions around **range, cost, and maintenance** persist.
- **Regulatory & Data Inconsistencies:** The **VAHAN portal** does not reliably classify all EV types. Absence of **unique battery identification numbers** limits tracking, resale, and recycling. Fragmented policy coordination between states and ministries creates implementation gaps.

Policy Measures Undertaken So Far

- **Demand-Side Interventions:** **FAME I and II** schemes offer subsidies on EV purchases (two-, three-wheelers, buses) and for charging infrastructure. **GST reduced to 5%** for EVs (versus 28% for ICE vehicles). **Registration fee waivers** to incentivise EV buyers.
- **Supply-Side Incentives:** **PLI schemes** for Advanced Chemistry Cell (ACC) batteries and critical EV components. Tax incentives and infrastructure support for OEMs establishing EV production facilities.
- **State-Level Policies:** States such as **Delhi, Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu, and Gujarat** have introduced comprehensive EV policies focused on infrastructure development and user incentives.

Economic Payoff of Widespread EV Adoption

Should India meet its **2030 EV targets**, the potential benefits include:

- **\$200 billion** in new opportunities for domestic manufacturing and allied services.
- **\$180 billion** savings in oil imports.
- **846 million tonnes** of CO₂ emissions avoided.
- Creation of up to **5 crore (50 million)** direct and indirect jobs — as per NITI Aayog estimates.

Key Recommendations from the Report

- **Strategic Policy Reforms**
- **Set Clear National EV Targets:** Time-bound EV sales mandates across vehicle categories. Example: 100% electric public bus fleets in **five major cities by 2027**.
- **Disincentivise ICE Vehicles:** Increase registration charges for internal combustion engine (ICE) vehicles. Gradually raise fossil fuel taxes. Phase out ICE vehicle registration in urban areas over time.
- **Mandate Zero-Emission Fleets:** Enforce EV adoption targets for fleet operators like taxis, delivery vehicles, and municipal transport systems.

Financial and Infrastructure Measures

- **Blended Financing Models:** Create pooled funds backed by government guarantees to reduce capital costs for large-scale fleet adoption.
- **Standardisation and Battery Management:** Introduce **unique battery IDs** to aid in **tracking, reuse, and recycling**. Develop a **battery data monitoring framework** to support resale markets.
- **City-Based Electrification Pilots:** Select **five urban centres** for full EV conversion of public transport, last-mile logistics, and shared mobility.
- **Build EV-Ready Urban Infrastructure:** Amend urban planning guidelines to include:
 - **Dedicated EV parking zones**
 - **Charging provisions in residential and commercial buildings**
- **Public Awareness Campaigns:** Nationwide outreach to tackle **range anxiety**, debunk EV myths, and educate consumers about **total cost of ownership (TCO)** advantages.

Institutional and Data Framework

- **Establish an Inter-Ministerial Task Force:** Ensure policy coordination between: Ministry of Power, Ministry of Road Transport and Highways (MoRTH), Department of Heavy Industries, Ministry of Environment and respective State Governments

- **Upgrade VAHAN and National Data Platforms:** Improve **classification and tracking** of EV registrations. Develop **real-time dashboards** capturing metrics like: Sales figures, Emissions saved, Battery performance

Conclusion

India's shift to electric mobility is **inevitable**, but its **pace and success** hinge on moving from intent to **actionable implementation**. NITI Aayog's report calls for a **holistic approach** — beyond just incentives — involving coordinated mandates, financing innovations, regulatory modernisation, and awareness-building. With 2030 looming, India must seize this window of opportunity to position itself as a global leader in the EV revolution — securing energy independence, environmental sustainability, and economic transformation.

With Tariffs, India's Growth Rate Requires Close Monitoring

Context

Recent U.S. trade actions have introduced major challenges to India's economic momentum and external sector stability.

Effective August 7, the U.S. imposed a 25% reciprocal tariff on Indian exports.

A second 25% penal levy, announced on August 6, will be enforced starting August 29, 2025, in response to India's continued crude oil imports from Russia.

These trade measures are expected to significantly affect India's trade balance, GDP growth, current account deficit (CAD), and its overall strategic trade alignment.

India-U.S. Trade Relationship

- India holds a merchandise trade surplus with the U.S., valued at \$41.18 billion in 2024–25, with the gap steadily increasing.
- The U.S. actions are impacting both sides of India's trade:
 - **Export Tariffs:** Target India's export competitiveness.
 - **Crude Oil Penalty:** Aims to limit Indian oil imports from Russia by imposing non-tariff trade pressure, possibly redirecting purchases to higher-cost U.S. oil.

These steps compromise the idea of free and fair trade, adding geopolitical undertones to what should be economic decisions.

Economic Impact of Reciprocal Tariffs

- **Exports:** A 25% export decline is expected, assuming an import elasticity of -1 .
- **Trade Deficit:** Could widen by 56% of GDP, increasing the overall deficit to 7.84%.
- **GDP Growth:** Projected to fall 6 percentage points, from 6.5% to 5.9%.
- **Current Account Deficit (CAD):** May climb from 0.6% to 1.15%.

For 2025–26, with four months passing before full implementation, the GDP dip may be -0.4% , with a proportionally smaller rise in the CAD.

Mitigating Factors & Caveats

Despite the adverse outlook, some buffers exist:

- **New Trade Deals:** India's UK trade agreement, and ongoing talks with the EU and others, could partially cushion export losses.
- **Competitive Advantage:** Tariff hikes on other nations by the U.S. might inadvertently shift demand back to Indian goods.
- **Rupee Depreciation:** A lower exchange rate ($₹87.5/\text{USD}$) could improve export competitiveness.

However, these factors may not offset the entire shock. Projections still suggest a 5% reduction in GDP growth and a similarly widened CAD for FY 2025–26.

If India is forced to switch from Russian to U.S. crude, the CAD could worsen further, the rupee may depreciate more, and inflation may rise, particularly if global oil prices increase.

Policy Recommendations for India

1. Engage Diplomatically with the U.S.: The current trade deal remains under negotiation, offering a chance to protect key sectors like agriculture, MSMEs, and allied industries.

2. Diversify Export Market: Although tough in the short term, a long-term pivot towards new markets is vital. India should also reassess its own tariff structure to support export sectors. Evidence shows India's own import tariffs negatively affect exports, with elasticity worse than -1.

3. Lower Input Tariffs: Reducing tariffs on imported inputs used in exports can strengthen manufacturing, improve trade resilience, and boost competitiveness.

The Penal Levy: Additional Pressure

- The second 25% tariff, termed a penal levy, mirrors the effects of the reciprocal tariff but is slightly mitigated by commodity exemptions.
- Combined, both measures could slash over 6 percentage points from the current year's GDP growth forecast.
- India views this action as discriminatory, especially since many nations import more from Russia without facing such penalties.

The three-week gap before the penalty becomes effective is a crucial window for diplomatic resolution.

Conclusion

These tariff actions reflect a broader trend of trade policy being used as a geopolitical tool. While India can deploy short-term measures—negotiations, currency adjustments, and diversified trade partnerships—the ongoing use of such unilateral actions threatens the foundations of a rules-based global trade system.

Moving forward, India must:

• protect its trade interests,
• strengthen export capabilities, and
• reduce overdependence on any single market or energy source.

In parallel, coordinated efforts with like-minded nations are essential to restore a non-discriminatory, stable trade order.

Industrial Accidents: The Human Cost of Indifference

Context

India's vast industrial base—including oil refineries, chemical plants, factories, and construction zones—is a critical engine of economic development. However, behind this progress lies an often-overlooked human tragedy: the deaths of thousands of workers in entirely preventable accidents. These incidents are not unfortunate acts of fate but reflect deep-rooted systemic failures—regulatory apathy, operational negligence, and a society that undervalues the lives of its workers.

The Magnitude of the Crisis

Government records, RTI data, and independent research all point to a severe industrial safety problem in India:

- Over the last five years, at least 6,500 workers have died in accidents at factories, mines, and construction sites—averaging nearly three deaths per day.
- States like Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu together account for over 200 major accident-related fatalities in the last decade.
- These figures exclude the informal and unregistered sectors, where real casualty numbers are likely far higher.
- A 2022 study by the Centre for Science and Environment (CSE) recorded over 130 serious chemical accidents in just 30 months post-2020, resulting in 218 deaths and more than 300 injuries.

Each number is not just a statistic, but a shattered family, a lost livelihood, and a community in mourning.

Common and Preventable Causes

What makes this situation particularly alarming is the ease with which most of these accidents could be avoided. Common safety failures include:

- **Lack of Fire No-Objection Certificates (NOC):** Many facilities operate without even basic fire clearance.
- **Faulty or Non-Existent Fire Systems:** Absence of alarms, extinguishers, or detection mechanisms.
- **No Permit-to-Work Systems:** Dangerous jobs proceed without proper risk evaluation or controls.
- **Lack of Training:** Migrant and contract workers often don't receive safety briefings, worsened by language barriers.
- **Blocked or Locked Fire Exits:** Frequently obscured or inaccessible due to poor design or storage practices.
- **Lack of Accountability:** Safety audits become formalities, legal action is rare, and financial penalties are insignificant.

Though such issues are prevalent in small and medium enterprises (SMEs), large corporations are not immune—many still prioritise speed and cost over long-term safety standards.

Global Comparisons: Where India Falls Behind

In countries like **Germany** and **Japan**, workplace safety is integrated into every aspect of design, management, and operations. India, by contrast, adopts a **reactive approach**, implementing reforms only in the aftermath of disasters. This mindset ensures accidents remain not occasional tragedies but persistent features of industrial life.

Geographic Concentration and Pattern of Recurrence

- Gujarat alone reported over 60 major industrial fires and gas leaks in 2021.
- Other states, including Maharashtra, Uttar Pradesh, and Chhattisgarh, reveal similarly dismal records.
- According to the Directorate General of Factory Advice Service and Labour Institutes (DGFASLI), India witnesses a **major industrial accident every two days** in registered units. The situation in unregulated sectors is largely undocumented.

The sequence is disturbingly familiar: a disaster occurs, public outrage ensues, temporary compensation is offered, a committee is formed—and then silence, until the next tragedy strikes.

Root Causes: Indifference and Class Bias

At the core of India's industrial safety crisis is **national indifference**:

- Regulatory bodies are understaffed or complicit.
- Companies reduce safety spending, viewing it as a cost instead of an obligation.
- Public concern is lacking—especially when victims are low-income, migrant, or contract workers.

A **class-based double standard** underlies this apathy: a safety failure in a high-end office or tech park triggers outrage; the same in a labour-intensive factory often passes unnoticed.

Rejecting the "Act of God" Narrative

Labeling industrial accidents as "acts of God" shifts accountability away from human actors and toward chance or fate. But these incidents are not natural disasters—they're the direct result of human failures, weak systems, and neglected responsibilities.

Nations like **South Korea** and **Singapore** have adopted **corporate manslaughter laws**, holding senior executives legally responsible for gross negligence in safety. India, so far, has avoided enacting similar measures.

Solutions: Charting a Path Forward

To break this cycle of neglect, India must:

- **Empower Labour Safety Boards:** Equip them with greater autonomy, better training, and sufficient resources.
- **Digitise Safety Reporting:** Create transparent, accessible databases for real-time risk assessment.
- **Protect Whistle-Blowers:** Ensure safety concerns can be raised without fear of retaliation.
- **Embed Safety Culture:** Make rigorous safety training and design standards mandatory across SMEs and large corporations.
- **Hold Executives Accountable:** Introduce legal provisions that assign responsibility for avoidable workplace deaths.

Conclusion

- The tools and knowledge to prevent these tragedies already exist. What's missing is the **political and institutional will**—from regulators, corporate leadership, and the public—to make worker safety a true national priority.
- Industrial safety is not a corporate favour; it is a **fundamental right** of every person who contributes to India's economic engine. Until India shifts from a post-crisis reaction to a **prevention-first mindset**, it will continue to silently affirm a disturbing truth: when it comes to the lives of the working poor, few truly care.

Paving the Path to 8% Growth

Introduction

India aspires to achieve developed nation status by 2047, marking its centenary of independence. To reach this milestone, the country must maintain an annual GDP growth rate of 8% or higher over the coming decades. This is a formidable ambition, especially in light of how rarely such high, sustained growth has been achieved globally.

Global Context: Historical and Comparative Perspective

- **Global Precedents:** Only a handful of nations—China, South Korea, Singapore, and Hong Kong—have successfully maintained growth rates exceeding 8% over a 25-year period.
- **India's Track Record:**
 - Between 2001–02 and 2023–24, India averaged a GDP growth rate of 6.3%.
 - When excluding the pandemic years, the average rises slightly to 6.7%.
 - This demonstrates a noticeable shortfall from the 8% growth benchmark India aims to achieve.

Key Challenges to Sustained High Growth

1. **Structural Inefficiencies:** Fundamental reforms across sectors such as agriculture, labour, land, and energy are essential to unlock higher growth.
2. **Geopolitical Risks:** Global tensions, shifting trade alliances, and supply chain disruptions create external uncertainties that can impact India's growth trajectory.
3. **Federal Constraints:** Several growth-critical reforms fall under state jurisdiction, necessitating greater alignment and cooperation between the Union and state governments.

Strategic Opportunities: India's Growth Enablers

- **Global Supply Chain Shifts:** As international businesses diversify away from China, India has a chance to position itself as a global manufacturing hub.
- **Demographic Edge:** India's youthful workforce, if effectively trained and employed, can serve as a long-term driver of productivity and growth.
- **Post-COVID Reform Momentum:** The economic rebound after the pandemic highlights India's ability to implement structural reforms and drive investment-led recovery.

CII's Five-Point Agenda to Achieve 8% Growth

Institutionalizing Reform Through Federal Consensus

- **Need for Alignment:** Many transformative reforms involve areas under state or concurrent jurisdiction.
- **Successful Example:** The GST Council facilitated the smooth implementation of indirect tax reforms via cooperative federalism.
- **Proposed Action:** Establish reform councils or an empowered group of secretaries under the Cabinet Secretary. Institutionalize these mechanisms in the Union Budget 2025–26 to drive productivity-enhancing reforms across sectors.

Accelerating Public Sector Disinvestment and Asset Monetization

- **Revenue Generation Potential:** Reducing government ownership in 80 listed PSUs to 51% could generate ₹10.3 lakh crore, as estimated by CII.
- **Case in Point:** The successful privatization of Air India demonstrates that such transitions are both feasible and impactful.
- **Recommendations:**
 - Form a dedicated task force including private-sector experts to oversee disinvestment.
 - Create a Disinvestment Fund to: Reduce public debt and Invest in rural development and social infrastructure.
 - Launch the second phase of the National Monetisation Pipeline (NMP 2.0), building on the 2021–2025 initiative.

Creating a Sovereign Wealth Fund for Strategic Global Investments

- **Purpose:** To safeguard India's economic interests and mitigate geopolitical uncertainties.
- **Focus Sectors:** Overseas investments in ports, logistics, cutting-edge technology, and critical minerals.
- **Funding Strategy:** Use proceeds from public sector disinvestment to seed the fund.

Expanding Irrigation Infrastructure to Reduce Monsoon Dependency

- **Present Challenge:** A significant portion of Indian agriculture still depends heavily on rainfall, leading to unpredictable food output and price instability.
- **Target:** Increase irrigation coverage to 80% of gross cropped area by 2030.
- **Expected Benefits:** Enhanced agricultural productivity; Lower vulnerability to food inflation; Greater climate resilience and income security for farmers.

Deepening Ease of Doing Business (EoDB) Reforms

- **Progress Made:** While India's ranking has improved, further reforms are needed to consolidate investor trust.
- Ensure the full functionality of the National Single Window System to streamline regulatory approvals.
- Fast-track the **Jan Vishwas Bill 2.0** to decriminalize business compliance.
- Implement the four labour codes to modernize workforce regulations and boost industrial relations.

Conclusion

Sustaining long-term GDP growth above 8% is not merely an economic objective—it represents a transformative national agenda. Achieving this goal requires strategic, well-sequenced reforms in fiscal management, federal governance, infrastructure, and ease of doing business. The **Confederation of Indian Industry (CII)'s five-point blueprint** provides a practical, actionable roadmap to unlock India's untapped potential and steer the country towards its **2047 development vision**.

Ensuring Healthy Years, Not Just Long Years

Introduction

While rising life expectancy is a sign of societal progress, it presents a challenge if those added years are dominated by illness, disability, and dependence. The real objective must be to reduce the gap between **lifespan** (total years lived) and **healthspan** (years lived in good health), ensuring that longer lives remain active, independent, and fulfilling.

Historical Gains in Longevity

- **Improvements in life expectancy** worldwide have been the result of:
 - **Public health advancements:** Safer drinking water, sanitation, better nutrition, and medical innovations lowered deaths from infectious diseases.
 - **Social progress:** Better education, economic development, and women's empowerment improved population health.
 - **Post-independence development** in former colonies enhanced healthcare access and infrastructure.
- However, a new challenge emerged:
 - Survivors of childhood diseases often faced long-term disabilities.
 - As populations aged, chronic conditions led to growing health dependency.

The Rise of Non-Communicable Diseases (NCDs)

- Today, the **leading contributors to death and disability** are: Cardiovascular diseases, cancers, diabetes, and chronic respiratory disorders.
- **Rising risk factors** include: Obesity, poor diets, smoking, excessive consumption of processed food and sugary beverages, and increasingly sedentary lifestyles.
- **Other contributing factors:** Mental health issues driven by emotional disconnect in a digitally connected world. Increasing incidents of road traffic injuries, suicide, and violence. Climate change and pollution introducing new public health threats.

The Global Healthspan-Lifespan Divide: A 2024 study (Garmany & Terzic) shows:

- Globally, the average difference between life expectancy and healthy life expectancy (HALE) from 2000–2019 was **9.6 years**.
- Women experienced a wider gap—**2.4 years more than men**—due to longer life spans but extended periods in poor health.
- In developed countries: USA had a gap of **12.4 years**, and the UK **11.3 years**, largely due to lifestyle-related conditions and aging populations.
- Low-income countries showed **narrower gaps**, though they require balanced improvements in both life and health expectancy.

India's Healthspan Challenge

- Between 2000 and 2019: **Life expectancy** increased by **0.43 years per year**. **Healthy life expectancy** improved slightly slower—**0.37 years per year**.
- By 2022, the **healthspan-lifespan gap** was **10.49 years**: Men: 9.22 years | Women: 11.77 years.
- Notably, **56.4% of India's total disease burden** is linked to poor diets (Economic Survey 2024).
- This health crisis threatens India's **demographic dividend**, as poor health among youth could reduce productivity and long-term growth.

Policy Priorities to Bridge the Gap

1. Lifelong Health-Oriented Approach

- **For children and mothers:** Tackle undernutrition, stunting, and improve access to healthcare.
- **For adolescents and young adults:** Reduce tobacco, alcohol, and drug use; combat physical inactivity; promote mental wellbeing.
- **For the elderly:** Develop geriatric care, manage chronic conditions, and expand palliative care services.

2. Risk Factor Mitigation

- **Dietary interventions:** Encourage consumption of fresh fruits, vegetables, and whole foods. Curb marketing of junk food and sugary beverages.
- **Physical activity:** Design walkable cities, build cycle lanes, and public recreational spaces.
- **Environmental health:** Strengthen pollution control measures and climate adaptation strategies.

3. Universal, Affordable Healthcare Access

- Enhance **primary healthcare systems** to integrate preventive, diagnostic, and treatment services.
- Expand reach using **digital health tools, telemedicine, and AI-driven solutions** to serve remote and underserved communities.

4. Behavioural and Policy Interventions

- Use **regulatory levers:** Taxation of tobacco, alcohol, and sugary drinks. Incentivise healthy consumption choices.
- Promote **health literacy:** Integrate health education into school curricula. Launch national campaigns on lifestyle diseases and preventive care.

Conclusion

As the most populous nation, India faces the pressing challenge of ensuring that longer lives are also healthier and more productive. The solution lies in a **comprehensive strategy** encompassing nutrition, lifestyle, healthcare delivery, and environmental safeguards. Without proactive action, gains in lifespan risk being undermined by poor health. India must now move from adding years to life toward adding **life to years**—ensuring each year lived is healthy, empowered, and dignified.

The Difficult Path for Trump's 'One Big Budget' Bet

Context and Overview

- In his second term, President Donald Trump launched an ambitious fiscal reform initiative known as the **Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE)**. This initiative aims to significantly cut **federal spending, deficits, national debt, and interest obligations**, while also modernising and streamlining government operations. A central element of this initiative is the reduction of the number of federal agencies from over **400 to 99**, with **Elon Musk appointed as an advisor** to help lead this overhaul.
- The initiative's flagship legislative proposal, known as the **One Big Beautiful Bill (OB BB)**, has become the focal point of debate. It promises sweeping budget reform but is now facing **political and economic obstacles**, particularly due to its **tax-cut-heavy structure** and the **risk of escalating long-term debt**.
- **The Root Problem: Low Revenue Collection Driving Debt and Deficits**
- Despite efforts to shrink the size of government, the **core fiscal issue in the U.S. remains persistently low revenue collection**, rather than excessive spending alone. Between 2001 and 2024, **U.S. public expenditure averaged just 36.49% of GDP**, the **lowest among major advanced economies (MAEs)**. Nevertheless, the U.S. ran a **fiscal deficit of 6.0% of GDP** and held a **debt burden of 119.5% of GDP in 2024**, both of which **exceeded MAE averages**.
- This mismatch between low spending and high debt arises mainly from **chronic revenue shortfalls**. Between 2001 and 2022, **U.S. government revenue averaged 30.55% of GDP**, ranking lowest among peer nations. Its **tax-to-GDP ratio of 19.27%** significantly lags behind countries like **France, Italy, and the OECD average**. Without substantial revenue generation, any effort at deficit control risks being undermined, regardless of spending reductions.

DOGE's Cost-Cutting Strategy and Structural Reforms

- The DOGE initiative has implemented sweeping cost-cutting measures, delivering substantial reductions in federal expenditures. These reforms include **cancelling underutilised leases**, terminating **wasteful contracts**, and **recovering misallocated funds**. DOGE has also focused on shrinking the federal workforce, using a combination of **hiring freezes**, **voluntary buyouts**, **layoffs based on performance metrics**, and **automation**.
- In addition, DOGE has slashed **overseas humanitarian aid** and **eliminated overlapping or inefficient departmental functions**. Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools have been introduced to monitor productivity and identify redundancies in government roles. Regulatory rollback has been another key priority, with DOGE **repealing or amending numerous federal rules**, achieving savings of **\$30.1 billion** and removing **1.8 million words** from the federal rulebook.
- A significant structural change has come through workforce downsizing tools like the **"Workforce Reshaping Tool"**, which has contributed to the **exit of around 260,000 federal employees**. DOGE claims to have generated **\$190 billion in savings**, translating to **\$1,180 per taxpayer**.
- The initiative also promotes **transparency and accountability** by making data on grant recipients, workforce size, and cost savings publicly accessible through dedicated digital portals. Moreover, DOGE tracks the disproportionate influence of bureaucracies on policy through its **"Unconstitutionality Index" (UI)** — a unique metric showing that for every law passed by Congress in 2024, **19 rules were introduced by federal agencies**.

Challenges to Long-Term Fiscal Sustainability

- Despite its early accomplishments, DOGE's long-term viability is now being questioned, especially following **Elon Musk's withdrawal of support** for the **One Big Beautiful Bill (OBBB)**. Musk's objection stems from the bill's removal of **electric vehicle tax credits**, a move seen as politically and economically regressive by climate advocates and clean tech investors.
- More concerning, however, is the **fiscal structure of the OBBB itself**. While it extends DOGE's cost-cutting approach, it also introduces **broad tax cuts** that heavily outweigh the planned expenditure reductions. Projections estimate the bill will **add \$3.2 trillion to the national debt over the next ten years**.
- This trajectory is further complicated by America's already **low corporate tax rates**, **below-average effective tax rates for the wealthy**, and **financial secrecy laws that enable tax evasion**. Without **major revenue-side reforms**, especially targeting tax compliance and equitable contribution, deficit reduction will remain elusive.
- Ultimately, unless revenue collection is substantially increased, **President Trump's vision of debt reduction through DOGE-style austerity may be unsustainable**. The initiative's success hinges not only on cutting costs but also on **strengthening the government's ability to generate revenue** — a factor that remains largely unaddressed in current policy.

Signing Off on an Entrenched Symbol of Stigma

Context and Announcement

In April 2025, Tamil Nadu Chief Minister M.K. Stalin made a significant announcement in the State Legislative Assembly: village names that include the word *"colony"* or contain explicit references to caste—such as *Pallappatti*, *Paraiyappatti*, *Naavidhan Kulam*, *Paraiyan Kulam*, and *Sakkilippatti*—would be removed from official records. These areas will be renamed with the broader aim of erasing visible markers of caste identity and reducing social stigma. Although largely symbolic, the move carries deep historical and cultural implications, especially in a state where caste-based spatial segregation has long been woven into the fabric of rural life.

Historical Roots of Caste-Based Segregation

- Caste-based segregation in Tamil Nadu has a long history that likely began around the 12th century CE, rooted in the *varnashrama* system. Literature from that period began documenting the physical isolation of labouring and marginalised communities, often placed at a distance from dominant caste settlements.
- Over centuries, this segregation became increasingly entrenched. During the Bhakti movement under the Chola dynasty, the temple became the social and spatial nucleus of village life, reinforcing caste hierarchies in the layout of villages. This continued under later regimes such as the Vijayanagara Empire and the Nayakkas, where caste divisions were enforced with even greater rigidity.
- The arrival of European colonial powers exacerbated these divisions. Colonial administrators introduced bureaucratic classifications that reinforced caste-based separations and formalised them through derogatory locality names in official documents. These names would persist into modern governance, long after their origins had faded from public memory.

The Linguistic Transformation of 'Chery' and 'Colony'

- The words *chery* and *colony*, which today are commonly associated with Dalit habitations in rural Tamil Nadu, had far more neutral connotations in earlier periods.
- In classical Tamil literature, such as the *Tolkappiyam* (7th century BCE) and *Kurunthokai* (5th century BCE), the word *chery* merely denoted a settlement or hamlet without any caste-based implication. However, by the medieval era, texts like the *Periya Puranam* (12th century CE) began to use terms such as *theendachery* (meaning "untouchable settlement"), clearly delineating caste boundaries within the language itself.
- The term *colony*, introduced by the British, initially referred to elite European settlements. But as it entered local usage in rural Tamil Nadu, it underwent a dramatic reversal. By the 20th century, *colony* was used almost exclusively to denote Dalit areas, becoming interchangeable with *chery* in describing caste-segregated geographies.

The Lingering Stigma of Caste-Tagged Place Names

- In rural Tamil Nadu, village names containing the term *colony* are rarely neutral. While in urban settings the word might appear in socially mixed localities—such as *Railway Colony* or *Jayendrar Colony*—in villages, it is almost universally recognised as an indicator of lower caste habitation.
- This linguistic signal functions as a form of coded caste identification. When such addresses appear on official documents—like Aadhaar cards, ration cards, voter IDs, passports, or driving licences—they can instantly trigger social bias. The implications go beyond mere social discomfort; they often result in discriminatory treatment, exclusion, and long-term psychological and economic harm for residents of these areas. The presence of caste-revealing locality names entrenches the barriers that marginalised communities are trying to overcome.

Efforts Toward Reform and the 2025 Renaming Drive

- Throughout the 20th century, there were several efforts to replace casteist terminology. Mahatma Gandhi introduced the term *Harijan* in an attempt to elevate the status of Dalits, but it eventually became yet another patronising label.
- More substantive efforts came from social reformers such as *Iyothee Thass Pandithar* and *M.C. Rajah*, who advocated for the term *Adi-Dravidar* in place of *Parayar* or *Panchamar*. This terminology was formally adopted by the Madras Presidency in 1922. Still, over time, even these more progressive terms came to be associated with marginalisation, reflecting the difficulty of detaching language from deep-rooted social hierarchies.
- The 2025 renaming initiative introduced by the Tamil Nadu government does not function as a welfare scheme in the conventional sense. Rather, it is a symbolic gesture aimed at addressing a cultural wound. The plan involves renaming villages currently identified by caste-laden terms, using names inspired by flowers, poets, scientists, and neutral cultural markers—while

avoiding politically charged names. Urban neighbourhoods like *Saibaba Colony* or *Velachery* will remain unchanged, as they are not viewed as caste indicators.

- The renaming seeks to restore dignity to communities, challenge linguistic caste markers, and foster social cohesion. Although it cannot dismantle caste-based discrimination on its own, it sends a powerful message: the state formally acknowledges the harm caused by caste-tagged geography and is committed to change.

Conclusion: A Symbolic Yet Historic Gesture

- The presence of caste-linked place names in Tamil Nadu is not just a relic of the past—it is an ongoing mechanism that reinforces social exclusion. The transformation of words like *chery* and *colony* from neutral descriptors to entrenched caste markers reveals how language can serve as a vehicle for both hierarchy and prejudice.
- By undertaking the removal of these terms from official records, the Tamil Nadu government is making a historic move—one that is symbolic, yet far-reaching in its potential to influence public perception. While renaming alone cannot bring structural equality, such symbolic reforms can reshape collective consciousness and lay the foundation for deeper, more sustained integration.

Reviving Civic Engagement in Health Governance

Context and Emerging Trends in Health Delivery

In recent years, several Indian states have launched innovative healthcare initiatives aimed at making health services more accessible and proactive. Among the most notable are Tamil Nadu's *Makkalai Thedi Maruthuvam* scheme, initiated in August 2021, and Karnataka's *Gruha Arogya* scheme, which was introduced in October 2024 and expanded statewide by June 2025. Both programmes prioritise the home-based delivery of healthcare services, with a particular focus on managing non-communicable diseases. While these efforts signify a commendable shift toward more responsive healthcare delivery, they also provoke an equally critical inquiry: as state systems work to physically reach citizens, to what extent are citizens enabled to actively engage with, influence, and shape the systems that govern their health?

The Imperative of Citizen Participation in Health Governance

India's health governance has transformed from a centrally managed structure into a multifaceted ecosystem involving a range of actors, including civil society organisations, professional associations, hospital groups, and trade unions. This ecosystem operates through a blend of formal mechanisms and informal networks, often shaped by entrenched power dynamics that determine whose voices are prioritised. Genuine public engagement in this space is not merely a bureaucratic formality; it affirms individual dignity, combats epistemic injustice, and reinforces democratic ideals by allowing citizens to meaningfully contribute to decisions affecting their health and well-being.

Concrete Benefits of Inclusive Civic Engagement

Active and inclusive citizen participation enhances governance in tangible ways. It improves accountability and transparency across the system, challenges elite capture and reduces opportunities for corruption, and fosters constructive collaboration with frontline health workers, which in turn strengthens service uptake and health outcomes. Moreover, it cultivates mutual trust between communities and healthcare providers. Without such engagement, health governance risks becoming top-down, disconnected, exclusionary, and misaligned with community realities and needs.

Existing Participation Frameworks and Their Persistent Gaps

- Efforts to institutionalise community engagement in healthcare began with the launch of the National Rural Health Mission (NRHM) in 2005. It established mechanisms such as Village Health Sanitation and Nutrition Committees (VHSNCs) and Rogi Kalyan Samitis, designed to include women and marginalised communities in health governance. These bodies were supported by untied funds intended for addressing local health needs. Urban counterparts such

as Mahila Arogya Samitis, ward committees, and NGO-led groups were introduced to ensure similar engagement in city contexts.

- Despite these frameworks, implementation remains patchy and inconsistent. In many areas, these bodies have never been constituted. Where they do exist, they are frequently undermined by irregular meetings, unclear mandates, and underutilised resources. Furthermore, poor intersectoral coordination and deeply embedded social hierarchies limit genuine inclusivity and participatory impact.

Structural and Perceptual Barriers to Engagement

- A key barrier to effective civic engagement lies in the prevailing mindset among policymakers, administrators, and healthcare providers, who often perceive communities as passive recipients of care rather than as active participants in shaping the health system. This attitude reveals a subtle but persistent paternalism, treating citizens as subjects of state intervention instead of recognising them as rights-holders. Performance metrics tend to focus on quantifiable outputs such as the number of people reached, rather than assessing the quality of engagement or the lived experience of care delivery.
- Health governance remains dominated by medical professionals, the majority of whom are trained in Western biomedical models and who often assume administrative responsibilities without formal training in public health. Career progression within this structure is largely based on seniority rather than merit or domain expertise, reinforcing a hierarchical and medicalised culture that often resists participatory approaches.

Charting the Way Forward

- Overcoming these challenges requires a profound shift in both mindset and practice. Community engagement must be recognised not merely as a tool for achieving programme outcomes, but as an intrinsic element of democratic health governance. When people are reduced to instruments for improving health metrics, their dignity and agency are compromised. Participation should be valued not only for its instrumental benefits but as a fundamental right in and of itself.
- Empowering communities requires widespread dissemination of accessible information about health rights and governance structures, along with sustained civic education beginning from an early age. Special effort must be made to reach and include marginalised populations, equipping them with the knowledge, skills, and resources necessary to engage meaningfully in governance processes.
- Equally essential is the sensitisation of health system actors. This involves moving beyond simplistic explanations that attribute low service utilisation to community ignorance or apathy. Instead, health providers and administrators must be encouraged to understand and address the structural determinants of health disparities. By reframing the relationship between citizens and the state as a partnership of equals, health systems can evolve into more inclusive, just, and responsive institutions.

A Court Ruling That Undermines Gender Justice

Context and Background

In July 2025, the Supreme Court of India delivered its ruling in *Shivangi Bansal vs Sahib Bansal*, which effectively upheld the suspension of arrests and coercive action under Section 498-A of the now-repealed Indian Penal Code (IPC), replaced by Section 85 of the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita. The verdict has sparked criticism for resting on flawed premises and for potentially endangering the criminal justice framework and the pursuit of gender equality. The decision is seen as a troubling development that could erode the protections originally designed to safeguard women from domestic cruelty.

Understanding Section 498-A and Its Intent

Section 498-A of the IPC, now codified as Section 85 of the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, was enacted in 1983 to address the growing incidence of domestic violence and dowry-related harassment. It penalises cruelty inflicted on a woman by her husband or his relatives, prescribing a maximum sentence of three years along with a fine. Cruelty under this provision includes dowry harassment, physical or mental abuse that could lead a woman to suicide, or actions that harm her health or life. Originally introduced in response to widespread dowry deaths, the law was expanded to cover the broader spectrum of cruelty within marriage. The legislative intent acknowledged that extreme outcomes like suicides or murders were only a fraction of the problem, and that sustained abuse often went unpunished without such a provision.

The Supreme Court's Endorsement of Temporary Protection from Arrest

The controversy stems from an earlier Allahabad High Court directive that imposed a two-month moratorium on arrests or coercive measures following the filing of a complaint under Section 498-A. During this period, cases would be referred to district-level family welfare committees. The Supreme Court has now endorsed this directive, granting blanket protection from arrest for two months, even in cases involving compelling evidence of violence. This endorsement was made in an individual case, without a comprehensive examination of its broader social consequences or adequate input from state authorities.

The implications of this ruling are significant. By suspending police action regardless of case specifics, the Court may inadvertently deter victims from reporting abuse and create a chilling effect on the police, who may be reluctant to pursue investigations with urgency. Critics argue that while mediation and reconciliation mechanisms are appropriate in civil family disputes such as child custody or divorce, they are fundamentally unsuitable in cases involving allegations of serious criminal violence. Penal law is meant to address harm to life, dignity, and bodily integrity, not to serve as a platform for forced compromise.

The 'Misuse' Narrative and Its Judicial Endorsement

- A major factor shaping the Court's decision is the longstanding narrative of alleged "misuse" of Section 498-A. This belief has been reiterated in various judicial pronouncements over the years. In *Preeti Gupta vs State of Jharkhand* (2010), the Court observed that many complaints lacked genuineness, while in *Sushil Kumar Sharma vs Union of India* (2005), it characterised misuse as "legal terrorism." In *Arnesh Kumar vs State of Bihar* (2014), the Court introduced stringent guidelines discouraging automatic arrests, requiring police to assess necessity under Section 41 of the Code of Criminal Procedure.
- These judicial interventions have already had a deterrent effect on police responsiveness. However, the assumption that misuse is widespread remains unproven. Most cases presented before courts involve subjective and conflicting accounts, making it difficult to establish broad patterns. Courts are not equipped to override the legislative judgment that led to the enactment of Section 498-A, which was informed by deeply entrenched patterns of domestic abuse and the difficulty of securing justice for women in patriarchal settings.

The Misleading Use of Conviction Rates

A commonly cited argument against Section 498-A is the low conviction rate, which, according to the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) 2022 data, stands at approximately 18%. However, such statistics can be misleading. This conviction rate is higher than that recorded for many other criminal offences. Furthermore, a low conviction rate does not necessarily indicate misuse. It more often reflects the complexity of proving domestic abuse that occurs in private spaces, systemic weaknesses in investigation, and the social and familial pressures that lead victims to compromise or withdraw complaints. The high burden of proof in criminal trials, compounded by the unwillingness of family members to testify, adds to the difficulty of securing convictions even in genuine cases.

Survey Evidence Challenges the Misuse Claim

- Empirical evidence further challenges the idea of widespread misuse. While NCRB data for 2022 indicates that 1,34,506 cases were registered under Section 498-A, the National Family Health Survey-5 reveals a significant level of under-reporting of domestic violence in numerous states. Women's rights organisations, such as Humsafar, suggest that any rise in reported cases is more likely the result of increased legal awareness and access to justice mechanisms than an actual increase in incidents. The existence of some false cases, though undeniable, does not undermine the law's necessity. Every law is vulnerable to some degree of misuse, but the veracity of complaints can only be ascertained through proper investigation and legal due process.
- By imposing a blanket suspension on arrests and effectively making the law dormant for an initial period, the Supreme Court has weakened a vital legal safeguard. Victims of domestic abuse are now more vulnerable, and their access to timely justice has been further restricted.

Conclusion: A Legal Precedent That Risks Undermining Justice

- The Court's approach in this case sets a worrying precedent by selectively applying enhanced scrutiny to certain criminal provisions. This disrupts the principle of uniformity within the criminal justice system and opens the door to potential systemic biases. It also contradicts the Court's own earlier stance in *Sushil Kumar Sharma* (2005), where it upheld the constitutionality of Section 498-A and explicitly stated that the possibility of misuse is not a valid reason to invalidate legislation.
- By endorsing a freeze on arrests without case-specific evaluations, the judiciary has inadvertently created a climate that may discourage victims from coming forward. It also sends a signal that protection under the law can be suspended without deep engagement with its social function. In doing so, the ruling undercuts decades of progress in recognising and addressing the gendered realities of domestic violence in India, ultimately narrowing the path to justice for countless women.

Recurring Monsoon Disasters in the Himalaya – Looking Beyond Climate Change Narratives

Context

The ongoing monsoon season has once again exposed the fragility of the lower Himalayan states, particularly Uttarakhand and Himachal Pradesh, which are reeling under the effects of severe erosion and flash floods. While public discourse often attributes such calamities directly to climate change, this narrow explanation overlooks deeper historical patterns and critical human-induced factors. In reality, localised drivers—such as unregulated construction and poor land-use planning—play a far more immediate and decisive role in heightening the region's vulnerability to disasters.

Historical Context of Himalayan Disasters

Contrary to the popular assumption that disasters in the Himalaya are new or solely climate-driven, the region has a long record of devastating natural events. The 2013 Kedarnath tragedy, for instance, was caused by a glacial lake outburst triggered by intense rainfall, unleashing a deadly flow of water and debris through the Mandakini Valley. Similarly, in 2011, flash floods in Assi Ganga near Uttarkashi destroyed a hydropower project and washed away labour settlements. The floods of 1970 and 1978 saw minor tributaries like the Alakananda and Bhagirathi becoming blocked by landslides, leading to temporary dams that eventually burst, releasing massive volumes of water and debris downstream. Even as far back as 1880, the Harsil region experienced a catastrophic flood near the very site of the most recent disaster. These examples underscore that while climate change may be intensifying certain dynamics, destructive monsoon events are not unprecedented.

Structural and Environmental Vulnerabilities

- The Himalayan terrain itself is inherently prone to natural hazards. Being geologically young and unstable, the mountains are vulnerable to hydrological extremes, erosion, and seismic activity. However, these natural risks are being significantly amplified by human activities. Unplanned and often illegal construction is a major contributor. Residential buildings, hotels, ashrams, and eateries continue to emerge on riverbanks and flood-prone areas with little regard for safety regulations. The massive expansion of tourism, particularly around the Char Dham Yatra, has led to road widening projects and the introduction of helicopter services, accelerating environmental degradation. The surge in pilgrim numbers has triggered an unchecked growth of hotels and eateries in hazard-prone zones.
- Urban sprawl adds to the crisis. Cities like Dehradun and Mussoorie have witnessed rapid construction even in streambeds and landslide-prone slopes, ignoring established restrictions. Such patterns of growth reflect a reckless disregard for ecological limits and disaster vulnerability.

Political and Administrative Complicity

Underlying these environmental and structural failures is a persistent pattern of political opportunism and bureaucratic inertia. Weak enforcement of land-use laws and building regulations in ecologically sensitive areas enables hazardous development to continue unchecked. Administrations have repeatedly failed to take pre-emptive measures, even when disaster risks are well documented. This systemic complacency has created a governance vacuum in which unsafe practices flourish.

The Problem of Oversimplified Climate Change Attribution

While the effects of global climate change—such as melting glaciers and erratic rainfall—are undoubtedly relevant, placing exclusive blame on them risks oversimplifying a much more complex set of causes. Climate change may act as a stress multiplier, but it is not the primary trigger in many instances. Inadequate planning, rampant deforestation, illegal construction, and encroachment on natural drainage systems are all preventable, man-made actions that significantly worsen the consequences of extreme weather events. Focusing solely on climate change detracts from holding local authorities, planners, and developers accountable for avoidable damage.

Pathways for Reform

Addressing the escalating frequency and severity of Himalayan disasters demands an urgent rethinking of land-use practices. It is essential to enforce zoning laws and rely on hazard mapping to guide future development. Religious and adventure tourism, while economically valuable, must be regulated through visitor caps in ecologically fragile areas. Infrastructure in such regions must be designed with an eco-sensitive and resilient approach, deliberately avoiding flood plains and unstable slopes. Equally important is the need for a shift in public awareness—from viewing disasters as inevitable outcomes of nature or climate to recognising them as consequences of human choices and governance failures.

A discourse focused solely on climate fatalism offers no solutions. Instead, accountability, sustainable planning, and community involvement must become the central pillars of disaster risk reduction in the Himalayan region.

Recognising Organ Donation as a Lifeline

Context and Background

- Organ transplantation represents one of modern medicine's most remarkable achievements, offering the most effective treatment for patients suffering from end-stage organ failure. Yet in India, a chronic and acute shortage of donor organs continues to pose a grave public health challenge. Each year, this shortage contributes to more than **500,000 avoidable deaths**.
- Although the number of transplants in India has improved significantly—from **4,990 in 2013 to 18,378 in 2023**—the number of procedures involving **deceased donors** remains

disproportionately low at just **1,099**. India's current **organ donation rate of 0.8 per million people** is far below that of countries like **Spain and the United States**, where the rate exceeds **45 per million**.

- This stark imbalance between the demand for organs and their actual availability has left countless patients without hope. Urgent attention is needed to dismantle long-held misconceptions, build public confidence, and introduce strong policy measures that could substantially increase organ donation rates in the country.

Confronting Misconceptions That Hinder Organ Donation

- One of the most persistent obstacles to organ donation in India is the presence of widespread **myths and fears** among families of potential donors. A commonly held belief is that **organ retrieval mutilates the body**, thereby preventing appropriate funeral rituals, or that the act of donating may be **inconsistent with religious beliefs**. However, organ removal is carried out with **dignity and care**, ensuring that the donor's appearance is preserved for customary rites. Furthermore, **all major religions in India endorse organ donation** as a compassionate, life-saving act that reflects deeply rooted spiritual values.
- Another pervasive concern is the **fear of premature brain death declarations** to facilitate organ extraction. This fear is not supported by facts. In India, the certification of brain death is governed by the **Transplantation of Human Organs and Tissues Act, 1994**, which outlines a **rigorous, transparent, and legally mandated process**. This process involves the confirmation of brain death by multiple medical specialists, repeated clinical assessments at specific intervals, and detailed documentation—safeguards that ensure ethical and unbiased decision-making.
- Overcoming these damaging myths requires **sustained public education**. Increased awareness will not only dispel misinformation but will also help to normalise and encourage conversations about organ donation as a generous and meaningful final act.

Dispelling Misbeliefs About Age and Eligibility

- Another significant misunderstanding is the assumption that **only young individuals, especially those who die in accidents**, can become organ donors. In truth, **a wide range of organs and tissues**—such as **kidneys, segments of the liver, lungs, corneas, skin, bone, and heart valves**—can also be donated by **elderly individuals** or those who pass away due to **natural causes**.
- To tackle such entrenched beliefs, ongoing and diverse **awareness campaigns** are essential. **Television programs, digital media initiatives, and personal stories** from donor families and recipients can provide relatable examples and emotional resonance. **Community engagement**, particularly through **workshops facilitated by trained grief counsellors**, can directly address questions regarding funeral practices, medical suitability, and the donation process.
- In addition, incorporating **organ donation education** into **school and university curricula** can help foster a spirit of empathy and generosity from an early age. **Peer-driven outreach programs** can further enhance the reach and emotional connection of these efforts.
- **Health-care professionals** also have a vital role to play. With appropriate training, they can engage families in sensitive yet informed conversations about the benefits and procedures of organ donation. Hospitals with **dedicated transplant coordination teams**, such as **Apollo Hospitals**, are already demonstrating how such guidance can ease family concerns and lead to more informed, compassionate choices.

Restoring Public Trust Through Systemic and Policy Reforms

- Addressing India's wide gap between organ demand and availability requires not just public outreach, but also a **national strategy backed by strong policy frameworks**. An approach

that shows promise is the **presumed consent model**, already implemented with success in countries like **Spain and Croatia**. Under this model, every adult is considered a potential organ donor by default unless they **opt out**.

- However, for presumed consent to gain acceptance and operate ethically in India, it must be accompanied by **transparent protocols, trustworthy family support mechanisms**, and an accessible **grievance redressal system**. Only then can the public develop confidence in the system's integrity and fairness.
- The goal is not just legislative change, but a **cultural shift**—one that views organ donation not as an uncomfortable topic but as a shared moral responsibility.

Conclusion: A Legacy of Compassion

- Organ donation must be recognised not only as a **life-saving medical intervention** but also as a **selfless humanitarian gesture** that extends life and hope to others. On the occasion of **World Organ Donation Day (August 13)**, every Indian adult is encouraged to **register as an organ donor**, and families are urged to **respect and uphold this decision**.
- By debunking myths, enabling systemic reform, and promoting a culture of empathy and shared responsibility, India can move towards a future where **no individual dies simply due to the unavailability of an organ**. Organ donation is not just about saving a life—it is about leaving behind a legacy of care, humanity, and hope.

Debunking the Myth of Job Creation

Context

On **July 1, 2025**, the government launched the **Employment Linked Incentive (ELI) Scheme** with a significant allocation of **₹99,446 crore**, aiming to stimulate large-scale job creation across the country. While the scale of the initiative signals strong political intent to tackle India's chronic unemployment issues, its **employer-oriented framework** and narrow focus raise several pressing concerns.

India's labour market is marked by **profound asymmetries** between capital and labour, a **sharp divide between formal and informal sectors**, and a persistent **mismatch between the available jobs and the skills of jobseekers**. In such a scenario, the ELI Scheme risks **exacerbating existing inequalities** rather than resolving them.

Employer-Centric Focus and the Skill Mismatch Challenge

At its foundation, the ELI Scheme follows an **employer-driven approach**, incentivising job creation—particularly in the **manufacturing sector**—through **direct fiscal support to employers**. However, this approach fails to address the **deep structural problem of skill mismatch** that plagues the Indian labour market.

According to the **Economic Survey 2024–25**, just **8.25% of graduates** find employment that matches their qualifications. More than **half of them are underemployed**, often working in **semi-skilled or elementary jobs**. The disparity becomes more apparent when examined through the lens of wages:

- **46% of graduates** in low-skill roles earn less than **₹1 lakh per annum**,
- While only **4.2%** in specialised jobs earn between **₹4–8 lakh per annum**.

Adding to this disconnect is the fact that only **4.9% of Indian youth** receive **formal vocational training**, illustrating the profound **misalignment between workforce preparedness and industry demand**.

Under these conditions, subsidising employers to hire an **under-skilled and underprepared workforce** contributes little to boosting national productivity or improving worker well-being. Instead, it enhances employers' bargaining power, deepens wage disparities, and entrenches a **low-skill, low-wage employment trap** for much of the workforce.

Critical Concerns with the Employment Linked Incentive Scheme

Formal Sector Bias and Informal Sector Exclusion

A fundamental limitation of the scheme is its dependence on **Employee's Provident Fund Organisation (EPFO) registration** as the primary criterion for eligibility. This design choice **effectively excludes nearly 90% of India's workforce**, which operates in the **informal sector**.

By focusing on formal-sector enterprises—already better positioned in terms of resources and access to credit—the scheme marginalises **informal workers**, who often lack job contracts and social security. This further **cements a dual labour market**, wherein government support is concentrated in the formal sector, while the informal economy, which absorbs the majority of new entrants into the labour market, is **left under-resourced and unsupported**.

Risks of Artificial Employment and Misuse

- Without adequate monitoring mechanisms, the ELI Scheme could inadvertently promote **disguised unemployment**—situations in which individuals are technically employed but contribute little to overall productivity, a condition commonly seen in **agriculture and informal services**.
- Employers may also manipulate the system by **reclassifying existing jobs as newly created ones** to avail of the subsidies, thereby **defeating the scheme's intended purpose**.
- **Sectoral Bias and Gendered Exclusion**
- Another major flaw in the scheme lies in its **heavy focus on manufacturing**—a sector that now contributes to **less than 13% of total employment** in India. In contrast, **agriculture and services combined employ nearly 70% of the workforce**. Given the rapid rise of **automation and capital-intensive technologies**, manufacturing no longer has the **employment-generating capacity** it once did.
- This **sectoral imbalance** disproportionately disadvantages **women, rural youth, and informal workers**, most of whom are concentrated in **low-skilled service sectors or agriculture**. Thus, the scheme's limited sectoral scope may further entrench existing social and economic exclusions.

A More Inclusive and Equitable Approach to Employment

- While the ELI Scheme signals genuine intent to tackle unemployment, its current structure has the potential to **deepen systemic inequities** in the labour market. A **more balanced and inclusive strategy** must go beyond subsidising employers and focus on **long-term investments in education, skill development, and worker rights**.
- What is needed is a **coherent policy shift**—from increasing employment numbers in the short term to **sustaining meaningful employment** that enhances both **productivity and dignity of work**. This requires aligning vocational training with actual market needs, improving the coverage of social protection schemes, and ensuring that informal workers are not left out of the development process.

Conclusion

True employment generation cannot be reduced to wage-based incentives for employers. It must address the **root causes of underemployment**—including **poor skilling infrastructure, limited social safety nets, and imbalanced job growth across sectors**.

To be genuinely effective, an employment strategy must reflect the **complex and diverse realities of India's labour market**, ensuring that opportunities for decent work are available to both **formal and informal sector workers** alike. Only then can economic growth translate into **equitable and inclusive prosperity** for all.

The Ceding of Academic Freedom in Universities

Universities hold a distinctive and vital role in society—not only as centers for transmitting existing knowledge but also as crucibles for generating new ideas, challenging established orthodoxies, and fostering independent thinking. This mission depends fundamentally on the freedom of scholars and students to question, debate, and explore ideas without fear of censorship or external interference. The overall health and effectiveness of a university system are intrinsically linked to the degree of intellectual autonomy it enjoys. When academic freedom is compromised, the negative repercussions extend far beyond the campus, permeating society, the economy, and the political landscape at large.

The Crucial Role of Academic Freedom

- Academic freedom is essential because it enables the interrogation of established knowledge. For students, this means more than rote memorization; it involves developing the ability to critically examine accepted truths, challenge prevailing opinions, and resist undue submission to authority—whether that authority is spoken or written. For faculty members, academic freedom ensures they can pursue research in directions dictated by scholarly merit rather than political or bureaucratic agendas. Institutions themselves must be free to address pressing economic, social, and political issues openly, thereby fulfilling their role as intellectual catalysts that contribute meaningfully to public life.
- This freedom also encompasses the right to invite speakers with diverse viewpoints, set research priorities independently, and engage in unconventional or dissenting inquiries. Such openness is not merely beneficial but indispensable for the advancement of knowledge. Fundamental research thrives in environments rich with liberty and resources, enabling exceptional thinkers to innovate and excel.

The Crisis in Indian Higher Education

- The ideal of academic freedom is increasingly under threat in India. University autonomy faces growing constraints due to state intervention in curricula, mandated reading lists, and control over research funding. Decisions about what can be taught are often made beyond the educators' control, with certain texts outright banned from syllabi. This suppression is especially pronounced in the social sciences and humanities, where research diverging from mainstream narratives frequently encounters censorship.
- The centralization of authority extends well beyond academics. Faculty members often require official permissions to attend international conferences, with conditions attached that prohibit any criticism of the government, even while abroad. Private universities are not immune to these pressures; many adopt self-censorship strategies to maintain favorable relations with political authorities. The cumulative effect is a stifling of critical discourse, a decline in research culture, and a missed opportunity for India's universities to attain global excellence—reflected notably in the absence of Nobel laureates from Indian institutions.

Autonomy, Accountability, and Democracy

- University autonomy is not solely an academic concern; it is foundational to the functioning of a healthy democracy. Economically, universities drive innovation, generate policy ideas, and advance technological progress. Socially, they act as the conscience of society, with scholars engaging the public as intellectual commentators. Politically, universities contribute to government accountability through informed critique and evaluation.
- However, autonomy must be balanced with accountability, and this accountability should primarily be towards students and society at large, not the government. Governance structures within universities must be transparent and responsive. While government funding for public universities is necessary, such funding should never become a tool for political control. Instead, accountability should be maintained through mechanisms like rankings, public performance assessments, and independent peer review, rather than direct interference in academic matters.

A Global Context of Control and Conformity

- The struggle between academic freedom and government control is not unique to India. Democratically elected governments in countries such as Argentina, Hungary, and Türkiye have also attempted to curtail university independence. In authoritarian regimes like China and Russia, restrictions are far more severe, particularly in disciplines such as the social sciences and humanities.
- China presents a complex case: despite political constraints, some elite institutions maintain rigorous academic hiring standards and produce high-quality research in many fields. Even in the United States, often regarded as a bastion of academic freedom, actions such as research funding cuts under the Trump administration have raised concerns about the erosion of the country's global academic leadership.
- Across these varied contexts, the underlying motives for government interference tend to be similar: a fear of dissent, a desire for ideological conformity, or discomfort with independent scholars asking challenging questions.

The Consequences of Curtailing Academic Freedom

Restricting academic freedom inevitably diminishes the quality of both education and research. When a culture of fear or compliance takes hold, intellectual stagnation follows, deterring students and faculty alike from pursuing innovative or bold ideas. Over time, the ramifications extend far beyond universities. Economies deprived of fresh ideas lose their competitive edge; societies without critical voices lose their capacity for self-reflection; and political systems without informed dissent risk sliding into authoritarianism.

Conclusion

The lesson is clear and unequivocal: academic freedom is not a luxury but an essential foundation for the advancement of knowledge, the vitality of democracy, and the overall well-being of society. For India, and indeed for any nation, the path forward demands granting universities full autonomy—academic, financial, and administrative—while simultaneously instituting strong accountability systems focused on serving the public. Without such reforms, higher education risks devolving into a sterile exercise in conformity rather than fulfilling its potential as a dynamic and vibrant crucible of ideas.

India's Drone Diplomacy: Capitalizing on the Indo-Pacific Advantage

The 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh conflict marked a pivotal moment in the evolution of modern warfare, highlighting the critical role of drones in combat operations. This shift was further emphasized during India and Pakistan's Operation Sindoor in May 2023, when unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) and unmanned combat aerial vehicles (UCAVs) transitioned from mere reconnaissance tools to decisive weapons capable of precision strikes. This article explores the progression of drone warfare, India's commitment to modernizing its UAV fleet, and the strategic potential within the Indo-Pacific drone market amid the waning dominance of the United States.

India's Drive for Drone Modernization

- In the aftermath of Operation Sindoor, India accelerated its efforts to upgrade its unmanned aerial capabilities. In 2024, it acquired 31 MQ-9B Reapers from the United States, including the SkyGuardian and SeaGuardian variants, enhancing its maritime surveillance and strengthening strategic partnerships. However, these acquisitions address only part of the broad spectrum of India's defense requirements, especially given the challenges posed by high-altitude contested borders with Pakistan and China.
- India's needs encompass not only high-altitude, long-range fixed-wing drones capable of carrying heavy payloads for precision strikes but also smaller, cost-efficient UAVs for specialized missions. Presently, the Indian UAV fleet relies heavily on older Israeli platforms such as the

Harop loitering munition and the Heron medium-altitude drones. While effective, these systems lag behind the latest global advancements. Much of India's inventory consists of legacy imports predating the last decade, with only a limited number of indigenous systems in service, underscoring the urgency for broader and faster upgrades.

Shifting Strategies in Drone Procurement

- Traditionally, India has depended on procuring advanced drones from the U.S., but recent trends show a strategic shift towards acquiring American components like engines and electronic payloads rather than complete systems. Globally, the UAV market is dominated by the U.S., China, Türkiye, and Israel. Nevertheless, American drones have faced criticism for falling behind Russian and Chinese counterparts.
- Strict compliance with the Missile Technology Control Regime (MTCR) has restricted the U.S. to a mere 8% share of the export market by the end of 2023, trailing far behind China and Türkiye. However, recent policy reforms might help the U.S. regain some ground. Meanwhile, India is addressing capability gaps through a combination of imports, joint ventures, and domestic production, largely relying on Israeli and select European suppliers. Due to strained relations with China and Türkiye, these countries are unlikely to serve as reliable sources for critical defense technology.
- Looking ahead, India must not only secure its UAV needs but also position itself as a potential major supplier of fixed-wing drones for the Indo-Pacific region, leveraging its growing technological expertise.

China's Expanding Influence and India's Strategic Opening

- Several Indo-Pacific nations—including Vietnam, the Philippines, Taiwan, South Korea, and Japan—continue to grapple with tensions involving China, particularly over disputed maritime territories. For these countries, maintaining robust Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA) is essential to counter China's 'gray-zone' tactics, which involve deploying coast guard vessels and maritime militias to assert territorial claims covertly, while safeguarding fisheries, energy exploration areas, and sovereign rights.
- 'Gray-zone' tactics refer to coercive actions that exist in a space between peace and outright war, creating complex security challenges. While Israel is unlikely to be a dependable defense supplier due to its focus on ongoing conflicts in West Asia, Türkiye has emerged globally as a supplier of affordable, high-performance drones. However, given India's adversarial relationship with Türkiye, New Delhi has a strategic interest in limiting Ankara's influence in the region through proactive drone diplomacy.
- Many Indo-Pacific countries share similar geographic and operational challenges with India, such as the need for high-altitude border surveillance and extensive maritime monitoring. Should India develop UAV systems tailored to its unique security environment, it could export these technologies to meet the strategic and operational demands of regional partners. This would enhance India's defense diplomacy while providing a counterbalance to China's expanding footprint.

India's Prospects in the Indo-Pacific Drone Market

- The diminishing dominance of the U.S. in the Indo-Pacific drone market has opened a contested space that India is well-positioned to occupy strategically. By filling this gap, India can boost both its trade and geopolitical influence while simultaneously fulfilling its own defense needs. Despite challenges such as bureaucratic inefficiencies and a defense industry heavily reliant on the public sector, India can leverage its robust defense ties with Israel and its experience with joint ventures to strengthen domestic UAV production capabilities.
- Rather than pursuing solely complete indigenous production, India could pursue technology-sharing partnerships with like-minded Indo-Pacific nations. This collaborative approach would

accelerate the development of drone technologies and foster trust-based alliances in a region increasingly defined by strategic competition and polarization.

Conclusion

India's capacity to develop and export UAVs tailored to regional needs offers a path to securing its own strategic objectives, countering China's influence, and establishing itself as a pivotal defense partner in the Indo-Pacific. Through focused modernization, strategic diplomacy, and collaborative technology sharing, India can seize the emerging drone market opportunities and reinforce its standing in the evolving geopolitical landscape.

Balancing Code and Commerce in the U.K. Trade Compact

The India–United Kingdom Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement (CETA), with a particular emphasis on Chapter 12 concerning digital trade, marks a significant milestone in India's evolving approach toward international trade governance. Historically, India has tended toward cautious protectionism in digital policy, wary of the challenges posed by rapid technological changes and data governance issues. However, this agreement signals a noticeable shift toward strategic engagement with global digital markets, reflecting a more nuanced approach. It is crucial to undertake a thorough analytical examination of the digital trade chapter, focusing on the tangible benefits, potential risks, and the necessary policy measures that can balance openness in trade with the preservation of national sovereignty.

Digital Gains: Reducing Friction and Expanding Market Access

- One of the prominent advantages of the digital trade chapter lies in its efforts to reduce transaction friction and broaden market access. The mutual recognition of electronic signatures and contracts stands out as a critical provision, especially for small and medium enterprises (SMEs), which often face disproportionate administrative costs. By fostering paperless trade mechanisms and electronic invoicing, the agreement simplifies bureaucratic processes, facilitating smoother cross-border commercial activities. Furthermore, maintaining zero customs duties on electronic transmissions protects India's software export sector, which currently contributes around \$30 billion annually to the economy.
- The agreement's encouragement of regulatory sandboxes represents another significant benefit. These sandboxes provide a controlled environment for payments and data-driven companies to pilot innovative technologies under official supervision. This approach not only enhances consumer trust but also bolsters India's international credibility, positioning the country as a key player not only in IT service exports but also in shaping global digital regulatory frameworks.
- In addition to digital-specific benefits, this chapter complements broader trade concessions under CETA. For example, the elimination of a 12% tariff on crucial textile exports is expected to invigorate manufacturing hubs such as Tiruppur and Ludhiana. Indian IT companies gain increased access to U.K. public procurement markets, while social security waivers for temporary workers reduce employer payroll costs by as much as 20%. Together, these measures promise to institutionalize a more stable and mutually beneficial corridor for trade between the two nations.

Digital Costs: Constraints on Oversight and Sovereignty

- Despite these advantages, certain provisions raise concerns about regulatory oversight and sovereignty. Perhaps the most debated is the prohibition on blanket source-code inspections. Under the agreement, regulators can only access source code during specific investigations or via judicial processes, with exceptions made for government procurement and critical infrastructure. While proponents argue that this provision prevents arbitrary or excessive

intervention, critics fear it undermines India's ability to exercise full regulatory control over digital technologies. A potential compromise could involve accrediting independent, trusted laboratories to conduct sensitive code reviews under strict safeguards, striking a balance between trade facilitation and national security.

- When it comes to governance over government data, the agreement limits India's obligations to voluntary data publication, preserving a degree of discretion. While this safeguards sovereignty, it may weaken the potential benefits of open data for cross-border innovation and collaboration. Additionally, the agreement's treatment of cross-border data flows avoids granting automatic most-favoured-nation (MFN) status. Instead, it provides for a forward-review mechanism, which offers flexibility but also introduces uncertainty for businesses that depend on consistent data governance policies to make long-term investments.
- Another critical point involves the review mechanisms embedded in the compact. Although the agreement mandates a review within five years, this timeline may prove insufficient in the face of rapid technological advancements, such as those in artificial intelligence and cybersecurity. Institutionalizing a more frequent review cycle—perhaps every three years—would enable more agile adjustments to trade rules, aligning them better with emerging technological risks and innovations.

Domestic Anchors for International Commitments

India's external trade commitments require strong domestic policy frameworks as a foundation. For example, the Digital Personal Data Protection Act of 2023, while legislated, has yet to be fully operationalized through the issuance of subordinate rules and guidelines. Without these frameworks firmly in place, India risks making international commitments that outpace its internal regulatory preparedness. Moreover, procedural reforms are essential to build legitimacy and broaden policy discourse. Institutionalizing pre-negotiation consultations with industry stakeholders, civil society organizations, and subject matter experts would help anchor international agreements within democratic accountability and ensure that diverse perspectives are incorporated.

Policy Implications: Towards a Balanced Digital Trade Strategy

To reconcile the benefits of trade openness with the imperative of oversight, accrediting trusted independent laboratories for source-code review appears to be a promising approach. This would allow India to meet its trade obligations without compromising on security. Strengthening data accountability through mandated audit trails for cross-border data intermediaries could ensure that responsibility follows the data itself, fostering both transparency and enforcement capacity. Lastly, adopting a triennial review mechanism for digital trade chapters would provide necessary agility in aligning trade policies with the rapidly evolving technological and security environment.

Conclusion

The digital trade provisions within the India-U.K. Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement reflect a pragmatic and thoughtful recalibration of India's trade policy. While the agreement offers considerable benefits—such as reducing trade barriers, expanding export opportunities, and enhancing international credibility—it also introduces constraints on regulatory autonomy that must be carefully managed through domestic policy measures. Ultimately, India's participation in structured digital trade agreements marks a maturation of its policy stance, moving from defensive protectionism toward strategic global engagement. This evolution recognizes that sovereignty in the digital age is less about isolation and more about calibrated openness and informed participation in shaping international digital norms.

The Politics and Decline of Left-Wing Extremism

- This article explores the political dynamics and the significant decline of Left-Wing Extremism in India, contrasting it with the continuing threat of global terrorism. It traces the rise and eventual fall of Naxalism, assesses government strategies employed to counter it, and critically examines the misuse of the term “urban naxals.” The analysis highlights how India’s specific socio-political context, combined with sustained policy measures and security campaigns, has led to a notable reduction in ideologically motivated violence. This trajectory is markedly different from prevailing global trends where terrorism remains pervasive.
- Globally, terrorism continues to pose a persistent challenge even 25 years after the 9/11 attacks. Recent Islamic State (IS)-inspired assaults, such as the vehicle-ramming incident in New Orleans in January 2025, underscore the ongoing menace. Online extremist campaigns encourage lone-wolf attacks, while rising anti-Israel demonstrations provide further fodder for extremist propaganda. Counter-terrorism experts warn that the integration of Artificial Intelligence (AI) and the increased accessibility of bio-weapons could escalate the destructiveness of future terrorist acts.
- In stark contrast to this global scenario, India has witnessed a steady decline in ideologically driven terrorism, particularly the Naxalite insurgency. The Union Home Minister’s recent announcement predicting the potential elimination of Naxalism by mid-2026 marks the first official declaration signaling the possible end of decades of violent unrest. Initially revered as a revolutionary movement, Naxalism once mobilized marginalized tribal communities and the urban poor under the leadership of figures like Charu Mazumdar, Kanu Sanyal, and Kondapalli Seetharamaiah.
- Despite its early promise, the movement devolved into violent excesses and gradually lost its ideological appeal. What was once a nationwide phenomenon fragmented into multiple regional factions, now largely restricted to forested areas in central India, particularly parts of Andhra Pradesh, Maharashtra, and Chhattisgarh. Earlier predictions of its decline during the 1970s and 1990s did not yield definitive results; however, the current downward trajectory appears more lasting and substantive.
- The revolutionary zeal that once inspired India’s brightest youth, influenced by global icons such as Mao Zedong, Ho Chi Minh, and Che Guevara, has largely dissipated. The rallying cry, “China’s Chairman is our Chairman,” which had deeply resonated with many activists, has faded into obscurity. What remains are splintered groups engaged in localized violence, signaling the end of an era defined by ideological militancy—a phenomenon often referred to as the “Spring Thunder” insurgency.
- Since 2024, under the Union Home Minister’s leadership, security forces have conducted a coordinated offensive targeting Naxalite groups across multiple states. Though estimates vary, even the banned CPI (Maoist) admitted to 357 deaths among its cadres within a year, with women constituting more than a third of these casualties. The Dandakaranya region, encompassing Bastar in Chhattisgarh, Gadchiroli in Maharashtra, and parts of Odisha and Andhra Pradesh, remains the focal point of residual violence. Internal leadership crises, especially following the ousting of Ganapathi in 2018, have further debilitated the movement.
- India’s approach to combating Naxalism stands in clear contrast to the United States’ “war on terror” under President Trump. The U.S. campaign largely targeted jihadist groups without ideological specificity, often relying on direct military interventions abroad, such as strikes in Somalia and Yemen. In contrast, Indian Naxalites have historically lived among villagers and maintained close social ties with local populations. This socio-political embeddedness necessitated a more measured response, with the Indian government exercising greater caution and avoiding indiscriminate use of force except in extreme circumstances.

- The guiding principles behind India's anti-Naxal campaign reflect efforts by successive central and state governments to prevent revolutionary groups, despite their democratic claims, from undermining the established social order. While the original Naxalite leaders espoused ideologies aimed at creating a more egalitarian society, their failure to achieve meaningful reforms gave way to widespread violence. Over time, factions retained only a thin veneer of ideological commitment, resorting increasingly to indiscriminate attacks and thus losing much of their earlier legitimacy.
- The misuse of the term "urban naxals" further complicates the discourse. The original Naxalite movement of the late 1960s, although misguided in many ways, was rooted in a coherent Marxist-Leninist ideology. Today's so-called "urban naxals" are loosely connected intellectuals and activists critical of government policies but bear little resemblance to the original movement. Misclassifying these individuals risks distorting historical realities and producing flawed policy responses, potentially exacerbating risks and unintended consequences. Addressing these challenges requires a nuanced and unbiased understanding free from cognitive biases and political agendas.
- In conclusion, India's decline in Left-Wing Extremism, particularly Naxalism, marks a historic turning point. This outcome reflects a combination of effective strategic interventions, careful policymaking, and the gradual fading of ideological militancy amidst an environment of persistent global terrorism threats. India's experience offers a unique model of managing internal security challenges through calibrated responses and sustained political will.

Supreme Court's Intervention in Electoral Roll Revision – Continuity with Past Judgments

- The recent Supreme Court order in the case of Association for Democratic Reforms (ADR) versus the Election Commission of India (ECI) in 2025, concerning the Special Intensive Revision (SIR) of electoral rolls in Bihar, reflects a continuity with its landmark ruling in Lal Babu Hussain versus Electoral Registration Officer (1995). Both cases revolve around crucial issues related to citizenship verification, the potential exclusion of voters, and the fundamental constitutional right to vote.
- Looking back at the Lal Babu Hussain case from 1995, the Election Commission attempted to classify certain voters as non-citizens. The Supreme Court firmly ruled that no individual should be compelled to prove their citizenship unless credible and specific evidence points to doubt regarding their status. Furthermore, the Court mandated that Electoral Registration Officers (EROs) conduct thorough inquiries, allowing affected voters the opportunity to submit all possible evidence to establish their citizenship. This decision, while grounded in constitutional principles, sparked considerable political backlash against the then-ruling Congress party.
- In the present scenario, the issue concerns the Special Intensive Revision (SIR) of electoral rolls in Bihar. The legal framework governing electoral roll revisions is laid down by the Representation of the People Act (RPA), 1950, and the Registration of Electors Rules, 1960. These laws provide for summary revisions and intensive revisions but do not explicitly recognize or authorize a "Special Intensive Revision." Thus, the SIR exercise currently lacks clear statutory backing. The Election Commission's rationale for introducing SIR is to eliminate non-citizens from the voter lists. However, this process is contentious on multiple grounds.
- Firstly, the ECI relies solely on the 2003 electoral roll as the valid baseline, disregarding subsequent updates and revisions. Secondly, the Commission restricts acceptable proof of identity to a very narrow range of documents, notably excluding widely used identification such as Aadhaar cards and Electoral Photo Identity Cards (EPIC). This restrictive approach effectively

shifts the burden of proof onto citizens, compelling them to establish their own citizenship rather than requiring the authorities to justify their exclusion. A comparable situation arose in 1994 in Delhi and Mumbai, where ration cards were initially not accepted as valid proof until the Bombay High Court intervened to rectify the situation.

- The Supreme Court's 2025 order addresses these concerns decisively. It directs the Election Commission to ensure that draft electoral rolls are made accessible and searchable by the public. It also mandates that the ECI provide clear reasons whenever a voter is excluded from the rolls. Importantly, the Court instructs the acceptance of a broader array of documents as proof of identity, including Aadhaar and EPIC, thus enhancing the inclusivity and fairness of the process.
- This order carries significant implications. It upholds the principles of transparency and natural justice, shifting the focus from stringent citizenship verification towards ensuring the accuracy and inclusiveness of electoral rolls. It represents a balanced approach that protects voters' rights without compromising the integrity of the electoral process.
- The relationship between the Supreme Court and the Election Commission has generally been cooperative, with the judiciary supporting various ECI reforms over the years, such as mandatory asset declarations by candidates, disqualification of convicted politicians, and the introduction of the None of the Above (NOTA) option. Nevertheless, there have been rare moments of disagreement, exemplified by the Electoral Bonds case where the Supreme Court struck down the scheme as unconstitutional despite the ECI's reluctance to challenge it. In the present matter, the Court's directive is not a sharp rebuke but rather a gentle yet firm encouragement for greater transparency and accountability.
- At stake are fundamental democratic principles. The original electoral rolls of 1951 were remarkably inclusive, extending voting rights even to the homeless and nameless, especially women, thereby safeguarding universal adult suffrage. In contrast, the SIR exercise risks fostering exclusionary practices that undermine this legacy.
- In conclusion, the Supreme Court's insistence on transparency and fairness in the revision of electoral rolls promises to strengthen citizen-centric democracy and prevent exclusionary tendencies. As India progresses toward the vision of Viksit Bharat@2047, reforms in voter registration must evolve into a technologically advanced, inclusive, and legally accountable system that fully upholds the constitutional guarantee of universal suffrage.

A Conservation Manual, Drafted by the Ordinary Citizen

Context

- In his Independence Day speeches, Prime Minister Narendra Modi has consistently urged the public to honour the sacrifices of those who resisted colonial rule. However, these appeals are often more symbolic than practical, typically limited to referencing a few well-known freedom fighters or quoting their words. What is missing is a meaningful call to action—ways for citizens to actively engage with India's rich and complex historical past.
- This tendency toward symbolism reflects the broader approach of the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI), which focuses largely on isolating, repairing, and occasionally beautifying monuments. While these efforts do preserve physical structures, they fall short of grappling with the layered, lived, and evolving realities of India's historical landscape.

Colonial Legacies and Present Shortcomings

- India's contemporary conservation model is deeply rooted in colonial-era frameworks. British officials, motivated more by administrative convenience than cultural reverence, undertook the cataloguing of monuments and the codification of preservation laws. A defining influence was

John Marshall's *Conservation Manual* (1923), which emphasized structural restoration and aesthetic landscaping. Nearly a century later, these principles still guide ASI's operations.

- However, surveys, court rulings, and government audits increasingly reveal that many protected monuments are deteriorating, with policy execution inconsistent and often inadequate. Newer approaches, such as allowing corporate entities to adopt monuments, indicate a shift toward privatisation. But this strategy risks transforming heritage into a commodity, thereby alienating it from the collective cultural imagination and diluting its communal significance.

Learning from Gandhi and the Arts of Translation

- A more holistic and inclusive path to conservation might begin by revisiting Gandhian ideals—particularly *Sarvodaya*, Gandhi's adaptation of John Ruskin's vision of collective uplift. Gandhi advocated for the dignity of labour, the celebration of craft, and a commitment to community welfare. If these principles are applied to heritage conservation, the focus would extend far beyond structural maintenance to include the wellbeing of local communities and the meaningful engagement of visitors. Monuments could thus evolve into active spaces of learning, creativity, and shared history, rather than remaining static relics behind protective barriers.
- Translation offers another powerful metaphor for rethinking conservation. Modern translators understand that fidelity to the past does not mean erasing difference; rather, it involves recognising temporal and linguistic distances. Similarly, conservation work should be transparent, making clear where restoration has occurred. This allows the viewer to discern the historical from the newly added. Just as translators periodically revisit texts to ensure their relevance, conservationists should regularly reassess restoration materials and methods to avoid damaging the integrity of the original structures.

Lessons from Science, Ecology, and the Role of Citizens

- Conservation, as the essay suggests, can benefit greatly from interdisciplinary insights, particularly from science and ecology. Wildlife biologists, for instance, emphasise ecosystems over individual species. This approach can inspire conservationists to view monuments not in isolation but as part of broader landscapes that include rivers, forests, and human settlements. In practice, this could mean dismantling boundary walls that currently sever monuments from their natural and social surroundings.
- Mycologists, who study fungi—agents of both decay and renewal—offer another valuable analogy. Decaying monuments such as old wells, cisterns, and city walls can be reimagined not as lost causes, but as vital resources: for water storage, wildlife habitat, or even community gathering places.
- Economic perspectives further enrich conservation discourse. Economists remind us that value is often tied to function rather than appearance. For instance, the natural ventilation of an old haveli might be more valuable than a newly applied coat of paint. Concepts like scarcity and creative destruction can help justify expanded budgets for conservation and support the reimagining of submerged temples as sites for underwater archaeological research. Across disciplines, the message is consistent: heritage must be dynamic, adaptive, and capable of generating new meanings and uses.

The Role of Citizens

- Ultimately, conservation cannot be the sole responsibility of the ASI. In a country as culturally diverse as India, the meaning and method of heritage preservation must be constantly negotiated and contextualised. Citizens have a crucial role to play in this process. They must learn to interpret the language of stone, understanding the biases of builders, giving voice to those silenced by history, and challenging entrenched prejudices.
- Monuments, when read critically and empathetically, are not merely historical structures—they become reflections of society, revealing both triumphs and injustices. Through such

engagement, ordinary citizens can help shape a vision of India where heritage is not confined to walled-off spaces but is woven into the fabric of daily life. The ultimate aim is to create a nation that is itself a monument without walls—an ongoing, participatory project of cultural preservation and renewal.

Conclusion

India now stands at a crossroads in its approach to heritage conservation. To move forward, it must shed the constraints of colonial-era frameworks and embrace a more inclusive, dynamic, and community-rooted vision. Monuments should no longer be treated as polished remnants of a bygone era but as living, breathing spaces that link people, environments, and histories.

Drawing inspiration from Gandhi's vision, the nuanced understanding of translators, ecological and scientific insights, and economic pragmatism, both the ASI and the public have the opportunity to collaboratively draft a new conservation manual. This manual would not only preserve stone structures but also honour the multiplicity of voices, memories, and lives that give those structures meaning.

India at 79th Independence Day – Journey, Achievements, and the Road Ahead

Context

India commemorated its 79th Independence Day with a sense of pride, reflecting its evolution into a resilient, self-assured, and ascending global power. Despite encountering formidable challenges over the decades, such as the United States' sanctions following the Pokhran nuclear tests in 1998 and the deployment of the Seventh Fleet during the 1971 Indo-Pak war, India has not only endured but emerged more robust. Today, it stands as one of the fastest-growing economies in the world and commands increasing influence on the global stage.

Economic Progress

- India's economic transformation over the past decades has been remarkable. From a GDP of merely \$30 billion in 1947, it is now projected by the International Monetary Fund to reach \$4.19 trillion by 2025. In nominal terms, India is expected to become the world's fourth-largest economy by that year. When measured by Purchasing Power Parity (PPP), India has already secured the third position globally, with an estimated GDP of \$17.65 trillion.
- The period from FY15 to FY25, under the current administration, has seen sustained economic momentum. Real GDP growth has averaged 6.5% annually, while agricultural GDP has grown at a steady 4% per annum, reflecting a robust and diversified economic base.

Socio-Economic Transformation

- Parallel to economic development, India has undergone profound social transformation. Poverty, when assessed using the \$3 per day threshold at 2021 PPP, has declined significantly from a staggering 80% in 1947 to just 5.3% in 2025, according to World Bank projections. Literacy has risen dramatically from 18.3% in 1951 to 77% by 2023, indicating widespread access to education. Life expectancy has also seen a substantial increase—from 32 years at the time of independence to 72 years today.
- Women's empowerment has been a particularly notable area of progress, with marked improvements in access to education, socio-economic opportunities, political representation, and leadership roles, signalling a move toward greater gender parity.

Agriculture and Food Security

- In agriculture, India's achievements have been transformative. Foodgrain production has grown sevenfold, from 50 million metric tonnes in 1947 to 353.9 million metric tonnes in 2024–25. India has become the world's largest exporter of rice, expected to ship 20.2 million metric

tonnes in FY25. Horticulture output, as well as production of milk and eggs, has also expanded significantly.

- India today is not only self-sufficient in food production but also a net agricultural exporter—unlike countries such as the United States and China. However, challenges persist. While the issue of food security has largely been addressed, ensuring nutritional security, particularly for children under the age of five, remains an urgent concern.

Scientific and Technological Achievements

- India's advancements in science and technology have propelled it into global leadership in several sectors. Its space missions, including Chandrayaan's successful landing near the Moon's south pole and the pioneering Mangalyaan mission to Mars, underscore India's emergence as a serious space power.
- On the digital front, the Unified Payments Interface (UPI) has revolutionised digital transactions, processing over 10 billion monthly transactions and setting a global benchmark in fintech innovation. Furthermore, Indian-origin leaders such as Sundar Pichai, Satya Nadella, and Indra Nooyi have risen to helm global technology and business giants like Google, Microsoft, and PepsiCo, symbolising India's intellectual and managerial impact worldwide.
- The slogans that have shaped the country's vision—"Jai Jawan, Jai Kisan" under Lal Bahadur Shastri, "Jai Vigyan" under Atal Bihari Vajpayee, and "Jai Anusandhan" under Narendra Modi—reflect the progressive integration of defence, agriculture, science, and innovation into the national identity.

Persisting and Emerging Challenges

- While India has made substantial strides, it still faces several critical challenges. Government subsidies, though vital for shielding vulnerable sections of the population, remain plagued by inefficiencies. In the Union Budget for 2025–26, subsidies for food and fertilisers together constitute Rs 3.71 lakh crore—Rs 2.03 lakh crore for food and Rs 1.67 lakh crore for fertilisers. Studies indicate that 20% to 25% of these subsidies fail to reach their intended recipients. Reforms aimed at rationalising these subsidies, alongside greater investment in agricultural research and development, innovation, and value chains, are urgently needed.
- Environmental degradation is another pressing issue. Sustainable economic growth will require a serious commitment to conserving vital natural resources such as soil, water, and air. Simultaneously, addressing child malnutrition demands an integrated approach encompassing women's education, maternal healthcare, and improved sanitation infrastructure.

India's Role in the Global Landscape

- In terms of per capita income, India continues to lag behind major economies. For instance, China's projected per capita income for 2025 is \$13,690 (PPP \$28,980), compared to India's \$2,880 (PPP \$12,130). However, what distinguishes India is its unwavering commitment to democracy. Unlike several of its neighbours, India's democratic ethos remains a guiding compass—ensuring freedom, pluralism, and participatory governance.
- This democratic foundation, combined with its diverse experience in high-tech sectors, positions India as a model for many countries across Asia and Africa. In various domains, including healthcare, agriculture, and digital infrastructure, India is increasingly setting benchmarks that resonate globally.

Vision for Viksit Bharat @ 2047

- Looking ahead to its 100th year of independence in 2047, India has outlined an ambitious yet achievable vision—*Viksit Bharat*. This vision rests on several core pillars: accelerating inclusive and sustainable growth, dismantling bureaucratic obstacles, fostering a scientific and innovation-driven culture, and integrating environmental safeguards into development planning.

- The overarching goal is to transform India into a fully developed nation by 2047, one that embodies technological excellence, agricultural self-reliance, and inclusive, responsive governance.

Conclusion

- As India approaches its centenary of independence, the nation stands poised at the threshold of unprecedented transformation. The pursuit of *Viksit Bharat* signifies more than economic prosperity; it encompasses leadership in technology, resilience in agriculture, inclusiveness in governance, and sustainability in development.
- Anchored by its democratic values and enriched by its civilisational depth, India is steadily shaping a model of progress that resonates beyond its borders. By aligning collective effort with visionary planning, the country aspires not only to secure a prosperous future for its own citizens but also to offer a compelling blueprint for global development.

India Redefines Engagement with Africa in Namibia

Context

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's recent address to Namibia's National Assembly marked a pivotal moment in India's evolving diplomatic posture towards Africa. Speaking in Oshiwambo, referencing local symbols such as the Welwitschia mirabilis plant and the Springbok, and quoting a Namibian poet, Modi's speech embodied a culturally rooted and emotionally resonant style of diplomacy. This approach, which earned applause and laughter from the Namibian audience, diverged significantly from the often conditional, transactional, and short-term nature of Western diplomatic models. In contrast to Western strategies centred around aid with strings attached, migration control, or abrupt disengagement—as seen in recent USAID cutbacks—India's method is characterised by mutual respect, symbolism, and long-term partnership. Modi's Namibia visit thus reflects a broader reimagining of India-Africa relations.

India's Three-Stage Diplomatic Strategy with Namibia

- India's engagement with Namibia is guided by a thoughtful three-step logic—rooted in shared history, reinforced by present collaboration, and directed toward future innovation. Each stage underscores India's adaptive and context-sensitive diplomatic approach.
- The first stage involves anchoring the relationship in a shared historical struggle against colonialism. India has long supported Namibia's independence movement and contributed to UN peacekeeping efforts, positioning itself as a consistent and principled ally. Unlike powers whose engagement is marked by opportunism or short-term interests, India leverages historical solidarity to strengthen diplomatic bonds.
- In the second stage, India is building upon existing cooperation. Although bilateral trade remains modest—around \$800 million—it is underpinned by a far larger \$12 billion India-Africa development framework. Initiatives such as the India-Namibia Centre of Excellence in Information Technology and the India Wing at the University of Namibia demonstrate a focus on knowledge exchange, education, and youth empowerment. These projects reflect India's commitment to building local capacity rather than creating dependency.
- The third stage envisions a future-oriented partnership centred on digital and institutional innovation. A significant breakthrough was Namibia's decision to adopt India's Unified Payments Interface (UPI), marking a new chapter in digital diplomacy. This move not only enables digital transactions but also symbolises the export of India's governance innovations, regulatory systems, and technical expertise. India is thus positioning itself not merely as a trade partner but as a collaborator in building Africa's digital and institutional infrastructure.

Strategic Importance of Namibia to India

Namibia presents India with a stable and resource-rich partner in the African continent. Politically steady, mineral-rich, and increasingly technologically adept, Namibia aligns well with India's long-term strategic interests. The resonance between Namibia's call—articulated by President Netumbo Nandi-Ndaitwah—for a more just global financial system and India's own advocacy for inclusive global governance reinforces the shared vision between the two nations. Their joint efforts aim to shape a more equitable global order, especially for countries in the Global South.

Outcomes and Shortcomings of Modi's Visit

- While symbolically powerful—being the first Indian Prime Ministerial visit to Namibia in nearly thirty years—the tangible outcomes of the trip were modest. Two Memorandums of Understanding were signed, covering entrepreneurship and health cooperation. Additionally, Namibia joined the Global Biofuels Alliance and the Coalition for Disaster Resilient Infrastructure. These are important developments, but they fall short of capturing the full strategic potential of the India-Namibia relationship.
- A particularly noticeable gap in the visit was the lack of concrete progress on critical minerals cooperation. Namibia is among the world's leading producers of uranium, making it vital to India's vision of developing resilient, low-carbon supply chains. However, discussions around access to these resources, investment in value addition, and workforce training did not materialise into any strategic agreements. This represents a missed opportunity to deepen the partnership in a domain of high economic and strategic value.

India's Distinct Diplomatic Model

Despite these limitations, India's approach continues to stand apart in the broader diplomatic landscape. Its engagement with Namibia—and Africa more broadly—is not transactional or coercive, but grounded in mutual respect and long-standing solidarity. By emphasising inclusion, dialogue, and a recognition of African priorities, India is asserting a leadership role in co-creating the future of the Global South. The partnership is framed not as aid-giving but as joint progress.

The Way Forward: From Symbolism to Substance

- The forthcoming India-Africa Forum Summit offers a crucial opportunity to elevate symbolic diplomacy into structured and institutional cooperation. If India is to maintain credibility as a partner to Africa, it must move beyond performative gestures and address the structural gaps in its foreign engagement strategy. This includes ensuring robust financial commitments, developing clear policy frameworks, and establishing dedicated institutions to oversee Africa-focused initiatives.
- Ultimately, the strength of India's diplomatic posture in Africa will depend not just on the rhetoric of partnership but on its capacity to implement, invest, and sustain these partnerships over time. Consistency and follow-through are as critical as cultural empathy and historical solidarity.

Conclusion

India's engagement with Namibia reflects a promising shift toward a more holistic, respectful, and future-focused diplomatic model. However, the credibility of this approach hinges on India's ability to translate its symbolic gestures into sustained action, strategic investment, and institutional durability. If India succeeds, it can set a precedent for trust-based global partnerships, particularly in the Global South. Long-term credibility, after all, depends not merely on intention but on execution—and on building trust through consistent, equitable cooperation.

Alaskan Winds, India, and the Trump-Putin Summit: A Strategic Reckoning for New Delhi

Context and Immediate Fallout

The high-profile meeting between U.S. President Donald Trump and Russian President Vladimir Putin on August 15, 2025—dubbed the “Alaska Moment”—has been widely praised as a potential inflection point in the ongoing Russia-Ukraine conflict. However, from India’s standpoint, the summit yielded minimal practical outcomes. Despite the fact that both Washington and Moscow are among India’s closest partners, New Delhi found itself largely sidelined. The episode has underscored India’s lack of agency in the geopolitical maneuverings between two global powers and highlighted the vulnerabilities inherent in its current foreign policy posture. For India, the aftermath has not only exposed the limitations of its influence over U.S.–Russia dynamics but also raised fundamental questions about how it conducts its broader strategic engagement with the world—particularly under the unpredictable leadership of Mr. Trump.

India’s Expectations vs. Reality

- The Modi government had placed considerable hope in the possibility that a U.S.–Russia thaw would ease American pressure on New Delhi’s own dealings with Moscow. In particular, India sought relief from Washington’s secondary sanctions on Russian oil, the resumption of suspended bilateral trade negotiations, and the reversal of harsh reciprocal tariffs. Yet, these expectations proved overly optimistic. Despite the visible camaraderie between Trump and Putin, there was no significant recalibration in U.S. policy toward India. On the contrary, the U.S. administration appears to have hardened its stance.
- Senior Counsellor Peter Navarro articulated a punitive policy designed to penalize both Russian imports and India’s alleged trade protectionism. At the same time, Trump’s public claim of mediating the India-Pakistan ceasefire during Operation Sindoor has directly conflicted with New Delhi’s own narrative, exacerbating rather than easing bilateral tensions. This not only undercut India diplomatically but also heightened perceptions of external interference in regional matters traditionally managed by India.

Sanctions and Symbolism: The Real Motivations Behind U.S. Policy

- Far from being rooted in a consistent strategy to isolate Russia, the Trump administration’s secondary sanctions appear more focused on asserting leverage over India. While the U.S. itself has increased trade with Russia since Trump’s return to office, and China continues to import far more Russian oil than India, Washington has chosen to single out New Delhi. This selective targeting reveals more about Trump’s personal motivations—particularly his desire to be acknowledged as a global statesman and peace-broker—than about a coherent geopolitical doctrine.
- New Delhi’s refusal to publicly validate Trump’s mediation narrative, or to participate in U.S.-sponsored dialogue with Pakistan, has further strained relations. These developments indicate that the sanctions are less about policy enforcement and more about political theatre and personal ego.

Strategic Lessons for India

- The Alaska summit offers India several important takeaways, the foremost being the danger of overreliance on summit diplomacy. Prime Minister Modi has long prioritized personal rapport with world leaders, as seen in his public displays of camaraderie with Trump and repeated engagements with China’s Xi Jinping. However, these relationships have not shielded India from serious diplomatic and military setbacks, including the Galwan Valley clashes with China and the current trade and sanctions tensions with the United States. Moving forward, India must prioritize substantive outcomes over high-profile interactions, focusing instead on institutional mechanisms and durable agreements.
- Another key lesson is the necessity of bipartisan engagement in Washington. India’s closeness with Trump during his first term led to alienation from the Democratic establishment, and its later efforts to work with the Biden administration appear to have provoked Trump’s ire upon

his return to power. For India to safeguard its long-term interests, it must maintain constructive relationships across the U.S. political spectrum, just as it strives to balance competing political forces in neighboring countries such as Nepal, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka.

- India must also reaffirm its commitment to strategic autonomy. The imposition of secondary sanctions exposes the risks of deviating from the principle of adhering only to UN-mandated sanctions. Past concessions to U.S. pressure—such as halting oil imports from Iran and Venezuela—may have emboldened Washington to expect similar compliance on Russian oil. Resisting such demands not only serves India's economic self-interest but also strengthens its credibility as a leader among Global South nations advocating for multipolarity and non-alignment.
- At the same time, India must be prepared to implement countermeasures in response to policies that undermine its interests. These could include reciprocal tariffs, constraints on American companies operating in India, or taxation policies affecting remittances from Indian workers in the U.S. To restore its agency, India must act proactively and assertively rather than merely responding to external developments.

Looking Ahead: Diversification and Strategic Balance

India now faces a critical juncture in its foreign policy. It must decide whether to continue seeking approval from Washington or to pursue a more diversified and autonomous diplomatic strategy. Modi's upcoming visits to Japan, China, South Africa, and Russia offer opportunities to reinforce alternative strategic partnerships and mitigate dependence on the United States. Meanwhile, the forthcoming Quad summit will serve as a litmus test for the resilience of India-U.S. ties and may indicate whether Trump is willing to engage directly with India through a potential visit.

Conclusion: Anchoring Foreign Policy in Substance and Balance

The Alaska summit has illuminated the perils of allowing optics and spectacle to shape foreign policy. For India, the experience underscores the need to move beyond performative diplomacy and ground its international engagements in enduring principles, strategic balance, and concrete interests. Only by doing so can New Delhi safeguard its autonomy and navigate the volatility of global politics—especially in an era of heightened U.S. unpredictability.

India's Role in Ending Global Hunger: From National Progress to Global Leadership

Context: A Global Turning Point

- Global hunger, after years of worsening trends, is beginning to show signs of a long-awaited reversal. According to the *State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World 2025* report by the United Nations, the number of undernourished people globally declined to approximately 673 million in 2024—representing 8.2% of the world's population—down from 688 million in 2023. While this figure still exceeds the pre-pandemic level of 7.3% in 2018, the reduction marks a critical turning point in the international fight against hunger. Within this global context, India has emerged as a central player whose recent policy innovations, systemic reforms, and targeted interventions have contributed meaningfully to this progress.
- This article explores India's decisive contribution to the global hunger challenge through its transformation of the Public Distribution System (PDS), its focus on nutrition rather than mere calorie sufficiency, and its forward-looking digital and agrifood system reforms.

India's Progress in Food Security

India's progress in addressing hunger has been driven by a combination of strategic policy reforms, technological interventions, and governance improvements. Revised estimates using new National Sample Survey data show that undernourishment in India dropped from 14.3% in the 2020–22 period to 12% between 2022–24. In absolute terms, this means that 30 million fewer people in India are living with hunger—a significant achievement in a country of over 1.4 billion, especially in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, which caused severe economic and logistical disruptions.

Modernising the Public Distribution System (PDS)

One of the cornerstones of India's improved food security has been the comprehensive overhaul of its Public Distribution System. This system, once plagued by inefficiencies and leakages, has been significantly enhanced through digitalisation. Tools such as Aadhaar-enabled beneficiary identification, biometric authentication, and real-time inventory tracking have brought unprecedented transparency and responsiveness. The introduction of the *One Nation One Ration Card* scheme has made food entitlements portable across state lines, a critical development for migrant workers and vulnerable families. These advancements enabled the government to swiftly scale up food support during the pandemic and continue providing subsidised staples to more than 800 million people, even under crisis conditions.

From Calorie Sufficiency to Nutrition Security

While India has made commendable progress in ensuring caloric sufficiency, the bigger challenge remains improving overall nutrition. Despite the scale of food distribution, more than 60% of Indians still cannot afford a healthy diet, due to factors such as high prices of nutrient-rich foods, weak cold-chain infrastructure, and inefficient market linkages. In response, the government has launched initiatives focused on dietary diversity and nutrition sensitivity, especially among children. The *Pradhan Mantri Poshan Shakti Nirman (PM POSHAN)* programme and the *Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS)* are among the key efforts in this direction, aimed at delivering both food and nutrition to school-aged children and vulnerable households.

Ongoing Progress Amid Structural Barriers

New UN data indicates that India has made strides in making healthy diets relatively more affordable, even amid global inflation. However, this success has not erased deeper structural issues. Although hunger levels are declining, problems such as malnutrition, obesity, and micronutrient deficiencies continue to rise, particularly in lower-income urban and rural communities. This indicates that policy frameworks need to expand their scope beyond the eradication of hunger to embrace broader goals related to public health and nutrition.

Reforming the Agrifood System for Long-Term Impact

- Ensuring sustainable food and nutrition security requires a transformation of India's agrifood system. One critical area is the increased production and affordability of nutrient-rich foods such as pulses, fruits, vegetables, and animal-based products—many of which remain inaccessible to low-income households. Investment in post-harvest infrastructure is equally vital. India currently loses nearly 13% of its food between farm and market due to inadequate storage and logistics. Expanding cold storage, warehouses, and digital logistics networks can help reduce this loss, thereby stabilising prices and improving availability.
- Simultaneously, empowering women-led food enterprises, Farmer Producer Organizations (FPOs), and local cooperatives is essential, particularly those involved in cultivating climate-resilient crops. These initiatives not only enhance access to diverse, nutritious foods but also support livelihoods and community development in rural areas.
- India's digital edge provides another transformative opportunity. Platforms such as AgriStack, e-NAM (electronic National Agriculture Market), and geospatial data systems offer the potential to optimise agricultural planning, expand market access for farmers, and enhance the delivery of nutrition-sensitive schemes. When combined, these tools can build a more resilient, equitable, and nutrition-oriented food system capable of withstanding future shocks.

India as a Global Symbol of Possibility

- India's domestic achievements in transforming its food and nutrition systems hold significant international relevance. The Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) has spotlighted India as a model for the Global South, highlighting how technological innovation, targeted social protection, and data-driven governance can create scalable solutions to hunger. India's example

demonstrates that when political will, strategic investment, and inclusive policy design come together, large-scale reductions in hunger are not only possible but achievable.

- With only five years remaining to meet the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), including SDG 2: Zero Hunger, India's recent success offers a much-needed sense of global optimism. However, sustaining and building on this progress will demand a shift in policy focus—from ensuring basic food availability to guaranteeing access to diverse and nutritious diets—while also embedding resilience and equity into every layer of food governance.

Conclusion: Leadership in a Global Fight

The global "hunger clock" continues to tick, but India has proven that the trajectory can be altered. Its actions no longer serve only its own population but now inspire hope and provide a practical blueprint for other nations. India's emergence as a leader in food and nutrition security illustrates how national transformation can drive global progress. As the world edges closer to the 2030 deadline for the SDGs, India's experience stands as a testament to what is possible when ambition meets action—turning the goal of ending hunger from aspiration into reality.

PM Modi's 12th Independence Day Speech: A Strategic Roadmap to Viksit Bharat by 2047

Context: A Visionary Address for India's Future

On August 15, Prime Minister Narendra Modi delivered his 12th Independence Day address from the Red Fort. This speech was hailed as one of his most forward-looking and ambitious to date. Rather than focusing on immediate political gains, the Prime Minister laid out a civilisational vision, positioning India on a trajectory to become a *Viksit Bharat* (Developed India) by the centenary of its independence in 2047. The address spanned a wide range of strategic sectors, from digital sovereignty and energy independence to national security and employment generation, presenting an integrated roadmap to transform India into a global technological, economic, and strategic powerhouse.

Digital Sovereignty and Technological Leadership

Prime Minister Modi underlined the critical importance of self-reliance in technology, portraying it as a modern-day assertion of national sovereignty. India's technological rise is already evident:

- The **Digital India Stack**, led by the Unified Payment Interface (UPI), now accounts for half of the world's real-time digital transactions.
- The rollout of India's **first indigenous semiconductor chip** by the end of 2025 marks a decisive step towards achieving *digital Swaraj*—India's command over critical technological infrastructure.

This momentum signifies India's aspiration not just to participate in, but to lead the global digital economy.

Energy Security and Hydrocarbon Exploration

India's efforts to become energy self-sufficient were presented with bold new targets:

- The government has reduced "no-go" zones in its **Exclusive Economic Zones by 99%**, opening up **10 lakh sq. km** for oil and gas exploration.
- The **National Deepwater Exploration Mission**, launched during the speech itself, aims to tap into **600–1,200 MMTs of oil and gas** by drilling approximately 40 wildcat wells. Investment has been de-risked through policies that allow recovery of up to 80% in case of dry wells and 40% on commercial discoveries.
- The broader plan is to **triple domestic output** to 85 million tonnes by 2032 and **double reserves** to 1–2 billion tonnes.
- An *Atmanirbhar* E&P (Exploration and Production) ecosystem is being built, aiming to raise the local supply chain contribution from 25–30% to over 70%.

Energy Transition and Clean Power

The speech highlighted major progress in clean energy:

- India has already reached its **50% clean energy target**, five years ahead of the 2030 deadline.
- Biofuels, ethanol blending, compressed biogas (CBG), and **green hydrogen** are moving beyond pilot projects into scalable production, helping establish a **new rural-industrial backbone**.
- The civilian nuclear sector has been **opened to private investment**. Currently, **10 new nuclear reactors** are operational, and India plans to increase its nuclear capacity **tenfold** by 2047.

National Critical Minerals Mission

Recognising the foundational role of minerals in future technologies, India is aggressively securing its strategic resource base:

- Exploration has been launched at **1,200+ sites** for critical minerals such as lithium, rare earths, cobalt, and nickel.
- The focus is not only on extraction but also on **developing processing and recycling capabilities**, ensuring that India's ambitions in renewables, semiconductors, electric vehicles, and defence remain immune to global supply disruptions.

National Security and Strategic Sovereignty

National security featured prominently, with strong messaging on both military preparedness and technological self-reliance:

- **Operation Sindoor** demonstrated India's real-time military readiness, breaking the long-held notion of nuclear deterrence-based intimidation and signalling a bold shift in India's strategic posture.
- The **Indus Waters Treaty reversal** was cited as a sovereign decision, reinforcing India's assertiveness in regional diplomacy.
- The unveiling of **Mission Sudarshan Chakra** brought together civilisational symbolism and cutting-edge security technologies. Designed as a **multi-layered indigenous shield**, it aims to protect India's critical institutions from cyber, physical, and hybrid threats.

Healthcare and Biopharmaceutical Innovation

India's stature as the "pharmacy of the world" was reinforced, alongside ambitions to move up the innovation ladder:

- Currently, India **produces 60% of the world's vaccines**.
- The new **BioE3 policy** promotes innovation in biopharma, with the goal of **developing and patenting affordable, globally competitive medicines and vaccines**, while also becoming a leader in medical devices.

Taxation, Legal Reforms, and Governance

In one of the most sweeping reform announcements, the Prime Minister outlined legal and tax reforms aimed at simplifying governance and enhancing transparency:

- A **new Income Tax Bill** has replaced the outdated 1961 Act, reducing complexity, abolishing 280 redundant provisions, and offering relief for incomes up to ₹12 lakh.
- The **faceless assessment system** has added layers of transparency and efficiency to tax administration.
- **GST 2.0**, set to launch by Diwali, will further rationalise rates and improve compliance.
- The broader **decriminalisation drive** has abolished over 40,000 unnecessary compliances and repealed more than 1,500 obsolete laws, in addition to strengthening the **Insolvency and Bankruptcy Code**.
- Success of **Direct Benefit Transfers (DBT)** was highlighted, having touched more than **25 crore beneficiaries** and lifting **250 million Indians out of poverty** through accountable, technology-backed welfare delivery.

Employment Generation and Economic Growth

The Prime Minister introduced new initiatives to stimulate job creation and support entrepreneurial growth:

- The **PM Viksit Bharat Rozgar Yojana**, backed by a ₹1 lakh crore outlay, aims to impact **3.5 crore youth**. It incentivises companies to create new jobs, with **newly employed youth receiving ₹15,000 per month**.
- A **Task Force for Next-Generation Reforms** has been constituted to re-engineer India's economic ecosystem. Its objectives include: Reducing compliance costs for startups and MSMEs, Ensuring freedom from arbitrary regulatory action, and Consolidating scattered legal frameworks into a **simpler, more predictable system** that favours enterprise.

Conclusion: A Civilisational Blueprint for Modern Power

Prime Minister Modi's 12th Independence Day address was not merely a policy document or a celebratory speech—it was a blueprint for India's long-term transformation. The roadmap is deeply civilisational in its spirit but boldly modern in its ambition. By marrying India's ancient identity with next-generation reforms across energy, technology, governance, and security, the plan for *Viksit Bharat* envisions India's rise not just as a developed economy, but as a global force shaped by its values, powered by innovation, and protected by strategic self-reliance.

As the nation moves toward 2047, this vision of India—resilient, self-reliant, and globally influential—may well define the country's trajectory for decades to come.

Erosion of the Rules-Based World Order: A Deepening Crisis in Global Governance

Introduction

The post-World War II international system, built upon multilateralism and anchored in institutions such as the United Nations (UN), the World Health Organization (WHO), and the World Trade Organization (WTO), is now facing a crisis of legitimacy and functionality. This rules-based order, once a pillar of global cooperation and collective progress, is rapidly losing relevance. The rise of disinformation, an increasing tilt toward unilateral actions, and a growing deficit of trust among nations are severely weakening the ability of these institutions to function as effective platforms for international coordination.

The Decline of Global Institutions

- The weakening of key global institutions is among the most visible signs of the eroding international order.
- The **United Nations**, once the principal arena for global diplomacy, now finds itself relegated to an advisory role. Despite its expansive mandate, the UN often lacks the authority or political consensus to enforce resolutions or mediate effectively in major global conflicts. This diminished capacity has led to questions about its relevance in a rapidly polarising world.
- The **World Health Organization**, once seen as the central body in managing global health crises, suffered a major blow to its credibility during the COVID-19 pandemic. Its delayed response and perceived deference to certain member states in the early stages of the outbreak significantly undermined public trust in its leadership and effectiveness. The fallout from this crisis exposed not only structural weaknesses but also the vulnerability of health governance to geopolitical pressures.
- Meanwhile, the **World Trade Organization** has effectively become paralysed. In 2019, the United States blocked appointments to the WTO's Appellate Body, rendering its dispute resolution system non-functional. Without a working judicial mechanism, the WTO has lost its ability to enforce trade rules, raising the spectre of uncontrolled tariff wars, economic fragmentation, and a weakened framework for global commerce.

- Adding to this institutional decay is the **open defiance of international law**, where world leaders increasingly ignore or dismiss rulings by bodies such as the International Criminal Court (ICC). This disregard signals a broader erosion of global accountability and emboldens actors who choose to act outside established legal norms.

The Disinformation Crisis and Breakdown of Transparency

- The digital age has brought with it not just rapid information exchange but also unprecedented vulnerability to **disinformation campaigns**. Both state and non-state actors now weaponise misinformation to destabilise trust in international institutions and undermine multilateral initiatives. One illustrative example is the spread of false narratives regarding U.S. disengagement from polio eradication efforts, which have been exploited to fuel scepticism and resistance in targeted regions.
- This information warfare has had tangible consequences on global public health. In countries like Pakistan and Afghanistan, **polio eradication campaigns** have encountered significant pushback, as misinformation and conspiracy theories frame these initiatives as tools of imperial control. This not only disrupts local health efforts but also endangers decades of global progress in disease elimination.

Geopolitical Tensions and Security Fragility

- The weakening of multilateral frameworks has also led to a resurgence of **protectionist policies**, particularly in trade. With the WTO's dispute resolution mechanism inactive, countries have begun to employ tariffs as instruments of geopolitical strategy. This shift risks fragmenting global supply chains and creating long-term disruptions in the world economy, especially for developing countries dependent on open trade.
- Equally alarming is the growing **unpredictability in nuclear deterrence**. During the Cold War, treaties and diplomatic conventions provided a degree of predictability and restraint among nuclear powers. Today, however, the casual disregard for nuclear arms control agreements threatens to turn regional confrontations into full-scale international crises. The absence of dialogue and consensus on arms limitation increases the danger of escalation and miscalculation.

The Collapse of Collective Problem-Solving

- At the heart of the current global crisis lies the **erosion of shared problem-solving mechanisms**. Once seen as a beacon of global solidarity, the **polio eradication programme** now exemplifies the consequences of fractured cooperation. The unraveling of multinational health efforts due to nationalistic withdrawal illustrates how the abandonment of common platforms can reverse long-standing gains.
- The **post-war institutions**, designed to advance common goals through collective responsibility, are losing their foundational relevance as countries increasingly act in isolation. This unilateralism undermines the very fabric of global cooperation and risks driving the international system toward chronic instability.

The Uncertain Future of the Rules-Based Order

- As more nations lose faith in international treaties, disarmament efforts, free trade systems, and health coordination frameworks, the world is inching toward a potential **collapse of the rules-based order**. The decline in trust and accountability suggests that the global community may soon find itself in a fragmented landscape defined by competing blocs, rising conflict, and institutional irrelevance.
- Yet, amidst this bleak outlook, there remains **hope for revival through reform**. Revamping the WTO's appellate body and updating trade norms to reflect digital economies and climate-linked trade priorities can restore its credibility. Similarly, meaningful reforms to the UN system, including expanding the Security Council and enhancing transparency, could breathe new life

into global governance. Such reforms, however, require not just procedural change but a renewed commitment to multilateralism.

The Path Forward

- To reverse the trend of institutional decay and geopolitical fragmentation, the global community must take deliberate steps to restore faith in collective governance.
- The **United Nations** needs structural reforms to improve both its decision-making capacity and its perceived legitimacy. This includes reforming the Security Council, addressing representation gaps, and ensuring faster responses to crises.
- The **WTO** must be revitalised by restarting its appellate mechanism and modernising trade rules to accommodate emerging global challenges such as digital commerce, data sovereignty, and environmentally sustainable trade practices.
- Nations must **reaffirm their commitment** to existing multilateral frameworks—respecting rulings from the ICC, honouring nuclear treaties, and upholding international agreements. This return to principle-based diplomacy is essential to restoring predictability and cooperation.
- Strengthening **regional alliances** such as ASEAN, the African Union, and the European Union can offer scalable models for global problem-solving. These blocs, more agile and often less polarised than global institutions, can experiment with solutions that may later be adopted on a broader scale.
- Crucially, **emerging powers** like India, Brazil, and South Africa must be fully integrated into the core of global decision-making. Their participation is vital not only for legitimacy but also for ensuring a more balanced and inclusive global governance structure.

Conclusion

- The weakening of global institutions represents not just a political or procedural failure but a deeper crisis of **multilateralism and collective will**. In a world facing transnational challenges—from pandemics and climate change to cybersecurity and nuclear risk—no nation can afford to act alone. The erosion of trust, growing unilateralism, and weaponisation of disinformation are eroding the core of the rules-based world order.
- To prevent its total collapse, there must be a concerted global effort to reform institutions, re-establish transparency, and reaffirm shared commitments. Only through **collective, inclusive, and principle-based action** can the world effectively address the common threats of our time and reclaim the promise of global cooperation.

A Tribute to M.S. Swaminathan: The Man Who Fed India

Context

- India's aspiration to become a *Viksit Bharat*—a developed and self-reliant nation—hinges significantly on its scientific capabilities, especially in sectors like the digital economy that are rapidly evolving. However, this ambition is not without precedent. A similar transformative moment occurred in the 1960s, when India achieved food self-sufficiency through the Green Revolution. At the centre of that milestone was M.S. Swaminathan, a pioneering scientist whose vision and work altered the trajectory of the nation.
- As explored in Priyambada Jayakumar's biography, *M.S. Swaminathan: The Man Who Fed India*, his life offers enduring insights that go far beyond the agricultural domain. These lessons are equally relevant for India's future scientific and technological advancement.

Science as a Collaborative Endeavour: The Core of Swaminathan's Legacy

- Swaminathan's story illustrates that science flourishes through collaboration, not isolation. The success of the Green Revolution did not stem solely from Indian research but from a willingness to engage in global scientific exchange. His collaboration with Norman Borlaug in Mexico, and

his readiness to adapt foreign agricultural innovations to suit Indian conditions, proved critical in bringing high-yield seeds and new techniques to Indian farms.

- Yet, Swaminathan also had to contend with obstructive bureaucracy. Delays in securing Borlaug's visit to India nearly stalled the movement. If the collaboration had begun two years earlier, India might have avoided deeper food shortages. This experience underscores the urgent need to remove red tape that hampers international scientific cooperation. For India to succeed in its future ambitions, it must allow scientists to attend global conferences, build international networks, and collaborate freely.

Enabling Political Leadership: A Catalyst for Scientific Breakthroughs

The Green Revolution's success was not due to science alone—it was made possible by political leadership that actively listened to and supported scientific counsel. Leaders like Prime Minister Lal Bahadur Shastri and Agriculture Minister C. Subramaniam played pivotal roles. Subramaniam, with a background in science, appreciated the urgency of Swaminathan's work and pushed through necessary support when bureaucratic inertia could have stifled progress.

This dynamic highlights a critical principle for contemporary governance: in fields driven by technical expertise, political leaders must consult scientists directly, not solely rely on administrative filters. Nations like China, where technically trained leaders often hold ministerial roles, exemplify the advantages of scientific literacy in politics. If *Viksit Bharat* is to become a reality, it will require a similar cultural shift—one that places science at the heart of policymaking, both at the central and state levels.

Innovation Amid Scepticism: Political Courage and Calculated Risk

- The early phases of the Green Revolution required not just scientific innovation but political boldness. The massive import of 18,000 tonnes of high-yield seed faced opposition from the Finance Ministry, the Planning Commission, and ideological detractors wary of foreign influence. However, Prime Minister Shastri chose not to be paralysed by institutional disagreement. He took the time to personally review the scientific evidence and chose action over hesitation.
- This readiness to embrace innovation despite risks—while ensuring systems of accountability—was instrumental in achieving food security. The eventual success of the Green Revolution serves as a reminder of what's possible when visionary leadership aligns with scientific possibility. Today, similar courage is needed to back new and transformative ideas, even when consensus is elusive.

Sustainability and the Challenges of the Future

- While the Green Revolution addressed India's immediate food crisis, it also introduced new environmental challenges—such as overuse of water resources, excessive dependence on chemical fertilisers, and soil degradation. Swaminathan himself was among the earliest to warn against these side effects. He advocated for an "Evergreen Revolution" that would prioritise ecological sustainability while maintaining productivity.
- Regrettably, many of his proposed reforms were not fully implemented. With climate change now threatening agricultural yields and food security, the urgency to act has only intensified. Once again, science will need to play a central role. However, India's current standing in agricultural research is far from adequate. While China boasts eight institutions among the world's top ten in the field, India has none in the top 200. Underfunding, restricted autonomy, and ineffective governance structures continue to hinder India's research ecosystem.
- Bridging these institutional and infrastructural gaps is crucial if India is to tackle the coming agricultural and environmental challenges. Without robust scientific institutions, the ambition of *Viksit Bharat* may falter before it reaches fruition.

Extending Swaminathan's Legacy Beyond Agriculture

- The life and legacy of M.S. Swaminathan extend well beyond the realm of agriculture. His career offers a blueprint for national transformation that applies across disciplines. Key takeaways include the need to dismantle bureaucratic constraints that isolate Indian scientists from global knowledge networks, the importance of having scientifically informed leadership that directly supports innovation, and the necessity of balancing bold experimentation with mechanisms for independent oversight.
- Equally vital is the commitment to sustainability—not just as an environmental goal, but as a long-term strategy for resilience. Finally, Swaminathan's life underscores the importance of investing in a strong research ecosystem, grounded in adequate funding, academic freedom, and merit-based recognition.

Conclusion

- M.S. Swaminathan's contributions to India's scientific and agricultural history are monumental, but their relevance is far from historical. His life demonstrates how science, politics, and leadership must converge for a nation to undergo true transformation. Just as Swaminathan's vision helped India achieve food security in a time of crisis, today's vision of a *Viksit Bharat* will depend on cultivating a culture of innovation, collaboration, and sustainability.
- To honour Swaminathan's legacy is not merely to look back at his achievements—it is to carry forward his principles. It means empowering scientists, trusting experts, and making bold but informed decisions that serve the long-term interests of the nation. In doing so, India can secure not only its future but also reaffirm its capacity to lead and inspire on the global stage.

India's Climate Taxonomy: Translating Policy into Practice

Context

- In May 2025, the Ministry of Finance unveiled India's draft Climate Finance Taxonomy for public consultation. This initiative is designed to steer investments towards climate-aligned sectors, combat the growing risk of greenwashing, and offer clear guidance to investors on which technologies and industries contribute to mitigation, adaptation, or transitional objectives. By declaring itself a "living" framework, the taxonomy acknowledges the need to evolve in tandem with India's domestic priorities and global climate responsibilities.
- However, the success of this dynamic vision will depend on how effectively it transitions from paper to practice. This article explores the foundational requirements for implementing the taxonomy: a robust review architecture, legal and content clarity, and institutional accountability mechanisms.

Review Architecture: Creating an Adaptive Yet Predictable System

- For India's climate taxonomy to instil trust among investors and meet both domestic and global standards, it requires a clearly defined and multilayered review structure. A well-organised review mechanism will not only enhance legal precision but also ensure responsiveness to fast-changing market conditions and policy landscapes.
- The design of this system can draw from international precedents, particularly the supervisory mechanism under Article 6.4 of the Paris Agreement. A two-tiered approach can help balance agility and long-term resilience.
- Annual reviews will serve as the mechanism for addressing short-term gaps in implementation, responding to evolving regulatory obligations, incorporating policy updates, and integrating stakeholder feedback. These reviews must be conducted on a predictable schedule, with defined timelines, uniform documentation protocols, and mandated public consultations to maintain transparency and credibility.

- Complementing these, comprehensive five-year reviews will offer an opportunity to reevaluate the taxonomy against broader shifts such as international carbon market trends, evolving definitions of climate finance, and India's own sectoral transitions. Aligning these deeper reviews with India's Nationally Determined Contributions (NDC) cycle and the global stocktake under the UNFCCC would ensure coherence with international climate governance timelines.
- Together, these short- and long-term review cycles would enable the taxonomy to remain both responsive to immediate needs and durable against long-term challenges.

Substantive Clarity: Legal Consistency and Accessible Content

- Beyond establishing review timelines, the substance of these reviews must address two critical dimensions — legal coherence and clarity of content.
- Legal coherence requires harmonisation between the taxonomy and existing Indian legal frameworks such as the Energy Conservation Act, SEBI's regulatory guidelines, and the Carbon Credit Trading Scheme. These legal connections must be clearly mapped to ensure enforceability, remove duplication, resolve jurisdictional overlaps, and align the taxonomy with fiscal tools such as green bonds, blended finance instruments, and mandatory risk disclosures.
- Content clarity is equally vital to ensure the taxonomy is not only technically robust but also accessible to a wide array of users — from institutional investors to MSMEs and local government bodies. Definitions must evolve in line with global market standards while remaining intelligible to both experts and laypersons. Quantitative benchmarks — such as emission reduction thresholds or energy efficiency norms — must be regularly updated using reliable data sources and stakeholder feedback to reflect technological advancements and policy shifts.
- In particular, the taxonomy must adopt an inclusive lens. Ensuring that sectors such as agriculture, small-scale manufacturing, and the informal economy are not excluded is crucial for equity and participation in India's net-zero journey. This requires designing simplified entry points, phasing compliance obligations, and adopting realistic expectations for sectors with lower technical capacity or access to finance.

Institutionalising Accountability and Transparency

- To operationalise this complex and evolving taxonomy, the Ministry of Finance must take the lead in institutionalising its governance. Establishing a dedicated unit within the Department of Economic Affairs would centralise oversight and provide continuity in review processes.
- This unit should also implement mechanisms for public engagement and transparency. Digital dashboards can be used to collect inputs from stakeholders, flag implementation bottlenecks, and publish ongoing reports and updates. Such tools will enhance predictability and enable real-time course correction, ensuring that the taxonomy remains grounded in practice rather than only existing in principle.
- Annual summaries of review findings and comprehensive five-year revision proposals should be made publicly accessible in a consolidated format. This level of transparency will bolster investor confidence, enhance the credibility of the taxonomy, and ensure better integration with adjacent frameworks such as India's carbon markets, green bond regulations, and mandatory sustainability disclosures.

Conclusion

- The launch of India's climate finance taxonomy comes at a critical juncture, coinciding with significant shifts in the broader climate finance landscape. The operationalisation of the Carbon Credit Trading Scheme, increasing reliance on green bonds, and the need to align public expenditure with India's long-term climate goals all underscore the urgency of a strong, credible, and adaptable governance tool.

- A taxonomy that lacks transparency, clarity, or accountability could undermine rather than support these crucial developments. Therefore, it is essential that the taxonomy lives up to its promise as a “living document.” Its continued relevance will depend on how rigorously it is reviewed, how transparently it is revised, and how effectively it engages all stakeholders — from government agencies and investors to local communities and emerging sectors.
- Only through such a holistic, structured, and participatory approach can the taxonomy serve its intended purpose — guiding India’s climate finance ecosystem toward a low-carbon, resilient, and inclusive future.

India’s Tsunami Preparedness: From Tragedy to Global Leadership

Introduction

The 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami was a catastrophic event that claimed over 230,000 lives across 14 countries, marking a defining moment in global disaster management. For India, it served as a wake-up call, revealing a glaring need for robust preparedness and a reliable early warning mechanism. In response, India developed the Indian Tsunami Early Warning System (TEWS), which has since evolved into a benchmark of technological innovation and regional cooperation in disaster risk reduction.

Development and Key Features of India’s Tsunami Early Warning System (TEWS)

- Following the 2004 disaster, India established the Indian Tsunami Early Warning Centre (ITEWC) under the Indian National Centre for Ocean Information Services (INCOIS) in Hyderabad. Fully operational by 2007, this centre has become a cornerstone of India’s disaster management infrastructure.
- The TEWS integrates an array of advanced technologies to detect and respond to tsunamis. Seismic sensors identify undersea earthquakes, while DART (Deep-ocean Assessment and Reporting of Tsunami) buoys measure ocean pressure changes indicative of tsunami waves. Complementing these are Wave Rider Buoys that assess wave behavior, tide gauges that detect abnormal sea-level variations, and satellite communication systems that enable swift data transmission and alert dissemination.
- The system follows a four-pronged operational mechanism. It begins with detection through real-time seismic monitoring, followed by simulation using predictive models to estimate wave travel and coastal impact. Monitoring tools then refine these predictions, and finally, alerts are disseminated using multiple channels—SMS, email, television, radio, and social media—to ensure timely public outreach.

India’s Role in Global and Regional Tsunami Preparedness

- India’s TEWS does not function in isolation; it plays a significant role in the global framework for tsunami risk reduction. India maintains data-sharing arrangements with international seismic monitoring agencies and works closely with bodies like the Pacific Tsunami Warning Center and the Japan Meteorological Agency. Its indigenous DART buoys have not only bolstered national capability but have also enhanced the global credibility of India’s warning system.
- India has also taken on a regional leadership role. As a designated Regional Tsunami Service Provider by UNESCO, India provides early warnings and advisories to 25 countries bordering the Indian Ocean. Its precise and timely forecasts during seismic events such as the 2012 Banda Aceh earthquake demonstrated the reliability and effectiveness of its early warning system.
- In comparison to other global efforts, India’s TEWS stands alongside systems in countries like Japan—renowned for its highly advanced capabilities due to frequent seismic activity—and the United States, which monitors both the Pacific and Atlantic coasts. Indonesia and Chile focus their efforts on seismic hotspots, while Australia and New Zealand maintain vigilance over the

Indian and Pacific Ocean regions. Within this global context, India has emerged as a key contributor to international disaster preparedness.

Challenges Facing India's Tsunami Preparedness

- Despite these accomplishments, India's tsunami readiness faces emerging challenges. One concern lies in new potential tsunami sources, such as the Makran subduction zone and lesser-known plate tail realignments, which remain under-researched. Additionally, tsunamis triggered by non-seismic causes—such as landslides, meteorite strikes, or underwater nuclear tests—pose risks that current systems may not adequately detect.
- There is also underutilisation of natural precursors, such as sudden ocean withdrawal, unusual animal behavior, or distinct sounds and smells that have historically served as early indicators in local communities. Bridging this gap requires integrating scientific tools with indigenous knowledge systems.
- Furthermore, public awareness remains a weak link in India's preparedness strategy. Although alerts can be issued promptly, gaps in last-mile connectivity, insufficient community drills, and limited citizen participation hinder effective on-ground responses. The added threat of climate change, particularly rising sea levels and increased coastal vulnerabilities, compounds the need for integrating disaster preparedness with long-term climate adaptation strategies.

Strategies for Strengthening India's Tsunami Preparedness

- To address these complex challenges, India must deepen its investment in research and innovation. Focused studies on non-seismic triggers and the development of AI-driven predictive models can improve detection and forecasting accuracy. Enhancing public engagement through nationwide education campaigns, community-based monitoring networks, and frequent evacuation drills will build resilience at the grassroots level.
- On the international front, India should expand its role in collaborative initiatives, data-sharing networks, and multilateral workshops that facilitate the exchange of best practices. Technologically, the deployment of additional DART buoys, tide gauges, and integration of machine learning into real-time data analysis are essential next steps.
- Simultaneously, coastal resilience must be prioritised by reinforcing infrastructure, enforcing zoning regulations, and incorporating climate change projections into planning frameworks. Effective governance will be critical—regular mock drills must be mandated, sustained funding must be ensured, and institutional accountability must be maintained to keep the system responsive and credible.

Conclusion

- India's Tsunami Early Warning System is a testament to the nation's commitment to regional security and humanitarian leadership. In the two decades since the 2004 disaster, India has transformed from a vulnerable recipient of global aid into a proactive global leader in disaster preparedness. However, emerging threats demand continuous improvement. By aligning technology, community participation, international collaboration, and climate resilience, India can not only protect its own coastal regions but also serve as a model for others in the global South.
- The path forward lies in preserving this momentum and enhancing it with innovation, awareness, and coordinated governance. In doing so, India can solidify its status as a global leader in tsunami preparedness and disaster risk reduction.

Nuclear Laws and the Role of the Opposition: Balancing Liability, Investment, and Energy Security

Introduction

India's dual challenge of ensuring energy security and meeting climate change commitments has brought nuclear energy policy back into the spotlight. The government's renewed effort to amend the **Civil Liability for Nuclear Damages Act (CLNDA), 2010**, and the **Atomic Energy Act (AEA), 1962**, seeks to revise the legal framework governing nuclear liability and to enable private participation in the nuclear sector. These proposals, however, come with significant political and strategic implications, testing the Opposition's unity and raising critical questions about accountability, safety, and national interest.

Historical Evolution of Nuclear Liability in India

- India's journey toward nuclear liability legislation has been shaped by its decision to remain outside global nuclear conventions. Instead, it opted to create a domestic legal framework for compensation in the event of a nuclear accident. This led to the enactment of the CLNDA in 2010, heavily influenced by global industrial disasters such as the **1984 Bhopal gas tragedy**, the **Gulf of Mexico oil spill**, and **Japan's Fukushima nuclear disaster**.
- Public concern over corporate accountability was high at the time. The then Opposition, particularly the BJP and the Left parties, insisted on extending liability to **equipment suppliers**, not just plant operators. While this stance addressed public safety concerns, it ultimately discouraged foreign suppliers from engaging with the Indian market, rendering the Act practically ineffective. Subsequent efforts to reform the legislation failed to yield progress, with global suppliers maintaining a cautious distance due to India's stringent liability norms.

Political Dynamics and the Current Debate

- Nuclear liability has long been politically sensitive. Back in 2007, the UPA government considered opening the sector to private entities, following the **Dr. Raja Ramanna Committee's** recommendations. However, political resistance—rooted in concerns about sovereignty, safety, and foreign control—stalled reform.
- Today, the BJP-led NDA government is taking up the issue once more, aiming to amend the CLNDA and AEA to reassure suppliers and draw private investment into nuclear energy. The Congress has pushed back, accusing the government of diluting accountability, compromising public safety, and privileging the commercial interests of countries like **France and the United States** over Indian citizens. These criticisms are reminiscent of the earlier political storm when the original CLNDA was introduced ahead of U.S. President Obama's 2010 visit, a move critics claimed was geopolitically motivated. Then Prime Minister Manmohan Singh defended the law as a necessary framework for India's nuclear future.

India's Nuclear Energy Landscape and Strategic Vision

- Despite India's long-standing ambitions, the nuclear sector remains a minor contributor to the national energy mix, accounting for roughly **3% of power generation**. As of late 2023, 24 operational nuclear plants provide about **8.8 GW** of capacity, far short of earlier goals. The government now aims to raise this figure to **22.48 GW by 2031-32** and achieve an ambitious **100 GW by 2047**.
- Such expansion depends significantly on resolving liability concerns to attract international collaboration and financial investment. It also requires integrating **new technologies**, such as **small modular reactors (SMRs)**, which offer increased safety and flexibility. Yet these innovations also bring new challenges related to **nuclear waste disposal**, regulatory oversight, and public trust—challenges that must be addressed with transparency and rigor.

Opposition's Role, Precedents, and Policy Continuity

- How the Opposition responds to these proposals will be crucial. Indian political history is replete with instances of parties opposing reforms only to adopt them once in power. Legislative shifts on the **Patents Act**, **FDI in insurance**, and the **Land Boundary Agreement with Bangladesh** all saw initial resistance followed by eventual bipartisan consensus.

- A similar evolution may occur with nuclear law reform. The Opposition, particularly the Congress, must carefully weigh the **risks of loosening supplier liability** against the **imperatives of clean energy expansion**. Rather than framing the debate as another partisan clash, the focus must shift to long-term strategic concerns: How can India ensure supplier accountability without scaring off investment? What safeguards are essential for private-sector participation? And where does nuclear energy fit within India's broader transition to renewables?

Building a Forward-Looking Nuclear Policy

- While the current government may not need the Opposition's votes due to its parliamentary majority, an inclusive, reasoned debate is essential to the legitimacy and sustainability of any new policy. The implications go far beyond nuclear law; they touch on India's climate objectives, its global energy positioning, and its capacity for technological innovation.
- A parliamentarian once cautioned against political role reversals leading to policy reversals. The current moment calls for both government and Opposition to rise above historical hostilities and construct a shared framework for nuclear development—one that is **forward-looking, scientifically robust, and uncompromising on safety**.

Conclusion

- The proposed amendments to India's nuclear legislation bring into sharp focus the enduring tension between **corporate accountability** and **investment-facilitating reform**. While it is crucial not to undermine the importance of liability in protecting public interest, a balanced and pragmatic legal framework is essential if India is to realise its energy goals and climate commitments.
- Achieving this balance will require **bipartisan cooperation**, an honest assessment of the risks and opportunities, and a commitment to **public safety** and **national interest** above political calculations. Only through such a comprehensive and mature approach can India craft a nuclear policy that meets the demands of the future without compromising the lessons of the past.

India's Democracy is Failing the Migrant Citizen: The Crisis of Electoral Disenfranchisement

Introduction

- India's democratic framework is increasingly failing one of its most vulnerable populations: internal migrants. A stark example is unfolding in Bihar, where the recent Special Intensive Revision (SIR) of electoral rolls has led to the deletion of nearly five million voters—representing 4.4% of the total electorate. These individuals were marked as "permanently migrated" after being absent during house-to-house verification processes.
- However, migration in Bihar is not an anomaly or an economic choice—it is often a matter of survival. Despite this, the bureaucratic interpretation of mobility as a renunciation of citizenship rights is leading to large-scale, quiet disenfranchisement. Millions now find themselves without the right to vote, either in the places where they work or where they come from, creating a silent but profound democratic deficit.

The Structural Exclusion of the Migrant in India's Electoral System

- At the heart of the problem lies India's electoral infrastructure, which is still predicated on the notion of a sedentary citizen—someone with a fixed, verifiable, and continuous residence. For migrants who move frequently or live in informal and precarious housing—rented rooms, construction sites, slums, or even on pavements—establishing proof of residence becomes a formidable barrier. Voter registration is dependent on physical verification and documentary evidence that many migrants cannot provide.

- This systemic flaw is compounded by regional political dynamics. Migrants are often viewed in host states with suspicion—as outsiders, job competitors, or agents of political disruption. As a result, there is widespread resistance to their inclusion in local electoral rolls, driven by fears that their votes might shift political equations. Movements demanding domicile-based quotas and local hiring further cement this hostility. Simultaneously, migrants are being removed from electoral rolls in their home states simply because they are absent during verification drives. The result is a form of double exclusion: migrants are politically invisible both where they reside and where they originate from.

Empirical Evidence of Migrant Exclusion

A 2015 study conducted by the Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS), with support from the Election Commission of India, affirmed that migrants remain overwhelmingly excluded from the electoral processes of their host states. The report highlighted a triple burden faced by migrants: stringent administrative requirements such as proof of address, low digital literacy which hampers access to online electoral services, and social marginalisation, where they are cast as political outsiders. Most importantly, the study established a direct link between states with high rates of out-migration and significantly lower voter turnout figures.

Bihar's SIR and Its Contribution to the Democratic Deficit

Instead of addressing this democratic vacuum, Bihar's recent Special Intensive Revision (SIR) exercise has only deepened it. Nearly 3.5 million migrants risk being permanently disenfranchised because they were not present at the time of house-to-house verification. The state already suffers from chronically low voter participation, averaging just 53.2% across the last four assembly elections. In contrast, states like Gujarat and Karnataka, with far fewer outbound migrants, consistently record much higher voter turnouts—66.4% and 70.7% respectively. Rather than closing the participation gap, Bihar's administrative measures risk institutionalising it.

Migration Patterns and Their Electoral Consequences

Data from mobile visitor location registers shows an annual outflow of about 7 million circular migrants from Bihar, with an additional 8 million engaging in seasonal migration between June and September. Significantly, nearly half of these migrants return home during festivals like Durga Puja, Chhath, and Deepavali. However, in years when elections coincide with these returns, many find themselves unable to vote, having been removed from the rolls in their absence. Without coordination between sending and receiving states, this becomes a systemic denial of electoral rights. Migrants, who contribute significantly to the economies of their host states while remaining emotionally and socially tied to their home states, are treated as politically irrelevant in both.

Parallel Challenges in Welfare Portability: The ONORC Example

The disenfranchisement of migrant workers finds a close parallel in the operational challenges of the **One Nation One Ration Card (ONORC)** scheme. Since its inception in 2019, the programme was designed to ensure food security across state lines, but its success among Bihari migrants has been limited. As of May 2025, only about 3 lakh households had availed themselves of ration portability outside Bihar. The reasons mirror the electoral exclusions: the duality of migrant life (economic activity in one state, legal entitlements in another), fear of losing access to welfare benefits, and bureaucratic hurdles in unfamiliar states. Just as with ration cards, voter identity documents are retained in home states for safety, but they fail to provide enfranchisement where migrants actually live and work.

Reimagining Electoral Inclusion: A Portable Voter Identity System

- Addressing this democratic crisis requires systemic reforms that recognise the mobility of India's working poor. Portable and flexible voter identity systems must be developed so that migrants are not penalised for their mobility. The Election Commission must replace blanket deletions with a more nuanced approach, possibly by cross-verifying with rolls in destination states to prevent duplication while preserving rights. Grassroots institutions such as panchayats

and civil society groups should be empowered and resourced to conduct migrant outreach programmes and facilitate voter re-registration.

- States like Kerala have already begun conducting detailed migration surveys. Replicating this model in high-migration states such as Bihar and Uttar Pradesh could provide the basis for a more inclusive and dynamic electoral roll. These surveys would help track mobility patterns and ensure that returning migrants are re-enfranchised in time for elections. Unless these reforms are implemented, India may witness the largest silent voter purge in its post-Independence history—affecting precisely those who leave their homes in search of dignity, livelihood, and survival.

Conclusion

India's democracy, if it is to retain its foundational promise of universality and inclusion, cannot afford to ignore the plight of its migrant citizens. The ongoing disenfranchisement of millions due to rigid and outdated electoral frameworks amounts to a structural failure of democratic governance. Migration, especially among the poor, should not be mistaken for political disengagement or abandonment of citizenship. On the contrary, it reflects the resilience and agency of individuals striving for a better life. Unless India's electoral systems evolve to accommodate this reality, the country risks creating a democracy that works only for the immobile and the privileged—leaving behind a vast population that is mobile, marginalised, and voiceless.

Criminal Law, Politics, and the Misuse of State Power in India

Introduction

Criminal law in India lies at the fraught intersection of state authority and individual rights, functioning as both a mechanism of justice and a potential tool of political control. Recent legislative developments—specifically proposals to constitutionally mandate the removal of ministers, including the Prime Minister and Chief Ministers, upon arrest—have revived complex debates. These include the alleged misuse of investigative agencies, the erosion of political ethics, and the growing need for structural reforms in the criminal justice system. At the heart of this debate is a vital question: should criminal law be wielded as an instrument of justice or manipulated for consolidating power?

Criminal Law and the Exercise of Discretion

Criminal law, in its practical application, often reflects the weight of state power more than the ideal of justice. It is subject to the political climate, where acts can be criminalised or decriminalised depending on prevailing priorities. In practice, the police hold vast discretionary power, particularly in the context of arrests based merely on suspicion. This unchecked authority has tangible consequences: as of 2022, an alarming 76% of India's prison population consisted of under-trials, a statistic that underscores how the power to arrest is frequently misused. The system, rather than presuming innocence, often imposes punishment before conviction.

The Government's Proposal and Its Political Implications

The current proposal by the Government of India seeks to introduce constitutional provisions for the removal of ministers upon arrest. Articles 75(5A) and 164(4A) have been proposed to cover Union and State ministers respectively. While these changes are framed as measures to promote the decriminalisation of politics, they were seemingly triggered by the former Delhi Chief Minister's decision not to resign while incarcerated. The Delhi High Court had noted at the time that there was no legal provision requiring a Chief Minister to step down under such circumstances. Though this initiative is being marketed as a progressive reform, its political context and selective application invite scrutiny. The symbolism of including the Prime Minister in this framework mirrors the Lokpal Act of 2013—arguably more of a political gesture than a structural commitment to accountability.

Investigative Agencies and the Crisis of Credibility

The misuse of investigative agencies has long been a matter of judicial concern. In 2013, Justice R.M. Lodha famously described the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) as a "caged parrot" echoing its political master. More recently, Chief Justice of India B.R. Gavai criticised the Enforcement Directorate (ED), remarking during a case involving a raid on Tamil Nadu's State Marketing Corporation that the agency had "crossed all limits." Several high-profile cases point to systemic flaws. Jharkhand's former Chief Minister Hemant Soren was detained for six months over allegations of land fraud before receiving bail. Similarly, Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal's prolonged judicial custody prevented him from participating in critical phases of an election campaign. The problem is compounded by laws such as the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act (UAPA) and the Prevention of Money Laundering Act (PMLA), which include stringent bail provisions. These laws, by design, convert arrests into instruments of punishment before any judicial verdict is delivered.

Corruption, Political Expediency, and Ethical Lapses

The nexus between crime, politics, and business has been longstanding. The 1993 Vohra Committee Report exposed the entrenchment of criminal elements in political systems. Despite this awareness, parties continue to embrace corrupt candidates, driven by calculations of electoral "winnability." Judicial attempts to curb this culture have met with mixed success. In *Lily Thomas v. Union of India* (2013), the Supreme Court barred convicted politicians from contesting elections. However, earlier precedents such as the *Jan Chaukidar* case (2004), which prohibited jailed individuals from contesting, were eventually overturned by Parliament. The gap between legal reform and political will continues to weaken ethical standards in governance.

Enforcement Agencies and Public Trust

The dismal track record of the Enforcement Directorate further damages its legitimacy. Between 2014 and 2024, the ED initiated 193 cases against politicians—yet secured only two convictions. Notably, 71% of these cases were registered in the last five years alone. The Supreme Court has voiced concern over this low conviction rate, which reinforces public perception that enforcement agencies are politically driven rather than evidence-based. Such perceptions erode institutional credibility and undermine the legal process itself.

The Political Strategy Behind Legislative Reform

The introduction of the 130th Constitutional Amendment Bill, even without the support of a two-thirds majority, signals a political rather than purely reformist agenda. The ruling party's move appears calculated to position itself as a crusader against corruption while framing the Opposition as protectors of tainted leaders. The Opposition, in turn, has accused the government of weaponising investigative agencies for partisan gains. The proposed inclusion of the Prime Minister in the amendment, rather than ensuring accountability, appears to function as a symbolic shield—meant to neutralise criticism while maintaining control over the political narrative.

Risks of Over-Criminalisation

The *Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita* (BNS) 2023 exemplifies the risk of excessive criminalisation. Of its 358 sections, 181 prescribe imprisonment of over five years, suggesting a punitive orientation. Such sweeping criminal provisions offer greater scope for abuse, especially in political contexts. The judiciary has long maintained that bail, not jail, should be the norm—except in cases of serious crime. However, in practice, arrest is often used as a tool to curtail liberty, silence opposition, or delay political participation.

A Roadmap for Reform and Justice

Addressing these issues requires a multi-pronged approach. Investigative agencies like the CBI and ED must be granted genuine autonomy, with leadership appointments made through bipartisan consensus. Judicial safeguards must be strengthened to ensure that arrests are not arbitrarily used as instruments of coercion and that bail remains a viable and accessible right. Constitutional amendments—particularly those involving disqualification or removal from office—must emerge from broad political

consensus, not tactical manoeuvring. In parallel, the fight against corruption must be grounded in institutional reforms and ethical leadership, not ad-hoc purges timed for political advantage.

Conclusion

India stands at a critical juncture where the use of criminal law must be re-evaluated through the lens of justice rather than power. True reform lies not in symbolic legislation or selective prosecutions, but in building institutions that are independent, transparent, and trustworthy. By safeguarding civil liberties, ensuring due process, and fostering bipartisan consensus on legal reforms, the country can transform its criminal justice system into a genuine instrument for cleansing public life. Only then can criminal law function not as a means of political retaliation but as a foundation for democratic accountability and the rule of law.

Justice Is Not About 'Teaching Someone a Lesson': Judicial Complicity, Caste, and the Constitution

Introduction

A recent judgment by the Chhattisgarh High Court in a custodial death case has raised serious concerns about the Indian judiciary's stance on police brutality and systemic caste-based violence. The facts of the case are deeply disturbing: a Dalit man died in police custody, with an initial medical report showing no injuries, only for a post-mortem to later reveal 26 wounds. Yet, even more troubling is the High Court's rationale in downgrading the conviction from murder to culpable homicide, on the grounds that the police officers had merely intended to "teach him a lesson." This seemingly innocuous phrase carries profound legal and constitutional implications, as it subtly legitimises violence by state actors and weakens the very principles of justice the Constitution upholds.

The Dangerous Normalisation of State Violence

- The phrase "teaching a lesson" may appear as a casual description of intent, but in legal discourse, it functions as a dangerous normalisation of custodial brutality. It reframes acts of violence by state officials not as criminal transgressions but as excessive discipline—improper, perhaps, but not entirely illegitimate. This framing flies in the face of constitutional principles that define the state as a lawful entity bound by due process, proportionality, and respect for rights. India's legal order does not grant law enforcement officers the authority to inflict punishment outside the judicial process.
- When a constitutional court uses language that casts custodial violence as a misguided but understandable attempt at discipline, it undermines the rule of law. Judicial reasoning influences both public perception and institutional behaviour. The implication that such violence is merely an overzealous form of correction sends a troubling message to police officers across the country: that brutality may not only be tolerated but tacitly condoned under certain circumstances.

Caste and the Systemic Erasure of Structural Violence

- Equally disconcerting is the judicial erasure of caste from the case's narrative. The victim, a Dalit man, was reportedly assaulted by upper-caste police officers, yet neither the trial court nor the High Court found it appropriate to invoke the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989. Their justification rested on the absence of explicit caste-based slurs or overt discriminatory intent.
- This interpretation is both legally narrow and socially blind. It ignores how caste-based violence operates through implicit power hierarchies and structural inequalities, especially in rural policing contexts where Dalits and Adivasis are disproportionately subjected to abuse. By setting the evidentiary bar unrealistically high—demanding explicit proof of caste motivation—the judiciary effectively empties the SC/ST Act of its purpose and fails the very communities it

was designed to protect. This narrow reading divorces violence from the context in which it occurs and reduces structural oppression to isolated, provable instances of prejudice.

Judicial Apathy and the Failure of Safeguards

- The failure to address custodial violence is not a recent development, nor is it limited to a single case. The Supreme Court of India, in landmark cases such as *D.K. Basu v. State of West Bengal*, has repeatedly laid out guidelines to prevent torture and abuse in custody. These include mandates for proper arrest procedures, medical examination of detainees, and independent oversight. However, compliance remains inconsistent and largely superficial. The mechanisms meant to ensure accountability—such as departmental inquiries and internal investigations—often remain in the hands of the very institutions implicated in the abuse, leading to a vicious cycle of impunity.
- Within this context, the Chhattisgarh High Court's reasoning is especially regressive. Instead of confronting a pattern of institutional failure, the court effectively legitimises it by portraying custodial violence as a regrettable but well-intentioned act. This narrative only serves to reinforce the already weak enforcement of constitutional safeguards, and makes future violations more likely by providing legal cover to perpetrators.

Judicial Integrity and the Rejection of Coercive Narratives

- For the judiciary to fulfil its role as a guardian of constitutional democracy, it must categorically reject any attempt to morally justify or mitigate state-inflicted violence. Police officers are not vigilantes entrusted with correcting behaviour through coercion; they are public servants who must operate within the boundaries of law. Endorsing the notion of "teaching a lesson" substitutes the rule of law with fear and replaces due process with arbitrary punishment.
- True deterrence comes not from hidden injuries inflicted behind closed doors, but from transparent, proportionate, and lawful punishment administered through an impartial judicial system. Courts must assert that custodial violence is not merely unlawful but antithetical to the democratic ethos. This includes an expansive reading of the SC/ST Act, one that recognises how caste functions as a structural axis of vulnerability and does not require overt proof of prejudice to activate legal protections.
- Moreover, investigations into custodial deaths must be taken out of the hands of the implicated institutions. Independent and empowered oversight bodies are essential for ensuring accountability. Most crucially, judicial discourse must model an unwavering commitment to upholding human dignity, signalling zero tolerance for brutality masquerading as discipline.

Conclusion

- India's Constitution is anchored in the ideals of dignity, equality, and rule of law—principles fundamentally incompatible with a justice system that rationalises custodial violence. The High Court's use of the phrase "teaching a lesson" not only weakens the moral authority of the judiciary but also risks undoing decades of constitutional jurisprudence aimed at curbing police excess and protecting marginalised communities. What is needed now is not symbolic outrage but a structural overhaul—firm enforcement of legal safeguards, strong implementation of protective laws like the SC/ST Act, independent investigative mechanisms, and a judicial language that affirms the absolute sanctity of individual rights.
- To tolerate anything less is to edge toward authoritarianism, where power is unchecked, and justice is dispensed not through rights, but through bruises. Justice must be defined not by retribution or coercion, but by fairness, proportionality, and unyielding respect for human dignity.

Overhauling India's Vocational Education and Training (VET) System – A Key to Realising Viksit Bharat

Introduction

In his Independence Day address on August 15, the Prime Minister emphasised a shift toward demand-driven reforms, the recalibration of GST, and the critical need to enhance productivity through robust education and skill development. Despite having one of the world's youngest populations, India grapples with a significant challenge: a workforce that remains largely low-skilled. To bridge this gap, vocational education and training (VET) emerges as an indispensable tool for improving both employability and economic output.

The Present State of India's VET Framework

- India's VET infrastructure appears formidable on paper, boasting more than 14,000 Industrial Training Institutes (ITIs) and 25 lakh sanctioned seats. However, the real picture reveals a system underutilised and underperforming. In 2022, actual enrolment in ITIs stood at merely 12 lakh, reflecting just 48% seat utilisation. More concerning are the employment outcomes: in 2018, only 63% of ITI graduates were employed. This pales in comparison to countries like Germany, Singapore, and Canada, where employment rates for vocational graduates range between 80% and 90%.
- The issue of formal skilling also paints a stark picture. Only 4% of India's workforce has formal vocational training, a figure dramatically lower than global standards. These indicators point not just to inefficiencies, but to a broader perception problem, with vocational training remaining unattractive and disconnected from actual employment needs.

Key Challenges in India's VET System

- A major shortfall lies in the delayed integration of vocational education into the mainstream educational journey. In India, VET is typically introduced only after high school, drastically reducing the time available for practical training before young people enter the job market. This late exposure also leaves little room for students to develop job-ready skills early on.
- Compounding this is the absence of academic mobility between VET and higher education. Unlike many international systems, India lacks structured pathways that allow for credit transfers or progression from vocational institutes to universities, leaving many learners trapped in a cul-de-sac of limited opportunities.
- Quality concerns further erode the effectiveness of the system. Curricula are outdated and misaligned with contemporary industry needs. One-third of instructor positions in ITIs remain vacant due to limited training capacity at National Skill Training Institutes (NSTIs). Quality control is inconsistent, with irregular grading of ITIs and little or no feedback mechanisms from trainees or employers.
- The limited involvement of private enterprises represents another structural weakness. While successful international VET models thrive on strong public-private partnerships (PPPs), India's ITIs remain heavily reliant on government funding. Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs)—which have high local employment potential—rarely engage with ITIs due to their own capacity constraints. Furthermore, Sector Skill Councils, intended to serve as a bridge between training and industry demand, are notably absent at the state level, curtailing their reach and influence.

International Best Practices for VET Reform

- Models from countries like Germany, Singapore, and Canada offer instructive comparisons. Germany's dual system incorporates VET at the upper secondary level, combining school education with paid apprenticeships to ensure real-world experience. Singapore ensures

academic progression by offering VET through both technical education and polytechnics, enabling seamless movement into university-level programs.

- Singapore's success also lies in its commitment to quality. Curricula are developed in consultation with industry leaders, instructors are highly qualified, and training institutions undergo regular audits, supported by feedback loops from both students and employers. Programmes like "SkillsFuture" further allow for continued upskilling throughout one's career, supported by government subsidies.
- These countries also demonstrate strong PPP models, where governments fund vocational institutions, and employers contribute by financing apprenticeships, helping design course content, and absorbing trained graduates into the workforce. This shared responsibility ensures both relevance and accountability.

What India Must Do to Reform Its VET Ecosystem

- India must begin by integrating vocational training much earlier, as proposed under the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020. Introducing VET at the school level would familiarise students with employable skills and expand their options post-secondary education.
- Equally important is the need to fast-track the National Credit Framework, which would enable academic progression between VET and higher education systems. This would not only raise the status of vocational training but also ensure that learners are not left in a professional dead-end.
- The quality and relevance of training must be significantly improved. Curricula must align with local industry demands. NSTIs should be expanded, more instructors recruited, and ITI grading made regular and transparent. Feedback from trainees should be institutionalised to drive continuous improvement.
- Public-private partnerships must be deepened. Scaling up the involvement of private training partners and leveraging Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) funds for skilling initiatives would ensure better industry alignment. MSMEs should be actively engaged through incentive structures that support their participation in apprenticeship and training programs.
- Funding for VET also needs a radical rethink. Currently, India allocates only 3% of its education budget to vocational education, far below the 10–13% allocated by countries like Germany, Singapore, or Canada. India must adopt a performance-linked funding model and provide revenue autonomy to ITIs, encouraging both efficiency and innovation.

Evaluating Recent Government Initiatives

- Several recent schemes show intent but lack systemic coherence. The Employment Linked Incentive (ELI) scheme, for instance, promotes job formalisation by offering financial incentives to both workers and employers. However, it fails to integrate any skilling component, thereby missing a crucial link in the employment chain.
- The PM Internship Scheme, which promises one-year placements in top firms, also falls short by offering no clear pathway to permanent employment. Similarly, the ITI Upgradation Scheme focuses on infrastructure modernisation for 1,000 government ITIs but does not necessarily guarantee improvements in the quality or relevance of the training provided.

The Way Forward

- India's current efforts are fragmented and insufficient for the scale of transformation required. What is needed is a systemic overhaul that makes vocational training not just a fallback option, but an attractive, effective, and aspirational pathway to quality employment. This transformation must anchor VET within the broader framework of economic mobility, formal employment, and industrial growth.

- To achieve the vision of *Viksit Bharat* by 2047, vocational education must be reimagined as a powerful lever for national development—equipping the youth with future-ready, globally competitive skills while aligning closely with industry needs.

Conclusion

A truly future-ready India hinges on transforming its vocational education and training system into a vibrant, industry-linked, and aspiration-driven ecosystem. Only by creating a system that is not just functional but empowering can India fully capitalise on its demographic dividend. Such a transformation will be pivotal in realising the larger national vision of *Viksit Bharat @2047*, where economic growth, social equity, and global competitiveness are grounded in the skills and potential of every citizen.

Negotiating the Global Plastics Treaty: Bridging the Divide Between Environmental Urgency and Economic Realities

Introduction

The world is facing an escalating plastic pollution crisis of unprecedented proportions. Over 430 million tonnes of plastic are produced globally each year, much of it for single-use purposes, contributing significantly to environmental degradation and adverse health effects. In response, the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) initiated a process to draft a legally binding Global Plastics Treaty. However, the most recent negotiations in Geneva—the sixth such round in three years—collapsed without reaching a consensus. This failure reflects the growing rift between two opposing blocs of nations with fundamentally different visions for addressing the plastic crisis.

The Competing Blocs: Divergent Visions for a Plastic-Free Future

- At the heart of the negotiations lie two sharply divided coalitions. The *High-Ambition Coalition*, comprising the European Union, Australia, Pacific Island nations, and several African states, has pushed for aggressive measures including binding global caps on virgin plastic production, strict targets for reducing pollution, and tighter controls on hazardous chemicals used in plastics. Their core argument is that the problem cannot be resolved by managing waste alone; rather, a substantial reduction in plastic production is essential for long-term sustainability.
- On the other side, the *Like-Minded Bloc*, which includes countries like Russia, India, and other oil-producing nations, favours an approach centred on improving waste management and recycling infrastructure. They oppose global production caps and advocate voluntary commitments over binding international regulations. From their perspective, plastics are deeply woven into the economic fabric—critical for packaging, healthcare, and industrial applications. Curbing plastic production, they argue, would harm economic growth, disrupt livelihoods, and place an unfair burden on developing nations.

Why the Geneva Talks Broke Down

- The collapse of the Geneva negotiations stemmed from a mix of conflicting interests, philosophical disagreements, and a lack of compromise. For oil-rich nations, plastics represent a critical revenue stream, especially as the transition to renewable energy threatens fossil fuel markets. Simultaneously, many developing countries argue that plastics remain essential for providing affordable consumer goods and sustaining jobs in informal sectors.
- Beyond the economic calculus, the groups fundamentally differ on what the treaty should prioritise. The High-Ambition Coalition emphasises prevention through production cuts, while the Like-Minded Bloc insists that effective management and recycling should form the treaty's core. This mirrors the familiar dynamics of climate negotiations, where historical responsibility, development needs, and equity dominate the discourse. Entrenched positions left no space for consensus or middle ground.

- India's stance illustrates this complexity. As the world's largest plastic polluter, contributing roughly 20% of global plastic waste, India introduced a ban on single-use plastics in 2022. However, enforcement remains weak, and the absence of viable alternatives has undermined implementation. India contends that binding global caps would disproportionately burden developing economies like its own, which are still grappling with basic developmental challenges.

The Scale and Impact of the Global Plastic Crisis

- The urgency of the crisis cannot be overstated. According to UNEP (2023), over 430 million tonnes of plastic are produced annually, two-thirds of which are single-use items with short lifespans. Alarming, less than 10% of all plastic is recycled, leaving the majority to accumulate in ecosystems.
- Environmental consequences are widespread. An estimated 11 million tonnes of plastic enter the oceans each year, a figure projected to triple by 2040. Marine species ingest or become entangled in plastic debris, leading to devastating biodiversity loss. On land, plastic accumulation clogs soil systems, reducing fertility and affecting agricultural productivity.
- The human health implications are equally severe. Microplastics have been detected in bloodstreams, lungs, placentas, and even breast milk. These particles are linked to a range of health issues, including endocrine disruption, infertility, cardiovascular diseases, and certain cancers. The crisis is further intertwined with climate change, as plastic production accounts for nearly 3.4% of global greenhouse gas emissions. This undermines decarbonisation efforts and deepens the climate emergency.

India's Plastic Conundrum

- India's plastic challenge is immense. It generates approximately 3.5 million tonnes of plastic waste annually, with nearly 60% of it mismanaged, according to the Central Pollution Control Board (2022). Although policy interventions such as the 2022 single-use plastic ban, Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) guidelines, and initiatives under the Swachh Bharat Mission aim to address the issue, they fall short in practice.
- Enforcement of bans remains inconsistent, with single-use items still widely available in markets. The packaging industry lacks affordable alternatives, and India's vast informal recycling sector—despite playing a crucial role in managing waste—remains largely unrecognised and under-supported. These gaps highlight the structural weaknesses in India's approach to managing plastic pollution.

Geopolitics, Economics, and the Plastic Economy

- Plastics are deeply entwined with global geopolitics and economics. As 99% of plastics are derived from petrochemicals, fossil fuel companies increasingly see plastics as a future revenue stream in a world gradually moving away from oil and gas for energy. This has led to a strategic shift in investments toward plastic manufacturing.
- A pronounced North-South divide complicates global negotiations. Developed nations, having already industrialised, now advocate for stringent restrictions on plastic production. Meanwhile, developing nations call for equity, pointing out that they are still in the process of economic expansion and cannot be expected to shoulder the same burdens. These arguments echo the climate justice debates seen in global forums like the COP summits.
- Trade considerations further entangle the issue. The global plastics industry is valued at around \$600 billion. Sudden or strict bans could disrupt export-heavy manufacturing sectors in countries like India, China, and across Southeast Asia, affecting economic stability and employment.

Lessons from Climate Negotiations and a Possible Path Forward

- The 2015 Paris Agreement demonstrated that global consensus is possible when the approach is flexible. By allowing countries to set nationally determined contributions (NDCs), the Paris model succeeded where previous top-down efforts had stalled. A similar hybrid approach may be necessary for the plastics treaty, blending binding commitments with room for national adaptation.
- Without compromise, the plastics negotiations risk ending in deadlock. A path forward at the global level must involve a treaty that is both binding and flexible—acknowledging differentiated responsibilities while committing all nations to meaningful action. For high per-capita plastic users, production caps should be mandatory, whereas developing countries could focus on improving waste management and investing in alternatives.
- Financing is critical. A Global Plastic Fund, supported by plastic producers and developed nations, could enable poorer countries to transition to eco-friendly materials and better infrastructure. Such a fund would help level the playing field and ensure that environmental goals do not come at the cost of development.

India's Role in the Transition

- At the national level, India must focus on stronger enforcement of existing bans and invest heavily in developing sustainable alternatives to plastic packaging. Empowering the informal sector through formal recognition, training, and incentives can significantly enhance recycling capacity. Public awareness campaigns are essential to changing consumption habits and building demand for eco-friendly products.
- Technological innovation will also be vital. Advances in chemical recycling and biodegradable materials offer long-term solutions. Establishing global standards for plastic design, such as restrictions on toxic additives, can make recycling easier and safer. Public participation, from consumers to civil society, must play a central role in pushing governments toward more ambitious action.

Conclusion

The collapse of the Geneva talks underscores a growing tension between environmental imperatives and economic considerations. Plastics are not merely an environmental hazard; they are also a developmental, industrial, and geopolitical issue. Without a unified approach that balances reduction targets with the developmental realities of the Global South, the world risks deepening the plastic crisis. The way forward demands political will, financial support, technological innovation, and inclusive global cooperation. Only through a fair, flexible, and enforceable treaty—complemented by national reforms and public engagement—can the global community hope to tackle the plastic pollution crisis before it becomes irreversible.

A Misguided Judicial Order on Stray Dogs: Flawed Logic, Misplaced Priorities

Context

On August 11, 2025, the Supreme Court of India issued a controversial directive mandating the capture and confinement of all stray dogs in New Delhi into mass shelters. Though this order was stayed just eleven days later, its initial announcement exposed critical deficiencies in legal reasoning, scientific comprehension, and ethical consideration. Rather than addressing the underlying concerns around dog bites and public health, the order risked exacerbating the humanitarian crisis and triggering an ecological imbalance, all while diverting attention from the city's deeper structural issues.

The Ill-Considered Approach to the Stray Dog Crisis

- The Supreme Court's directive was initially welcomed by some as a long-awaited fix to the so-called "stray dog menace." However, global and domestic evidence overwhelmingly discredits

mass confinement as a viable solution. In the United States, the pound system has long been associated with overcrowded facilities, psychological trauma among dogs, increased aggression, and rampant disease. Research by scholars like Leslie Irvine and David Tuber substantiates that prolonged confinement leads to severe behavioural decline in canines.

- Translating this model to Delhi, with its massive stray dog population, would create logistical chaos. The sheer scale—lakhs of dogs—would lead to unmanageable shelter conditions, violent altercations among territorial animals, and high mortality rates. Instead of resolving the issue, the Court's order risked inflicting large-scale suffering and systemic collapse.

Scientific Oversight and the Ignoring of Established Protocols

- The Court also disregarded the well-known “vacuum effect,” wherein the removal of street dogs from a locality results in the influx of others from surrounding areas, drawn by the same food sources and shelter opportunities. Thus, any population control through mass removal would be short-lived, as nature inevitably fills the void. Moreover, the removal of these dogs, which currently help regulate other urban species, could create a surge in rodents and monkeys, leading to fresh public health threats.
- In bypassing both international norms and national strategies—such as the WHO's recommendations and India's National Action Plan for Dog Mediated Rabies Elimination (NAPRE)—the Court's directive undermined scientific best practices. This deviation not only risks escalating the problem but also erodes institutional credibility by ignoring established, evidence-backed approaches.

Social and Ethical Dimensions of the Street Dog Debate

- The framing of street dogs solely as a nuisance fosters an erroneous and deeply unjust narrative, one that pits urban elites against the city's marginalised. As researcher Yamini Narayanan has shown, street dogs are embedded within the urban ecosystem in complex ways. For many of Delhi's homeless residents, these animals are companions, offering emotional support, protection, and a sense of connection in lives otherwise marked by state neglect.
- Forcibly removing these dogs not only inflicts trauma upon the animals but also deepens the vulnerability of already marginalised people. Such an action would strip them of one of the few sources of comfort and solidarity available to them, reflecting a profound ethical blind spot in the judicial imagination.

The Political Utility of a Distraction

- Beyond legal and ethical flaws, the Supreme Court's order functioned as a potent political distraction. By focusing public discourse on a visceral and divisive issue like street dogs, the conversation was deflected away from the pressing failures of civic governance. Delhi's chronic infrastructural breakdowns, flooding, rising inflation, administrative corruption, and even voter manipulation scandals were pushed to the margins.
- Instead of demanding accountability from the Municipal Corporation of Delhi (MCD) for lapses in sanitation, healthcare, and civic responsibility, the order offered a convenient scapegoat: the city's dogs. In doing so, it deflected systemic failures and redirected citizen frustration toward a largely defenceless population of animals.

Sustainable Solutions and the Role of Animal Birth Control

- The answer to Delhi's stray dog challenge is neither novel nor experimental—it lies in the Animal Birth Control (ABC) programme. Successfully implemented in cities like Jaipur and Jodhpur, ABC relies on systematic sterilisation and vaccination to manage dog populations while simultaneously reducing the risk of rabies.
- A 2010 study from Jodhpur demonstrated that sustained ABC interventions led to measurable and lasting reductions in dog numbers. The issue is not with the method but with its implementation: the MCD's chronic underfunding, failure to meet sterilisation targets, and lack

of institutional accountability have undermined the programme's potential. Ironically, the Supreme Court itself had recently endorsed the ABC Rules, 2023, in its Maheshwari judgment, affirming their scientific and ethical foundations. The August 11 order thus marked a disturbing departure from its own prior stance.

Charting a Humane and Evidence-Based Path Forward

- Addressing the problem of dog bites and public safety is essential, but that does not warrant draconian or reactionary measures. Mass incarceration of stray dogs—tantamount to a "final solution"—is neither humane nor effective. A more rational strategy requires targeted action: identifying and managing aggressive dogs, ensuring widespread sterilisation and vaccination, and promoting public education on coexistence.
- Furthermore, long-term investment in infrastructure, veterinary capacity, and community-based animal care is necessary to create sustainable solutions. Public participation and awareness campaigns must complement government efforts, fostering a culture of shared responsibility rather than reactionary fear.

Conclusion

The Supreme Court's August 11 directive was emblematic of a broader pattern where emotion eclipses reason, and expediency overrides evidence. While the order has since been stayed, its brief life serves as a cautionary tale about how policy can go awry when informed more by populist sentiment than scientific rigour or moral clarity. India's urban challenges—from waste management to animal control—require thoughtful, data-driven, and compassionate solutions. Reactionary measures that marginalise the voiceless, be they animals or people, only deepen the crisis. To truly address public health and civic safety, cities like Delhi must not look for scapegoats but confront governance failures directly. Humane, scientific, and accountable governance is the only sustainable path forward.

Establishing Guardrails for the Use of AI in Indian Courtrooms

Context

The incorporation of Artificial Intelligence into judicial functioning marks a profound transformation in the delivery of justice. This shift is especially significant for India, where the judicial system faces an overwhelming backlog of over five crore cases. In July 2025, the Kerala High Court became the first in the country to introduce a formal policy to regulate AI use in the district judiciary. This step is both timely and forward-thinking, considering AI's potential to improve efficiency, speed, and accuracy in the courts. Yet, alongside this promise lies a complex web of risks, ethical dilemmas, and institutional challenges that must be addressed with equal seriousness.

The Potential of AI in Judicial Workflows

- AI tools offer considerable benefits in automating repetitive tasks and easing the burden on an overstretched judiciary. Functions such as translating court documents, transcribing oral arguments, identifying defects in case filings, and conducting legal research can be executed far more rapidly through AI, thus expediting court processes. Pilot projects have already been launched in some Indian courts, using AI to transcribe witness depositions and arguments, which not only standardises court records but also helps reduce procedural delays.
- AI also offers the promise of greater accessibility. By enabling accurate translation of legal documents into regional languages, it allows a broader segment of the population—lawyers and litigants alike—to meaningfully engage with the judicial process. Moreover, AI-driven analytics could assist in mapping trends within cases, thereby informing judicial reforms and enhancing case management systems.

The Risks and Pitfalls of AI Integration

- Despite its efficiencies, AI introduces serious risks that cannot be overlooked. Instances of mistranslation—such as rendering "leave granted" as "holiday approved"—or transcription errors like interpreting "Noel" as "no" expose the flaws in over-reliance on imperfect AI systems. Large Language Models (LLMs), though capable of generating human-like text, are prone to hallucinations and may fabricate case laws or misstate facts—an unacceptable risk in legal environments that demand precision.
- Beyond technical errors, the absence of a robust regulatory framework is equally concerning. AI, if used mechanically, risks stripping adjudication of its essential human qualities—contextual interpretation, empathy, and moral reasoning. Furthermore, without well-defined protocols on data storage, access, and security, the handling of sensitive personal data by AI systems opens the door to potential privacy breaches.
- The situation is further complicated by the increasing reliance on pilot projects driven by private vendors, often introduced without long-term infrastructural support. Many of these AI tools are tested in environments lacking stable internet connectivity or secure digital infrastructure. This creates a situation where short-term technological fixes risk becoming long-term liabilities.
- Additionally, the current AI procurement practices in courts demonstrate little regard for ethical oversight or error mitigation. Even when human review mechanisms are in place—such as retired judges vetting AI-generated translations—the issue persists because AI tools continuously evolve. This means they may introduce new, unforeseen errors over time, making static oversight measures insufficient.

Essential Safeguards for Responsible AI Adoption

- For AI to serve the judiciary without undermining its core principles, several safeguards are essential. First, there must be widespread AI literacy among all stakeholders—judges, lawyers, and court staff. Training must go beyond operational know-how and include an understanding of the limitations and risks associated with AI. Judicial academies and bar councils, in collaboration with experts in AI governance, should take the lead in conducting structured capacity-building programmes that prepare legal professionals to engage critically with AI-generated outputs.
- Second, the use of generative AI tools in legal research or judgment writing must be governed by clear and transparent guidelines. Litigants have a right to be informed if AI was used in any part of their case—whether for transcription, legal analysis, or drafting. Courts should also consider allowing individuals the right to opt out of AI-assisted proceedings, reinforcing consent and preventing undue dependence on automated systems.
- Third, AI procurement processes must be standardised and legally accountable. Before any AI tool is adopted, pre-procurement assessments must determine whether an AI-based solution is even appropriate. These processes should include stringent criteria for explainability, data privacy, accountability, and system transparency. Courts must also be equipped to monitor the performance of AI vendors and ensure ongoing compliance with ethical and technical standards—areas that often lie outside judicial expertise and therefore require external oversight mechanisms.

A Thoughtful Path Forward

- As Indian courts cautiously embrace AI, it is vital to remember that judicial reform must always be rooted in the principles of fairness, accountability, and due process. The promise of efficiency must not come at the cost of transparency or justice. The challenge lies not in rejecting AI outright but in ensuring its thoughtful, ethical, and context-sensitive adoption.

- If implemented with the appropriate legal frameworks, technical infrastructure, stakeholder training, and institutional safeguards, AI can become a powerful tool to support—rather than substitute—human judgment in the justice system.

Conclusion

The Kerala High Court's initiative to establish a policy framework on AI use in the judiciary marks a significant step toward responsible innovation. It recognises both the immense potential of AI to transform judicial processes and the urgent need to install safeguards before deployment. As more courts experiment with technological solutions, the focus must remain on ensuring that such innovations complement human discretion rather than replace it. Technology must serve justice—not redefine it—and its integration into the courtroom must be guided by prudence, evidence, and ethical clarity.

Supreme Court's Stray Dog Order: A Case for Humane, Legal, and Sustainable Solutions

Introduction

The Supreme Court's order on August 11, 2025, mandating the relocation of all stray dogs in Delhi-NCR to shelters sparked significant public and legal discourse. Widely criticised as judicial overreach that disregarded statutory frameworks and urban realities, the order was soon modified. Within eleven days, the Court clarified that only rabid, suspected rabid, or aggressive dogs should be confined to shelters, while sterilised and vaccinated dogs were to be released back to their original locations. This revised directive, though emerging from controversy, has created an opportunity for a more balanced, lawful, and evidence-based approach to an issue that has troubled Indian cities for decades.

Legal and Institutional Framework

India's legal provisions for animal welfare are well-established. The *Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act, 1960* lays the foundation for the humane treatment of animals. The *Animal Birth Control (Dogs) Rules*, originally notified in 2001 and updated in 2023, codify procedures for sterilising and vaccinating stray dogs, mandating their return to their native locations post-treatment. Judicial precedents from the Supreme Court and various High Courts have consistently upheld that stray dogs cannot be arbitrarily relocated or exterminated, affirming their constitutional right to life and dignity. In modifying its original order, the Supreme Court has attempted to realign with these legal principles, seeking to reconcile citizen safety with animal welfare.

The Collapse of the ABC Programme

Despite the soundness of the ABC framework in theory, its implementation has faltered across much of the country. Municipal bodies often lack basic infrastructure such as adequate shelters, trained dog catchers, qualified veterinarians, and vehicles. Fragmented coordination between civic authorities and NGOs, combined with irregular funding, has hampered consistent sterilisation efforts. As a result, the rules have largely failed to curtail urban dog populations. Recognising this failure, the Supreme Court has directed civic agencies to furnish data on their capacity and infrastructure—an essential step towards grounding policy decisions in empirical evidence and operational feasibility.

Reconciling Public Safety and Animal Rights

India's estimated stray dog population ranges between 15 and 20 million, with annual dog bite incidents numbering around 1.5 to 2 million, according to official data from the NCRB and Ministry of Health and Family Welfare. Rabies remains a pressing public health concern, with the country accounting for 36% of global rabies deaths as per WHO estimates. However, animal rights advocates argue that indiscriminate removal or culling of dogs neither aligns with existing laws nor resolves the issue. The "vacuum effect"—where removed dogs are quickly replaced by new ones—makes such approaches ineffective. The Court's revised position, allowing only truly aggressive or rabid dogs to be

sheltered, thus appears to strike a middle ground that addresses human safety without violating legal and ethical mandates.

Urban Waste Management as a Crucial Factor

Stray dog populations are closely linked to the state of urban waste management. Open garbage dumps, meat markets, and uncollected food waste serve as primary food sources for street dogs. A 2016 report by the Central Pollution Control Board found that 70% of Indian cities do not practice waste segregation at source, effectively turning urban spaces into feeding grounds. Unless solid waste management systems are comprehensively reformed, sterilisation alone will be insufficient to reduce dog populations. The issue of stray dogs is therefore not just a matter of animal control but a symptom of larger urban governance challenges—particularly under the ambit of programmes like the Swachh Bharat Mission.

Civil Society and Community Involvement

Street-level engagement has emerged as a vital supplement to state efforts in managing stray dogs. Caregivers and feeders often ensure that dogs in their neighbourhoods are sterilised and vaccinated. Community-driven models—such as registering local dog feeders as caretakers—can help track vaccinations, identify behavioural changes, and monitor dog movements. Kerala's successful community-led response to a rabies outbreak in 2017 stands as a model for such collaboration between citizens and public health authorities. These decentralised initiatives are crucial in bridging the capacity gap faced by municipalities.

Global Comparisons and Best Practices

International experiences provide important lessons. In Europe, countries like Germany and the Netherlands have achieved near-zero stray dog populations through rigorous pet ownership laws, mandatory microchipping, and strict breeding regulations. Sri Lanka has seen considerable reductions in rabies through mass canine vaccination campaigns. In parts of Latin America, sterilisation drives combined with regulated community feeding programmes have reduced aggression and bite incidents. While India cannot adopt these models wholesale due to different socio-economic contexts, adapting key components—like mass vaccination and community registration—can offer viable pathways to progress.

A Comprehensive Path Forward

- The road to sustainable stray dog management lies in coordinated and multi-sectoral strategies. Strengthening the ABC Rules requires dedicated funding, greater collaboration with veterinary institutions and NGOs, and regular audits to ensure efficacy. Integrated urban waste management is equally critical. This includes strict enforcement of the *Solid Waste Management Rules, 2016*, mandatory source segregation, and the elimination of open garbage dumping sites. These efforts must be tied closely with national cleanliness initiatives like the Swachh Bharat Mission to ensure synergy across sectors.
- Legal reforms are needed to clarify the jurisdictional roles between state and municipal authorities, with mechanisms for stronger accountability. Clearer guidelines on how to handle aggressive or rabid dogs—balancing both public safety and animal rights—will help standardise responses and reduce ad hoc decision-making.
- Community engagement must be institutionalised through structured roles for local dog feeders and volunteers who can assist in vaccination tracking, behavioural observation, and awareness dissemination. Finally, there must be an investment in data systems: creating a national database of stray dog populations, using GIS mapping for sterilisation coverage and bite hotspots, and conducting periodic assessments through state animal welfare boards will offer the information backbone needed for long-term planning.

Conclusion

The Supreme Court's stray dog directive, though initially flawed, has evolved into a legal and policy turning point. The issue at hand cannot be resolved merely by rounding up animals—it demands an integrated approach encompassing municipal reform, public health, waste management, legal clarity, and civil society partnership. By treating stray dog management not as an isolated challenge but as part of the broader urban ecosystem, India can craft a solution that is humane, lawful, and sustainable. The ultimate objective must be to ensure both public safety and animal welfare—without compromising on either.

India's Inflation Targeting Regime: Achievements, Challenges, and the Road Ahead

Introduction

In 2016, India made a historic shift in its monetary policy framework by formally adopting inflation targeting (IT) through amendments to the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) Act, 1934. This framework established a medium-term consumer price index (CPI) inflation target of 4%, within a tolerance band of $\pm 2\%$ (i.e., 2% to 6%). It also institutionalised the formation of a Monetary Policy Committee (MPC) to determine policy interest rates. This collective, transparent, and accountable decision-making body marked a decisive move away from a centralised, discretionary approach. With the second quinquennial review of the framework scheduled for early 2026, the RBI has released a discussion paper to evaluate its performance and consider future directions.

Why Inflation Targeting?

India's decision to adopt inflation targeting was rooted in a period of macroeconomic instability marked by persistently high inflation. Between 2010 and 2013, average CPI inflation hovered around 10%, eroding household purchasing power and complicating investment planning. Additionally, the absence of a clear nominal anchor led to uncertainty regarding the RBI's policy priorities. The adoption of IT was intended to address this credibility gap. Globally, over 48 countries, including the United Kingdom, New Zealand, and Brazil, had already implemented similar regimes with notable success. For India, inflation targeting promised a structured mechanism to navigate the complex trade-offs between growth, price stability, and external vulnerabilities.

Key Achievements Since 2016

- The IT regime has produced several positive outcomes. One of its most significant achievements has been price stability. Since 2016, average CPI inflation has moderated to approximately 4.9%, a marked improvement from the pre-IT average of 6.8% (RBI, 2024). Surveys indicate that inflation expectations among households and firms have begun to show signs of anchoring, a critical condition for macroeconomic stability.
- The regime has also improved accountability. If inflation breaches the 2–6% tolerance band for three consecutive quarters, the RBI is legally required to report to the government, detailing the reasons, proposed remedies, and expected timelines for correction. This mechanism was activated in 2022 when inflation stayed above 6%, prompting the RBI to submit a formal explanation.
- Transparency has improved substantially. The publication of MPC minutes, with individual member views released two weeks after each policy meeting, has enhanced the credibility and predictability of monetary policy decisions. Moreover, the IT framework has demonstrated flexibility during crises. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the MPC prioritised growth to support recovery, without completely disregarding inflation risks—thus maintaining a careful balance between economic stimulus and financial stability.

- Institutionally, the IT regime has shifted decision-making from a “Governor-centric” model to a committee-based approach. This has introduced diversity of thought and greater policy deliberation, reflecting a more democratic structure.

Key Issues Highlighted in the RBI's 2025 Discussion Paper

- The discussion paper raises critical questions about the framework's future. One such issue is whether the 4% target remains optimal for an economy like India's, where structural factors—particularly food inflation—can create persistent upward pressure. While some suggest revising the target upward to accommodate such pressures, others warn that doing so could undermine policy credibility.
- Another debate centres on whether the current model of a point target (4%) with a $\pm 2\%$ band should be replaced by a range-based system (e.g., 2%–6%), which might offer more flexibility in volatile conditions. However, such a shift could reduce the clarity of the policy anchor.
- The paper also revisits the question of whether headline inflation, which includes food and fuel prices, should remain the target variable. Given the volatility of these components, some experts advocate for focusing on core inflation. Yet, the RBI maintains that headline CPI better captures the cost of living for households, particularly in a country where food and energy are significant parts of the consumption basket. Globally, most countries continue to target headline inflation, with Uganda being a rare exception in focusing on core inflation.
- The width of the tolerance band is another area of scrutiny. Narrowing it (e.g., to 3–5%) could improve policy discipline but may constrain the RBI's ability to respond to temporary supply shocks. Maintaining the existing band, therefore, provides a pragmatic balance between precision and flexibility.
- Lastly, the RBI stresses that frequent revisions to targets or methodology risk weakening the credibility of the entire framework. Anchoring expectations requires consistency and long-term commitment to the chosen regime.

Global Experience with Inflation Targeting

Globally, inflation targeting has been widely adopted and retained. The United Kingdom, for instance, targets 2% CPI inflation but often overshoots due to global energy price shocks. New Zealand, the pioneer in IT since 1990, has modified its inflation range over time (from 0–2% to 1–3%) based on evolving economic conditions. Brazil's approach reflects the volatility of emerging markets, incorporating a broader target band to allow for greater flexibility. Importantly, no major economy has abandoned the IT framework after adopting it, although adjustments and refinements have been common.

Criticism of India's Inflation Targeting Regime

- Despite its merits, the IT framework in India has not been without criticism. Detractors argue that it places excessive emphasis on inflation control at the expense of growth and employment, particularly problematic in a developing country with widespread poverty and unemployment. Moreover, much of India's inflation is supply-driven—especially in food and fuel—areas over which monetary policy has limited influence.
- There is also the issue of fiscal-monetary coordination. Expansionary fiscal policies, such as high deficits and untargeted subsidies, can counteract the RBI's anti-inflation efforts. This conflict was visible during the pandemic, when large stimulus packages risked undermining inflation control.
- Monetary transmission remains another challenge. Structural impediments, such as high levels of non-performing assets (NPAs), limited bond market depth, and slow rate pass-through by banks, reduce the effectiveness of policy rate changes. Critics also warn against policy rigidity,

where a strict adherence to inflation targeting could result in pro-cyclical tightening during supply shocks, thereby worsening growth slowdowns.

Alternative Policy Frameworks Explored Globally

Alternative monetary frameworks have been proposed and trialled in various countries. Nominal GDP targeting, for example, captures both inflation and real economic growth, and has been recommended by some economists for India. The U.S. Federal Reserve follows a dual mandate—balancing price stability and maximum employment. India's current model is best described as “flexible inflation targeting” (FIT), which attempts to incorporate growth objectives alongside price stability. Exchange rate anchoring, though considered elsewhere, is unsuitable for India given its high capital mobility and exposure to global trade volatility.

The Way Forward

- The upcoming review offers India a chance to refine, rather than overhaul, its IT framework. Retaining the 4% inflation target is crucial for maintaining policy credibility. Any upward revision could risk unsettling markets and raising borrowing costs. The existing $\pm 2\%$ tolerance band remains appropriate, offering sufficient room to accommodate supply shocks without diluting policy focus.
- Greater synergy between fiscal and monetary authorities is essential to ensure coordinated efforts in managing inflationary pressures. Improving monetary transmission is equally important and requires structural reforms, including deepening capital markets, accelerating interest rate pass-through, and cleaning up bank balance sheets.
- Addressing supply-side inflation calls for investment in agricultural infrastructure, energy diversification, and logistics improvements. These long-term structural reforms can help reduce the frequency and severity of food and fuel-driven price shocks.
- Credibility must be reinforced through consistent policy communication. The continued publication of MPC minutes and timely updates on inflation projections help guide market expectations. Clear, accessible communication from the RBI plays a pivotal role in managing public perceptions and fostering trust in monetary policy.

Conclusion

India's adoption of inflation targeting in 2016 has significantly moderated inflation and strengthened the credibility of monetary policy. As the country prepares for the second five-year review in 2026, the challenge lies in preserving the benefits of the current framework while refining it to better address India's structural and developmental realities. The RBI's emphasis on “policy certainty and credibility” remains well-placed. A calibrated and adaptive approach—grounded in transparency, coordination, and institutional resilience—will be key to ensuring the regime's continued success in a volatile global environment.

The New Constitution Bill and the Need for a Balancing Act

Introduction

- Indian voters consistently express the expectation that their elected representatives uphold high standards of moral and ethical integrity. However, this ideal stands in stark contrast to the enduring presence of political leaders with serious criminal charges occupying positions of executive authority. Seeking to resolve this long-standing contradiction, the Constitution (One Hundred and Thirtieth Amendment) Bill, 2025 was introduced in the Lok Sabha on August 20, 2025. The Bill proposes that Union Ministers, Chief Ministers, and even the Prime Minister must resign—or face automatic removal—if they remain in judicial custody for more than thirty consecutive days in connection with an offence carrying a potential punishment of five years or more.

- While the Bill appears to advance the cause of political accountability, it also raises significant constitutional and political concerns. These include potential violations of legal principles such as the presumption of innocence, and the risk of increasing political manipulation. Thus, although motivated by legitimate concerns, the Bill's approach may complicate rather than resolve the challenge it seeks to address.

Constitutional Foundations of the Bill

- The legal grounding of the Bill rests on Articles 75, 164, and 239AA of the Indian Constitution, which govern the appointment and tenure of Ministers at the Union, State, and Delhi levels. These provisions have undergone extensive judicial scrutiny. In *Shamsher Singh v. State of Punjab* and *Nabam Rebia v. Deputy Speaker*, the courts clarified the scope of executive authority. In *S.R. Bommai v. Union of India*, the Supreme Court emphasised that constitutional morality is fundamental for sustaining democratic governance. Most significantly, in *Manoj Narula v. Union of India*, the Court observed that persons facing serious criminal charges should ideally be kept out of executive office, although it stopped short of mandating disqualification.
- Drawing upon this jurisprudence, the 2025 Bill seeks to convert judicial suggestions into statutory obligation, thereby legislating ethical expectations into a binding framework. It represents an attempt to reconcile public morality with constitutional governance.

Constitutional and Political Pitfalls

Despite its ethical appeal, the Bill raises fundamental questions regarding constitutional rights and political prudence.

Undermining the Presumption of Innocence

A major concern is that the Bill erodes the presumption of innocence—an essential element of Article 21's guarantee of life and personal liberty. The proposal mandates removal not upon conviction, but merely upon prolonged detention. This diverges sharply from established jurisprudence. In *Lily Thomas v. Union of India*, the Supreme Court upheld the disqualification of legislators only after conviction, not upon arrest or detention. The Bill, by contrast, imposes a stricter standard on Ministers, thereby creating a constitutional asymmetry that penalises individuals before their guilt is proven.

Over-Reliance on Executive Discretion

The dual mechanism proposed in the Bill—removal either through executive advice or automatically after thirty days in custody—heightens the risk of politicisation. In practice, this structure offers ruling parties an opportunity to selectively apply the law. Political allies may be protected through delayed advice, while rivals may be subjected to the automatic provision. Far from insulating governance from political calculations, the Bill may entrench partisan manoeuvring under the guise of accountability.

Inconsistencies and Practical Dilemmas

- The Bill's approach also creates inconsistencies between legislators and Ministers. Legislators remain unaffected unless convicted, but Ministers may lose office based on pre-trial detention alone. While one might argue that executive office demands a higher standard, this uneven treatment risks disincentivising competent lawmakers from assuming ministerial responsibilities.
- Moreover, the provision allowing reappointment once custody ends could destabilise governance. The potential for frequent resignations and reinstatements—particularly in cases where detention is short-lived or politically motivated—could create a revolving-door scenario, with adverse consequences for administrative continuity and institutional stability.
- Additionally, the possibility of legal processes being misused for political ends cannot be ruled out. Weaponising arrests to engineer resignations could become a new tactic in electoral competition, undermining the very legitimacy the Bill seeks to uphold.

The Case for a More Nuanced Approach

- Despite these pitfalls, the need for reform is undeniable. The Association for Democratic Reforms reports that nearly 46% of Members of Parliament elected in 2024 faced criminal charges—an alarming statistic that underscores the deep entrenchment of criminal elements in Indian politics. But while the moral imperative is strong, the Bill's approach risks doing more harm than good by sacrificing due process in pursuit of ethical governance.
- A more calibrated solution is needed—one that upholds both constitutional principles and democratic accountability. Removal from ministerial office could be tied to judicial thresholds such as the framing of charges, which ensures a basic level of court scrutiny before sanctions are applied. This would protect individuals from politically motivated arrests while maintaining the integrity of public office.
- Oversight mechanisms should also be revised. Instead of relying solely on executive discretion, an independent judicial or quasi-judicial panel could evaluate cases of prolonged custody and recommend appropriate action. This would ensure procedural fairness and insulate decisions from political bias.
- Further, instead of immediate removal, the law could provide for interim suspension from ministerial duties while legal proceedings are underway. Such a provision would preserve administrative functionality while respecting public concerns about criminality in high office.
- Finally, the Bill's scope should be narrowed to include only serious offences—such as those involving corruption or moral turpitude. This avoids penalising Ministers for politically motivated or relatively minor charges that do not reflect on their fitness for public office.

Conclusion

- The Constitution (One Hundred and Thirtieth Amendment) Bill, 2025 represents a bold and timely attempt to address the moral deficit in Indian politics. Its intention—to promote integrity among those in positions of executive authority—is laudable and resonates with the public's longstanding frustration with the criminalisation of politics. However, the Bill's current form risks undermining constitutional safeguards, politicising the process of accountability, and destabilising governance.
- To be effective, the legislation must strike a careful balance between ethical imperatives and the rule of law. Without due process protections, independent oversight, and clear thresholds, the Bill may fail to achieve its goals while creating new risks. It now falls upon the Joint Parliamentary Committee to revise and refine the proposal, ensuring that the final legislation delivers genuine reform without compromising constitutional values or democratic stability.

Promotion and Regulation of Online Gaming Bill, 2025: A Need for Balance

Introduction

The *Promotion and Regulation of Online Gaming Bill, 2025*, recently enacted by Parliament, has generated significant debate. The legislation enforces a blanket ban on all online money games—irrespective of whether they are based on skill or chance. It also prohibits advertising, sponsorship, and promotion of such platforms. The government has justified this move on grounds of public health, addiction, financial distress, and the potential for fraud and money laundering. However, the law raises critical questions about efficacy, constitutional validity, and economic impact.

Government's Rationale for the Ban

The central government defends the Bill on multiple grounds:

- **Public Health and Mental Well-being:** Online gaming addiction has been increasingly associated with mental health issues such as anxiety, depression, and social isolation. A 2023 study in the *Indian Journal of Psychiatry* confirmed this link, and the World Health Organization (WHO) officially classified "gaming disorder" as a mental condition in 2019.

- **Financial Risks to Users:** Micro-transactions and real-money betting games have led to significant personal debt, particularly among the youth. The burden of these losses disproportionately falls on middle- and lower-income families, compounding economic vulnerabilities.
- **Fraud and Illicit Activities:** Investigations by the Enforcement Directorate uncovered the misuse of online gaming platforms for illicit financial flows, including hawala transactions, cryptocurrency laundering, and Ponzi schemes.

Justifications Offered in Support of the Ban

The proponents of the legislation argue that:

- The **state has a moral responsibility** to protect vulnerable populations from exploitative gaming ecosystems.
- A ban serves as a **preventive mechanism**, limiting the availability and accessibility of harmful platforms.
- It enhances **consumer protection** by curbing misleading advertisements that promote gaming as a guaranteed route to wealth.
- It introduces **national uniformity**, resolving contradictions in state-level regulations—for instance, divergent High Court rulings in Tamil Nadu and Karnataka on the legality of certain platforms.

Criticism and Concerns Surrounding the Ban

Despite its intent, the ban has attracted several critiques:

- **Questionable Effectiveness:** India's historical experience with prohibitive policies—such as liquor bans, cryptocurrency restrictions, and commodity price controls—suggests that outright prohibitions often drive activities underground. Unregulated offshore platforms may flourish beyond the reach of Indian regulators, making the problem harder to manage.
- **Economic Consequences:** The real-money gaming sector, according to a 2023 PwC report, generated revenues of ₹16,500 crore and was expected to grow to ₹26,500 crore by 2028. The ban directly impacts:
 - Startups and gaming platforms, many of which have already paused operations.
 - Employment across sectors like gaming development, animation, fintech, and digital marketing.
 - Foreign and domestic investment—EY estimates that the sector attracted ₹22,931 crore in FDI and domestic capital between 2019 and 2023.
- **Fiscal Losses:** Following the GST Council's decision to impose a 28% tax on online gaming, the government saw a 412% increase in tax revenues in just six months, amounting to ₹6,909 crore. The ban eliminates this emerging revenue stream.
- **Policy Uncertainty:** The abrupt policy reversal reflects instability, which can discourage long-term capital investment and innovation in India's broader digital economy.

Global Experiences and Lessons for India

Experiences from other nations provide useful contrasts:

- **China** has introduced stringent time restrictions for minors—limiting them to just three hours of online gaming per week. However, enforcement remains inconsistent, and unregulated black-market platforms persist.
- **The United States** differentiates between games of skill and games of chance, allowing regulated formats like fantasy sports with appropriate taxation.
- **The United Kingdom** has developed a robust regulatory architecture involving mandatory licensing, self-exclusion systems, and strict advertising norms.
- **Singapore** employs a “sandbox regulation” model that fosters innovation while enforcing safeguards.

These international models demonstrate that outright bans are rarely effective. Regulation, licensing, and taxation tend to achieve better outcomes in balancing user safety with industry growth.

Alternative Approaches to a Blanket Ban

To address risks without stifling growth, alternative strategies are available:

- **Regulated Licensing Framework:** Introduce mandatory licensing for online gaming platforms, ensuring compliance with the Information Technology Act, FEMA, and anti-money laundering laws.
- **KYC and Financial Controls:** Enforce strict Know Your Customer (KYC) norms, spending limits, and age-based access restrictions. Leverage Aadhaar and DigiLocker for identity verification.
- **Mental Health and Public Awareness:** Launch digital literacy programmes warning of the risks associated with online gaming. Offer helplines and counselling for users and families affected by gaming-related distress.
- **Grievance Redressal Mechanisms:** Establish an independent regulator or ombudsman to handle user complaints and disputes.
- **Differentiated Treatment of Games:** Permit regulated fantasy sports and skill-based gaming under oversight, while continuing to restrict chance-based gambling that mimics casino formats.

Constitutional and Legal Challenges

The Bill also raises potential constitutional issues:

- **Federal Tensions:** Betting and gambling fall under Entry 34 of the State List in the Seventh Schedule, granting states the authority to legislate. However, online platforms transcend geographical boundaries, complicating jurisdiction.
- **Right to Trade and Occupation:** Article 19(1)(g) guarantees the right to practice any profession or trade, subject to reasonable restrictions. The Bill's sweeping ban may be challenged as disproportionate and overbroad.
- **Judicial Precedents:** In *Dr. K.R. Lakshmanan vs. State of Tamil Nadu* (1996), the Supreme Court distinguished between games of skill and gambling. High Courts have similarly upheld the legality of fantasy sports on the grounds of predominance of skill. The new law may not withstand judicial scrutiny without a clear distinction.

Broader Implications of the Law

The legislation's ripple effects are multidimensional:

- **Social Impact:** While the law may protect families from addiction and financial loss, it may inadvertently drive users toward underground, unregulated platforms that offer no safety or oversight.
- **Economic Fallout:** The ban risks dismantling a fast-growing sector, threatening jobs, innovation, and investment, while eliminating a rapidly expanding tax base.
- **Legal Contentions:** By blurring the line between regulation and prohibition, the Bill invites constitutional challenges and legal ambiguity.
- **Technological Backslide:** The decision may slow the development of adjacent technologies like artificial intelligence, augmented reality (AR), and virtual reality (VR), which are closely tied to gaming ecosystems.
- **Geopolitical Risks:** Offshore platforms may fill the void left by banned domestic firms, reducing India's ability to regulate or influence global digital trends.

The Way Forward

A more balanced, future-oriented approach is possible:

- Implement a **light-touch regulatory model** as suggested by NITI Aayog in 2020, prioritising consumer safety without undermining industry potential.

- Establish a **Central Online Gaming Authority** to coordinate policies across states and streamline enforcement.
- Replace blanket prohibitions with **graded taxation models** that penalise harmful practices without stifling innovation.
- Promote **responsible gaming mechanisms**, including spending caps, self-exclusion tools, and age-verification systems.
- Align India's regulatory stance with **global best practices**, ensuring a balance between innovation, revenue generation, and consumer protection.

Conclusion

The *Promotion and Regulation of Online Gaming Bill, 2025* reflects the government's strong intent to address public health, financial safety, and crime concerns. However, India's past experience with prohibition-based policies suggests such approaches are often counterproductive. Instead, a calibrated strategy that combines robust regulation, taxation, awareness, and institutional oversight offers a more sustainable solution. The core challenge lies in navigating the middle ground: protecting users and vulnerable groups without derailing innovation, employment, and India's growing digital economy.

Nourish to Flourish: The Nutrition and Cognition Link

Introduction

Human development is fundamentally shaped by its earliest moments. Much like the necessity of leaving for an airport on time to catch a flight, the first 1,000 days of a child's life—from conception to their second birthday—represent a non-negotiable window of opportunity. During this critical period, nutrition, brain development, and cognitive growth align to establish the groundwork for lifelong health, learning, and productivity. Scientific evidence consistently shows that if this developmental window is missed, the consequences are profound and largely irreversible.

The Science Behind Early Development

The significance of the first 1,000 days is backed by extensive scientific research. By age two, a child's brain reaches approximately 80% of its adult weight, with peak synaptic development occurring during this stage. The frontal lobes—responsible for essential higher-order functions such as planning, decision-making, and self-regulation—undergo rapid maturation. Any failure to adequately nourish or stimulate the brain during this time results in underdeveloped neural pathways, constraining the child's future potential in ways that cannot be fully corrected later in life.

Nutrition and Cognitive Stimulation: Two Sides of the Same Coin

- Nutrition, though crucial on its own, is deeply interlinked with cognitive stimulation. Deficiencies during the first three years of life can cause stunting, cognitive delays, and permanent disabilities. India, despite steady progress, still struggles with alarming malnutrition rates. At the current pace, the country is projected to reach a stunting rate of 10% only by 2075—far too slow for a nation aspiring to global leadership.
- Research from Tamil Nadu highlights the neurological impact of early iron deficiency, showing how it hinders language acquisition and processing speed. Such findings confirm that interventions focused solely on nutrition—though beneficial—are insufficient when not combined with cognitive engagement. Children's extraordinary capacity for absorbing language and memory in these formative years reflects the brain's plasticity and the urgency of integrating care, nutrition, and stimulation into one cohesive framework.

India's Childcare Interventions: Progress and Innovation

- India has not been passive in addressing this developmental imperative. The Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) is among the world's largest programmes aimed at improving early childhood outcomes. With a dual focus on nutrition and education, ICDS acknowledges the

interdependence of body and mind. More recently, schemes such as *Poshan Bhi Padhai Bhi* have explicitly woven nutritional support with early learning, recognising that tackling one without the other is inadequate.

- Building on this approach, the *Navchetana* framework has introduced structured stimulation activities for children under the age of three. Designed around play-based learning, these activities empower caregivers, Anganwadi workers, and parents to support holistic development without falling into rote, school-like patterns. The focus here is relational care—encouraging responsive, interactive environments rooted in families and communities.

Persistent Gaps and Structural Challenges

- Despite these strides, India faces major hurdles. The scale is enormous: with around 14 lakh Anganwadi centres, the infrastructure exists, but service delivery is inconsistent and quality varies widely. Urban centres, paradoxically, remain some of the most underserved. Technology, though promising, has yet to be harnessed effectively to improve accountability, transparency, and efficiency.
- Further, early health, learning, and psychological well-being are still approached in silos rather than as interconnected facets of child development. This fragmented delivery impairs impact. A significant, often overlooked barrier is the lack of adequate childcare support for working women. Without reliable, accessible crèche systems—whether public, community-managed, or through public-private partnerships—women are frequently forced to exit the workforce. This limits not only their economic potential but also their ability to ensure optimal care for their children. Childcare, therefore, must be recognised not as a welfare service but as a vital component of gender equity and economic growth.

Why Early Childhood Investment Matters in a Changing Economy

- The imperative to invest in early childhood becomes even more pressing in the context of a rapidly evolving global economy. Automation, artificial intelligence, and mechanisation are steadily eroding demand for low-skilled, manual labour. The future belongs to those with cognitive flexibility, creativity, and adaptability—traits that begin to take root in the first 1,000 days of life.
- In this light, early childhood development is not a social expenditure but a strategic investment. It is a forward-looking policy choice aimed at equipping India's next generation to thrive in a knowledge-based economy. India's demographic dividend will only pay off if today's children are nurtured, stimulated, and supported from the very beginning of life.

Conclusion

- The first 1,000 days of life are not merely a biological stage but a blueprint for individual success and national progress. Missing this developmental window is akin to missing a flight: the opportunity is lost, and the consequences can be lasting. If India is to truly harness its demographic potential, it must treat early childhood development as a national priority.
- This requires a holistic strengthening of existing systems—upgrading the quality and reach of ICDS, integrating nutrition with cognitive programmes, leveraging community engagement, and supporting women through robust childcare services. Above all, it demands that policymakers recognise what science has long made clear: the body and mind are inseparable, and nourishing one without the other is a missed opportunity. Through sustained investment and integrated care, India can ensure that its youngest citizens are not just surviving, but thriving—and are prepared to lead the nation into the future.

The Dangerous Wiring Together of a 'Conspiracy'

Context

- Echoing Shakespeare's words — "*O horror, horror, horror! Tongue nor heart cannot conceive nor name thee!*" — India finds itself in a moment where the constitutional promise of press freedom stands perilously exposed. What initially appears as a local police action — the summoning of two senior journalists by Assam Police — is symptomatic of a broader and more troubling erosion of democratic dissent.
- At the center of this unfolding episode is **Section 152 of the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (BNS)** — a provision many argue is *sedition cloaked in new terminology*. Though sedition has been formally struck off Indian penal law, its spirit may have quietly re-entered through a more elastic and dangerous legal instrument.

The FIR and Its Context

The case stems from a **First Information Report filed in Guwahati in May 2025**, targeting journalists *Karan Thapar* and *Siddharth Varadarajan* for allegedly conspiring to endanger national security through interviews and articles published on *The Wire*. The complaint, couched in refined legal language, attempts to stretch journalistic critique into a narrative of subversion.

Despite this, the FIR **fails to meet the threshold of an offence under the BNS**. Yet, nearly three months after its filing, the Assam Police acted — summoning the journalists to Guwahati for questioning. This delay, combined with the flimsy legal basis, suggests a motive far removed from concerns of national security. What it reveals instead is an institutional determination to **intimidate critics** and suppress dissent.

Section 152: Sedition in Disguise

- Although the colonial-era offence of sedition has been formally abolished, Section 152 of the BNS effectively **reincarnates its spirit**. The clause criminalises acts that threaten the "sovereignty, unity, and integrity" of India — language that is constitutionally valid when applied narrowly to secessionist or violent acts.
- However, **the breadth and vagueness** of this provision make it ripe for misuse. In its current form, it can be invoked not only against those inciting rebellion but also against journalists, writers, or critics who merely question government policy. The penalty — life imprisonment — **casts a chilling shadow** over public discourse. With such a tool in hand, overzealous authorities can easily blur the line between dissent and criminality, turning legitimate scrutiny into punishable offence.

The Chilling Impact of the Summons

The effects of these actions are immediate and corrosive:

- **Stifling Public Debate:** The fear of being summoned, interrogated, or criminally charged discourages not just journalists but all citizens from engaging in critique.
- **Financial and Emotional Toll:** Defending oneself against vague accusations demands travel, legal fees, and time — resources many cannot afford. For Thapar and Varadarajan, recurring trips to Guwahati without clarity on the scope or duration of questioning only intensify the burden.
- **Due Process Denied:** In a direct affront to established Supreme Court rulings, the police have denied the journalists access to the FIR — a basic legal right essential for mounting a defence. This refusal is not a procedural lapse but an act of **institutional impunity**, undermining both legal accountability and public trust in the justice system.

In this scenario, **the process becomes the punishment**. Even in the absence of a conviction, the mere machinery of the law is wielded as a weapon of harassment.

A Broader and More Dangerous Precedent

The implications stretch well beyond this particular case. Section 152 allows the state to **expand the circle of suspicion** — potentially ensnaring editors, analysts, retired officials, or any intellectual associated with critical narratives.

Thus, the real casualty here is not just individual freedom but **the collective space for open, democratic debate**. The threat posed by such loosely framed laws is not episodic but systemic. It erodes the very foundation of a republic premised on argument and accountability.

Harassment Is Not Inevitable — There Are Alternatives

There are clear and practical alternatives to the harassment currently being inflicted:

- **Video-based Interrogation:** Technology enables questioning via video conferencing, a practice already recognised in Delhi's policing system. This would reduce travel-related costs and create a transparent, auditable process.
- **Respecting Legal Mandates:** Simply following Supreme Court guidelines — such as providing the FIR to the accused — would be a step toward restoring legal credibility.

The refusal to adopt such measures **exposes the true intention:** not to investigate, but to intimidate.

Three Fundamental Questions for Democracy

This episode forces India to confront three uncomfortable yet urgent questions:

1. **Can Section 152 remain on the books** when its potential for abuse so clearly undermines free speech?
2. **Should the police not be held to legal mandates**, especially when courts have made their rulings on due process unequivocal?
3. **Is the state accountable** when its institutions weaponise the law not to uphold justice, but to punish citizens for their speech?

If the answer to any of these is yes, then what we are witnessing is not law enforcement but **democratic backsliding**.

Conclusion

India today stands at a crossroads — caught between the **aspiration for a vibrant democracy** and the **reality of shrinking dissent**. The rebranded offence of sedition in Section 152 is more than a legal issue; it is a **moral and constitutional crisis**. What plays out in the summoning of journalists is not an isolated case, but a **cautionary tale of how democracies decay not with thunder, but with silence**. If unchecked by the judiciary, reformed by Parliament, and restrained by policing institutions, this provision will **freeze free speech into a national hush**. And a democracy without dissent, history reminds us, is no democracy at all.

Before Legislation Becomes Litigation

Context

- The framers of India's Constitution were acutely aware of the distinction between **parliamentary sovereignty** and **constitutional democracy**. Rejecting the British model—where Parliament reigns supreme and unbounded—they placed clear limits on legislative authority. Indian lawmakers were to operate under the Constitution, not above it. This framework ensured that while Parliament had broad powers to legislate, those powers would be subject to **constitutional scrutiny**.
- Yet, over time, a concerning pattern has emerged. Increasingly, it is **constitutional courts**, not Parliament, that are left to resolve disputes over legislation. This shift isn't driven solely by judicial activism—it reflects deeper **legislative lapses**: poor drafting, inadequate deliberation, and a recurring disregard for constitutional foresight. The result is a growing reliance on the courts to fix what Parliament failed to address.

The Expanding Role of Judicial Review

- Originally, the power of **judicial review**—to invalidate laws conflicting with the Constitution—was conceived as a tool of last resort. It was meant to be rare, invoked only in extraordinary circumstances of constitutional breach. In practice, however, this power has become a routine judicial function. The courtroom has evolved into a **frequent battleground over legislative validity**, reflecting not just legal contestation, but **parliamentary shortcomings**.

- A telling example occurred in **May 2025**, when the Supreme Court was petitioned to review the **Waqf (Amendment) Act**—barely weeks after its passage. Strikingly, some petitioners were Members of Parliament themselves, signalling the dissonance between legislative output and constitutional clarity. The Union Law Ministry's 2022 statement—that **35 central laws and amendments were pending challenge before the Supreme Court**—further illustrates this trend.
- While judicial oversight is critical for constitutional protection, its **frequent invocation exposes a systemic failure**: Parliament is not vetting its laws with sufficient rigour, thereby transferring responsibility for legislative precision to the courts.

Flaws in Legislative Execution

- Most legal challenges can be traced to one of three causes: **blatant constitutional violations**, **performative politics**, or more commonly, **technical flaws in execution**. It is the third—poor legislative drafting—that has become most pervasive.
- Indian laws often feature ambiguous definitions, contradictory clauses, and erratic cross-references. At times, entire sections contradict constitutional guarantees. Such errors do not merely lead to litigation; they **weaken economic predictability, social trust, and institutional credibility**.
- This deterioration is ironic given the robust design of India's **legislative process on paper**. The **Manual of Parliamentary Procedure** outlines an elaborate system: ministries formulate policy, seek stakeholder feedback, involve the Law Ministry for legal vetting, secure Cabinet approval, and submit to parliamentary scrutiny—including committee review and clause-by-clause debate.
- However, the gap between procedure and practice is stark. Bills are frequently tabled with minimal notice, bypassing standing committees and rushed through debates. This hasty approach creates glaring anomalies. For instance, **Section 18(d) of the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act, 2019** prescribes a maximum two-year sentence for sexual abuse against transgender persons—far lighter than the **seven years to life imprisonment** under the **Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, 2023** for similar crimes against women. These disparities aren't minor oversights; they signal a **failure of constitutional coherence and legislative seriousness**.

The Democratic Deficit in Law-Making

- When legislation becomes **inaccessible or incoherent**, it erodes democracy itself. Effective constitutional governance depends on **informed legislative participation**. Yet, in India's fast-paced legislative environment, Members of Parliament are often handed dense legal texts with little time or support to evaluate their implications.
- As debates are reduced to party-line rhetoric, lawmakers become passive participants in a highly technical process. The democratic ideal—of a diverse body of elected representatives engaging meaningfully with law-making—gets sidelined. The result is a widening gap between **constitutional expectations and political reality**.
- This situation is worsened by the fact that **most MPs lack formal legal training**, and there are few institutional mechanisms to support them in navigating complex jurisprudence. Consequently, law-making risks becoming the exclusive domain of legal elites—alienating legislators and diminishing Parliament's representative function.

A Constitutional Solution: The Retainer Attorney-General

- To address this systemic imbalance, Parliament must adopt **preventive safeguards**—interventions that correct errors **before** laws are enacted. One promising solution lies in reactivating a largely dormant constitutional provision.

- **Article 88 of the Constitution** permits the **Attorney-General (AG) of India** to participate in parliamentary proceedings. Though rarely invoked, this provision holds immense potential. By positioning the AG as a **constitutional adviser within the legislative process**, India can achieve two crucial outcomes.
- First, the AG could flag **constitutional inconsistencies and drafting flaws** before a bill becomes law—pre-empting unnecessary litigation. Second, MPs would benefit from **expert, non-partisan legal advice**, empowering them to make more informed decisions. This would elevate the quality of legislative debate and align statutes more closely with constitutional norms.
- Ultimately, **well-crafted laws reduce judicial intervention**. The AG, in this role, could serve as a **constitutional gatekeeper**, bridging the gap between **politics and jurisprudence**.

Conclusion

- The framers envisioned Parliament as a sovereign legislative body, but always **within constitutional bounds**. That vision is threatened when legislative processes deteriorate into **hasty enactments**, forcing courts to act as **post-facto editors**.
- Frequent judicial review is not a sign of healthy constitutionalism—it is a symptom of **legislative dysfunction**. To restore balance, India must **strengthen its legislative institutions**, support its lawmakers, and embed legal expertise in the drafting process.
- Reviving the **Attorney-General's advisory function**, as envisioned in the Constitution, offers a pathway to more coherent, constitutionally sound laws. Such a move would not only reduce litigation but would also restore Parliament's dignity as a serious, deliberative body.
- In the end, precision in law-making is not just a technical demand—it is a **democratic imperative**, essential for the long-term integrity of India's constitutional order.

Tourism in India: A Strategic, Resilient, and Tariff-Proof Growth Engine

Context

Amid rising global protectionism, highlighted recently by the US move to increase tariffs on Indian exports, India's over-reliance on trade-sensitive sectors is becoming a point of economic vulnerability. In this context, **tourism emerges as a robust, tariff-proof alternative** — one that not only drives economic growth but also enhances employment, foreign exchange inflow, and soft power.

Tourism's Untapped Economic Potential

- **A labour-intensive, inclusive sector:** Tourism's greatest strength lies in its capacity to **generate employment across a wide socio-economic spectrum**. From urban-based professionals in hospitality and aviation to rural artisans, transport operators, and local guides, the sector creates widespread opportunities. Its impact spans multiple domains — **transportation, accommodation, handicrafts, wellness, culinary services, and entertainment** — providing jobs at both the formal and informal levels.
- **Current contribution and comparative lag:** India's tourism sector currently contributes about **5% to the national GDP**, a modest figure compared to the **global average of 10%**. Countries like **Spain and the UAE**, where tourism makes up nearly **12% of GDP**, demonstrate the transformational potential of tourism when prioritised as a core economic strategy.
- **Foreign exchange earnings and missed opportunities:** In 2024, India earned approximately **\$28 billion (₹2.45 lakh crore)** from inbound tourism. However, this is just a fraction of its potential — estimates suggest that if tourism were to reach **10% of GDP**, **foreign exchange earnings could rise to \$130–140 billion annually**.

The outbound tourism paradox

In the same year, over **28 million Indians travelled abroad**, spending between **\$28–31 billion** globally. Indian tourists are among the world's top spenders. Unless India offers **comparable, world-**

class domestic tourism experiences, this revenue will continue to flow out of the country, posing both a challenge and a missed opportunity.

Future Projections and Economic Transformation

If India can double tourism's share in GDP from 5% to 10% within the next decade, the impact would be profound:

- An **additional \$516 billion added to the economy annually**.
- Creation of over **40 million new jobs**, many of which are non-offshorable.
- **Foreign exchange earnings** climbing to **\$130–140 billion**, insulating the economy against trade volatility.

Overcoming Capacity Constraints

Tourism differs from goods exports — its growth hinges on **perception, ease, and experience**, all of which are within policy control.

At present:

- India has only **1.8 lakh branded hotel rooms** and **1.5 million unbranded rooms**.
- To match rising demand and price competitiveness, India must **triple this capacity** across both categories.
- Scaling infrastructure is also critical for positioning India as a hub for **global events and conventions** — a high-value tourism niche.

Strategic Pathways to Unlock Growth

- **Destination and infrastructure development:** The 2025–26 Union Budget announcement to develop 50 destinations in collaboration with state governments is a critical first move. Creating at least one globally competitive, sustainable, and brand-rich destination per state could shift India's global image from a place to see to a place to experience.
- **Seamless connectivity and traveller facilitation:** Streamlining e-visas, minimising immigration queues, and ensuring a welcoming arrival experience are essential. With Indian airlines planning to expand their fleets by 1,000 aircraft, improved connectivity will significantly enhance tourist inflows.
- **Technology and content-led promotion:** India's cultural assets are already being informally marketed by millions of digital creators. The next step is AI-enabled content curation, and strategic tie-ups with global digital platforms, to tell India's tourism story at scale and with sophistication.
- **Attracting private capital:** Bringing tourism into the Harmonised Master List of Infrastructure will enable targeted investments. This includes PPP models in hotels, ropeways, convention centres, and wayside amenities — projects that can scale quickly and serve diverse tourist profiles.
- **Reviving and scaling domestic tourism:** Domestic travellers account for 86% of India's tourism revenue. Making interstate travel more affordable and convenient, especially for middle-income travellers, will foster: Cultural exchange, Balanced regional development, and National integration. The Dekho Apna Desh campaign can evolve into a broader movement promoting India's internal tourism ecosystem.

Tourism as a Green and Inclusive Growth Driver

- **High economic multiplier:** Every rupee spent by a tourist ripples across multiple sectors — from **transport to crafts, food services, and community-based enterprises**.
- **Low environmental footprint:** When designed and managed sustainably, tourism can drive **inclusive livelihoods** without inflicting environmental damage — unlike heavy industries or extractive sectors.
- **Niche tourism opportunities:** India is uniquely positioned to lead in **Wellness tourism** (e.g., Ayurveda, yoga retreats), **Spiritual travel** (pilgrimage circuits), **Medical value tourism**, and

Cultural tourism (music, art, heritage trails). These segments align with global trends in **experiential and mindful travel**.

Conclusion

In a global economy where **tariffs, trade disputes, and geopolitical tensions** create economic uncertainty, **tourism stands out as a resilient, self-sustaining, and tariff-proof growth engine**.

Its advantages are manifold:

- Generates **jobs that cannot be offshored**,
- Spurs **domestic consumption** that is largely untaxable by foreign entities,
- Strengthens **national identity and soft power**.

With strategic infrastructure development, policy consistency, private investment, and inclusive promotion, India can harness tourism not only as an economic tool but also as a **cultural force**. By turning trade adversity into domestic opportunity, India has the chance to make **tourism a core pillar of its next growth chapter**.

The Constitution as the Ring-Fence for the Election Commission of India

Context

Elections are the bedrock of any democratic system. Their legitimacy rests not only on the conduct of polling but also on the **credibility of electoral rolls**, which determine who has the right to vote. In recent weeks, two high-profile press conferences have cast a spotlight on India's electoral machinery, sparking a nationwide debate about whether fundamental flaws in electoral management — and the Election Commission of India's (ECI) responses — are eroding the democratic core of the country. The concerns raised go beyond isolated irregularities and suggest deeper institutional lapses that threaten electoral integrity.

Opposition Allegations and Electoral Trust

- On August 7, 2025, **Rahul Gandhi presented allegations** pointing to disturbing voter registration anomalies in the Mahadevapura Assembly segment of Bangalore. These included **duplicate entries at single addresses, fabricated names using placeholders like "xyz" for fathers' names, and entries lacking basic address information**, such as house numbers. According to the opposition, these revelations are based on six months of exhaustive analysis of official documents sourced from the ECI.
- If substantiated, such charges strike at the very foundation of Indian democracy. The principle of **free and fair elections**, enshrined as part of the **basic structure of the Constitution**, is imperilled when the electoral roll — the starting point of democratic participation — is itself compromised. The implication is not merely one of procedural lapse but a systemic failure that undermines electoral legitimacy.

The ECI's Response and Its Democratic Role

- The public expected the ECI to address these claims with transparency and seriousness. Instead, the Commission's press conference on August 17, 2025, marked a worrying shift. Rather than responding substantively, the Chief Election Commissioner issued an ultimatum to Rahul Gandhi — either submit a sworn affidavit or issue a public apology. This approach appeared **less like an institutional clarification** and more like a **political counteroffensive**.
- This is problematic on two fronts. First, the ECI is a **constitutional body whose neutrality and independence are essential** to preserving democratic faith. By adopting a combative stance, it risks compromising its perceived impartiality. Second, **Article 324 of the Constitution**, which grants the ECI broad powers to conduct and oversee elections, comes with an equal obligation to act in defence of democratic norms. Judicial interpretations have consistently stressed that the ECI's authority must be **exercised responsibly** and in the **public interest**, not

used to suppress political criticism or shift focus from genuine institutional concerns. Issuing ultimatums to political figures is well beyond its constitutional mandate.

Legal Framework and Procedural Shortcomings

- India's electoral processes are governed by the **Representation of the People Act, 1950**, which lays out multiple safeguards for preparing and revising electoral rolls. These include provisions for **annual revisions**, **public scrutiny**, and **formal channels for correction**. However, the allegations raised suggest that these mechanisms may be failing in practice.
- At the heart of the issue lies a conflict between two principles: the need for **finality in electoral processes** and the **imperative to address large-scale errors**. While the law presumes that electoral rolls are final before an election, **evidence of major irregularities cannot be dismissed on procedural grounds alone**. In such situations, the ECI's role is not confined to checking boxes but extends to **ensuring substantive fairness and democratic integrity**. Demanding affidavits or dismissing concerns on technical grounds does not fulfil this role — especially when public trust is at stake.

The Bihar SIR and the ECI's Credibility Gap

- Further questions about the ECI's functioning have emerged from its ongoing '**Special Intensive Revision**' (SIR) of electoral rolls in Bihar. This revision, initiated by the Commission, lacks **any formal recognition** under the Representation of the People Act or the relevant rules. Most notably, the ECI arbitrarily adopted **July 1 as the qualifying date** for voters, in clear violation of the legally mandated date of **January 1**.
- The fallout has been significant. Reports from Bihar suggest **chaotic and inconsistent enumeration**, and most alarmingly, the **deletion of over 65 lakh voters** from the rolls. Given that an "intensive revision" requires **door-to-door verification**, such an exercise is practically unfeasible within a single month. The Supreme Court's intervention — directing publication of the deleted names and reasons for their removal — was a crucial corrective step and widely regarded as a **victory for transparency**.

Constitutional Concerns and Institutional Boundaries

- The developments echo a warning issued decades ago by **Justice S. Murtaza Fazal Ali** in *A.C. Jose vs. Sivan Pillai (1984)*. He cautioned that when a constitutional body like the ECI operates without checks, particularly if politically influenced, it can cause **constitutional instability and political disruption**. Today, that warning seems increasingly relevant.
- The ECI, though endowed with constitutional authority, **must remain within legal boundaries** and uphold its **core mandate of neutrality and fairness**. Any deviation — whether through political engagement, overreach of legal authority, or procedural innovation outside the law — **threatens the legitimacy of both the institution and the electoral process**.

Conclusion

- The two press conferences — one by the opposition and the other by the Election Commission — are not merely episodes of political confrontation. They have together revealed a **structural vulnerability** within India's electoral system. The opposition's evidence suggests the possibility of deliberate manipulation in voter rolls. The ECI's response, far from reassuring the public, has raised legitimate concerns about its impartiality and accountability. Meanwhile, the unfolding situation in Bihar shows how legal and procedural deviations can exacerbate institutional mistrust.
- At this juncture, the **integrity of Indian democracy hinges on the ECI's commitment to constitutional discipline, procedural transparency, and institutional neutrality**. The Commission must not only act lawfully but be seen to act with **impartiality and fairness**. Its legitimacy is grounded not in confrontation, but in the **faith of the electorate** — and that faith can only be preserved through a **principled adherence to the Constitution and the law**.

The Gender Dimension of India's Economic Vulnerabilities

Context

India's economic rise has been swift and substantial. With its economy now valued at \$4.19 trillion, India has emerged as a formidable global force, well on its way to becoming the world's third-largest economy. This growth trajectory, while promising, is increasingly being tested by emerging challenges—most notably, the United States' proposed imposition of 50% tariffs on Indian exports. These tariffs, which target approximately \$40 billion in trade, threaten to erode nearly 1% of India's GDP. The impact is expected to be most severe in labour-intensive sectors such as textiles, gems, leather, and footwear—industries that are notable not just for their export contributions but also for employing a disproportionate number of women. Consequently, this tariff-induced disruption risks becoming not just an economic shock but a deeply gendered crisis.

The Gendered Vulnerability of India's Economy

- India's economic exposure contrasts sharply with China's more resilient position. While China has been able to weather similar U.S. tariffs thanks to its vast manufacturing capacity and diversified export base, India lacks that cushion. With 18% of its exports destined for the U.S., India's exporters could face a cost disadvantage of 30–35% compared to competitors like Vietnam, should the tariffs be enacted.
- This external vulnerability is compounded by an internal inefficiency: the chronic underutilisation of India's female workforce. Women's participation in the economy is not merely a question of fairness—it is a strategic imperative. The sectors at greatest risk from the tariffs collectively employ nearly 50 million people, with millions of women potentially facing job losses. India's female labour force participation rate (FLFPR) has remained stagnant, fluctuating between 37% and 41.7%, significantly below the global average and China's 60%. The International Monetary Fund estimates that closing this gender gap could increase India's GDP by as much as 27% over the long term. Yet, deep-seated cultural norms, policy inertia, and structural barriers continue to impede women's entry and retention in the workforce. The looming tariff crisis thus exposes not just economic fragility but a broader neglect of gender-inclusive development.

The Demographic Dividend Dilemma

- India is currently benefiting from a demographic dividend—its expanding working-age population. However, this window of opportunity is finite, expected to begin closing by 2045. Nations like China, the U.S., and Japan used similar demographic booms to power sustained economic growth. In contrast, India risks squandering its advantage, primarily due to low female workforce participation.
- In rural India, women's participation has inched upward, but largely in unpaid, low-productivity family roles. In urban areas, participation rates have stagnated, hindered by inadequate public safety, unreliable transportation, insufficient sanitation, and the disproportionate burden of unpaid domestic and caregiving responsibilities. If left unaddressed, these challenges could transform India's demographic dividend into a demographic liability—an issue that has already plagued countries like Italy and Greece, where low female labour participation has been a persistent drag on economic growth.

The Way Forward

1. **Learning from Global Models:** During World War II, the United States incorporated women into the workforce through policies that mandated equal pay and offered childcare support. China's economic reforms post-1978 included major investments in care and education, boosting female workforce participation to 60%. Japan improved its FLFPR from 63% to 70%, resulting in a 4%

rise in GDP per capita. The Netherlands pioneered flexible part-time employment with full benefits, offering a particularly relevant model for India, where many women prefer such work arrangements due to familial and societal constraints.

2. **Implementing Structural Reforms:** India currently lags in three key areas: legal safeguards for women workers, investment in care infrastructure, and comprehensive skill development. Rather than relying on short-term populist measures or undifferentiated welfare schemes, India must pursue structural reforms that treat women not as passive recipients of aid but as central, active agents in economic development. Some promising initiatives already offer a glimpse of what is possible. Karnataka's Shakti scheme, which provides free bus travel for women, has led to a 40% increase in female ridership since 2023, enhancing both mobility and autonomy. Platforms like Urban Company employ over 15,000 women, offering them not just income but also insurance, maternity benefits, and opportunities for skill advancement. Rajasthan's Indira Gandhi Urban Employment Guarantee Scheme has generated millions of jobs, with women comprising 65% of the workforce—many of whom are entering the labour market for the first time. These examples illustrate that when governments and businesses prioritise safety, mobility, and flexible work arrangements, women are more than capable of contributing meaningfully to economic growth.

Conclusion

- The proposed U.S. tariffs should not be viewed in isolation as a trade dispute but rather as a critical inflection point for India. External threats such as trade barriers starkly reveal internal deficiencies, especially the persistent underemployment of women. Empowering women is not just an act of social justice—it is essential to India's economic resilience and long-term prosperity.
- India now finds itself at a pivotal juncture. By choosing to invest in its women, the country can unlock sustainable and inclusive growth. Ignoring this imperative, however, risks consigning the nation to economic stagnation and structural vulnerability.

Pradhan Mantri Jan Dhan Yojana (PMJDY): A Global Model for Financial Inclusion

Context

Financial inclusion serves as a foundational pillar for empowering individuals, driving economic growth, alleviating poverty, and advancing social equity. Recognising this, the Government of India launched the Pradhan Mantri Jan Dhan Yojana (PMJDY) on 28 August 2014. Its objective was to ensure universal access to financial services, especially targeting marginalised and underserved populations, thereby enabling their participation in the formal financial system.

Genesis and Objectives of PMJDY

When PMJDY was launched, nearly 7.5 crore households across India remained outside the formal banking ecosystem. The scheme was conceived as a corrective measure to this financial exclusion.

PMJDY was designed with a clear mandate:

- To provide every household, especially those on the margins, with access to a basic bank account.
- To integrate the informal sector into the formal economy through banking services.
- To enable direct benefit transfers (DBT), thereby reducing leakages and dependency on intermediaries.
- To eliminate the reliance on informal credit systems and encourage habits of savings and insurance.

Key Achievements of PMJDY

Expansion of Bank Account Ownership

Prior to the launch of PMJDY, only 59% of Indian households and 35% of adults had bank accounts. This limited access inhibited formal financial participation.

By 2024, the impact of PMJDY has been transformative:

- Nearly 100% of households and over 90% of adults now possess bank accounts.
- According to the World Bank's Global Findex Report 2024, 89% of individuals aged 15 and above in India have bank accounts.
- The National Sample Survey (NSS) 2022-23 further reinforces this progress, reporting that 94.65% of Indian adults now own a bank account.

Growth in Account Numbers and Deposits

Since its inception, over 56.2 crore PMJDY accounts have been opened—a nearly fourfold increase since March 2015. Of these:

- 37.5 crore accounts are in rural and semi-urban areas, highlighting the rural focus of the initiative.
- 18.7 crore are in urban centres.

Women's financial inclusion has been a standout feature, with 56% of all PMJDY accounts held by women. This represents a deliberate effort to empower women financially and integrate them into formal banking.

The total deposits in PMJDY accounts have reached ₹2.68 lakh crore, marking a 17-fold surge from 2015. This signifies growing trust in the formal banking system and an increasing culture of saving.

Expansion of the Banking Infrastructure

To support widespread banking access:

- Over 16.2 lakh Bank Mitras (business correspondents) have been deployed to deliver doorstep banking services in remote and underserved areas.
- 99% of villages now have a banking access point—whether through a branch, a business correspondent, or the India Post Payments Bank—within a 5-kilometre radius.

Role of PMJDY in Welfare Delivery and Crisis Management

PMJDY accounts have revolutionised welfare delivery by enabling direct, transparent, and efficient transfer of subsidies and financial aid:

- During critical periods such as demonetisation and the COVID-19 pandemic, PMJDY accounts became a critical tool in ensuring fast and direct financial relief to millions.
- The elimination of intermediaries has reduced corruption and delays in welfare distribution.

Integration with Digital and Financial Products

The PMJDY scheme has significantly advanced digital and financial integration:

- Over 38.7 crore RuPay debit cards have been issued, facilitating access to digital transactions.
- PMJDY accounts are increasingly being used not just for DBT, but also to access other financial services such as micro-insurance, pensions, and investments.
- The Jan Suraksha schemes, including the **Pradhan Mantri Jeevan Jyoti Bima Yojana (PMJJBY)** and **Pradhan Mantri Suraksha Bima Yojana (PMSBY)**, extend life and accident insurance coverage of ₹2 lakh to account holders, especially benefiting those in the unorganised sector. This has provided a layer of financial security to vulnerable segments.
- Additionally, the rise of PMJDY accounts has bolstered the usage of UPI and digital payments infrastructure, aligning with India's broader digital economy goals.

Future Prospects and Innovation Potential

Looking ahead, PMJDY can be further strengthened through technological innovations and targeted outreach:

- Emerging technologies like artificial intelligence (AI) and natural language processing (NLP) can enable voice-based transaction authentication, removing the dependency on smartphones or internet connectivity—especially relevant for remote and low-literacy populations.

- Enhanced digital infrastructure and logistics are enabling the growth of e-commerce in Tier 4 and Tier 5 towns, powered by fast and reliable delivery systems.

The government has also launched a **financial inclusion saturation drive**, wherein banks are actively organising outreach camps to:

- Update KYC details for existing customers,
- Open new accounts for the unbanked,
- Promote micro-insurance and pension schemes,
- Reactivate dormant or inactive accounts under PMJDY.

Conclusion

As the world's largest financial inclusion initiative, PMJDY stands as a global benchmark for inclusive governance. Over its 11 years of implementation, it has not only facilitated universal access to banking but has also deepened financial penetration across socio-economic and geographic divides. As PMJDY enters its 12th year, the emphasis must evolve from mere account creation towards account activation and engagement. Financial literacy, access to credit, micro-insurance, and pension products must be scaled up to fully realise the scheme's transformative potential. By leveraging digital innovations and deepening outreach in rural and informal sectors, PMJDY can be a powerful driver of inclusive and sustainable economic growth, truly living up to its vision of financial empowerment for all.

The Gaza Famine Declaration: A Man-Made Catastrophe

Introduction

Gaza is now in the grip of a famine officially declared by the United Nations-backed Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC). This man-made disaster has become one of the most severe humanitarian crises in recent memory. The IPC reports that over 30% of children in Gaza are acutely malnourished, with at least two in every 10,000 children dying daily from starvation. UN Secretary-General António Guterres has described the situation as a "failure of humanity," underscoring the international community's inability to protect civilians amidst the prolonged Israel-Hamas conflict.

Current Humanitarian Conditions

- **Famine Status:** Gaza has entered IPC Phase 5—**Catastrophe/Famine**, the highest level of food insecurity. Over 641,000 people, or one-third of the population, face life-threatening hunger if the conflict continues. At least 271 individuals, including 112 children, have already died due to hunger and malnutrition.
- **Blockade and Starvation Tactics:** Israel stands accused of using starvation as a tool of war, violating international humanitarian law. A full blockade, in effect since March 2025, has halted deliveries of food, medicine, and aid. UNRWA reports that over 6,000 aid trucks remain stalled at Gaza's borders. Civilians attempting to access aid have reportedly been targeted by Israeli fire, worsening the tragedy.

Historical Background

- **The 2007 Blockade:** Israel, with Egypt's cooperation, imposed a blockade after Hamas took control of Gaza in 2007. UN agencies have long warned that this blockade created unsustainable living conditions, laying the groundwork for today's crisis.
- **Pre-existing Vulnerabilities:** Gaza already faced over 40% unemployment, limited electricity, and heavy dependence on aid. The famine is not solely a result of the ongoing war, but also decades of structural deprivation.

Legal and Ethical Implications

- **Violations of International Law:** The **Geneva Conventions** explicitly ban the use of starvation as a method of warfare. Under the **Rome Statute**, intentionally causing starvation is a war

crime. Israel's ongoing blockade and restrictions on humanitarian access raise serious legal concerns under these frameworks.

- **Moral Accountability:** Guterres's remarks point to global moral failure in preventing civilian suffering. The deliberate starvation of children challenges the ethical foundations of international humanitarian norms and the sanctity of human life.

International Politics and Diplomacy

- **Role of Israel's Allies:** Key allies, particularly the United States, continue to offer strong diplomatic and military support to Israel. Reports suggest U.S. resistance to ICC investigations into alleged Israeli war crimes, including imposing sanctions on ICC officials.
- **Global Response:** Symbolic gestures like state recognitions (e.g., by Britain) have limited impact on the ground. UNRWA faces significant challenges: denied access, resource shortages, and donor fatigue.
- **Geopolitical Distractions:** Global attention is fragmented due to other crises, including the Russia-Ukraine war and US-China tensions. These divisions have paralyzed collective international action, allowing Gaza's crisis to worsen.

Humanitarian Impact

- **Children at Risk:** UNICEF warns that 132,000 children under five are at imminent risk of death from starvation. Malnourished children are highly susceptible to preventable diseases like diarrhoea and cholera.
- **Public Health Collapse:** Gaza faces acute shortages of clean water, medicine, and healthcare infrastructure. Malnutrition and untreated illnesses compound each other, deepening the crisis.
- **Psychological Trauma:** The compounded effects of war, hunger, and displacement have left lasting psychological harm—especially among children—manifesting in anxiety, PTSD, and trauma.

Erosion of the International Humanitarian Order

- **Breakdown of Global Norms:** The world's inaction erodes trust in international law and institutions like the UN and ICC. If famine becomes an unchecked tool of war, it could set a perilous precedent.
- **Human Rights Violations:** Denial of food and aid contravenes both the **Universal Declaration of Human Rights** and the **ICESCR**, which guarantee the right to adequate food and healthcare.
- **Responsibility to Protect (R2P):** The international community has a legal and moral duty to intervene in cases of war crimes and mass atrocities. Political gridlock, especially within the UN Security Council, has stalled decisive measures, highlighting systemic failures in global governance.

India's Role and Strategic Outlook

- **Navigating West Asia Diplomacy:** India maintains a delicate balance—supporting the Palestinian cause while deepening ties with Israel. Its policy reflects a strategic need to engage both sides: aiding Gaza while not alienating Israel.
- **Leadership in the Global South:** As a recent G20 president and UN Security Council member, India is expected to lead on humanitarian issues. While India has provided aid and supported calls for humanitarian pauses, it has refrained from condemning Israel directly.
- **Strategic Implications:** India's decisions are influenced by energy needs, its diaspora in the region, and counter-terrorism cooperation. Balancing domestic interests with global expectations remains a complex diplomatic task.

Path Forward

- **Prioritize Humanitarian Access:** Immediate and unimpeded delivery of food, medicine, and water must be ensured. International pressure must mount on Israel to allow aid convoys.

- **Reinforce International Legal Mechanisms:** Bodies like the UN and ICC must be empowered to hold all violators accountable—regardless of political alliances.
- **Promote Dialogue and Mediation:** Regional and global powers—including the US, EU, Arab states, and India—must push for a ceasefire and long-term political resolution.
- **Address Structural Inequities:** A sustainable future requires lifting the blockade, rebuilding infrastructure, and enabling economic self-sufficiency in Gaza.
- **Renew Global Humanitarian Consensus:** The crisis reaffirms the urgent need to protect civilians in conflict zones and put humanity above geopolitics.

Conclusion

The famine in Gaza is not a consequence of nature but of war, blockade, and political paralysis. It reflects a collapse of global governance and moral accountability. The international community must act—not only to save lives today but to uphold the principles of humanitarian law and ensure that such tragedies are never repeated. A durable political solution in West Asia, rooted in justice and dignity, is long overdue.

India's Growing Cancer Burden

Introduction

Cancer has become one of the most pressing public health crises in India today. The lifetime probability of an individual developing cancer in the country now stands at 1 in 9, reflecting the critical scale of the problem. A 2024 report by the Parliamentary Standing Committee projected that, if current patterns persist, cancer-related deaths could rise by 20%, reaching approximately 880,000 annually by 2025. Coupled with the rising incidence of other non-communicable diseases such as tuberculosis, diabetes, and cardiovascular conditions, India is at risk of becoming the “cancer capital of the world.” This alarming trend necessitates immediate and wide-ranging intervention.

Current Status of Cancer in India

- The cancer burden in India is marked by an upward trajectory in incidence and mortality. The Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR) has estimated that by 2025, India will witness around 1.57 million new cancer cases each year. However, this figure may significantly underrepresent reality, given the widespread under-reporting and the limited reach of cancer registries.
- Mortality rates from cancer have also shown a concerning rise, with annual increases ranging from 0.1% to 1%. One of the primary reasons for poor survival outcomes is the late-stage diagnosis, which severely limits treatment efficacy.
- India faces a heavy load of specific cancer types. Among women, breast cancer has emerged as the most prevalent. Oral cancer, strongly linked to tobacco and betel nut consumption, continues to affect large segments of the population. Lung cancer cases are escalating, driven by smoking and deteriorating air quality. Cervical cancer remains a major killer, even though it is largely preventable through HPV vaccination.
- There is considerable variation in cancer prevalence across different regions. Notably, the North-Eastern states report disproportionately high rates of stomach, oesophageal, and lung cancers. These trends are closely associated with prevalent risk factors in the region, including high tobacco and alcohol use and dietary habits.

Underlying Causes of the Rising Burden

- Multiple interrelated factors are contributing to India's growing cancer epidemic. Lifestyle transformations are a significant driver—urbanization has led to sedentary routines, reduced physical activity, increased obesity, and widespread consumption of processed foods, sugary items, and trans-fats.

- Addictive substances play a substantial role. India is currently the second-largest consumer of tobacco products globally, according to the World Health Organization (WHO). Both smoking and smokeless tobacco, along with alcohol, are directly responsible for cancers affecting the lung, oral cavity, liver, and oesophagus.
- Environmental degradation also adds to cancer risk. Air pollution, particularly particulate matter (PM_{2.5}), is closely linked with respiratory and lung cancers. Moreover, industrial emissions and unsafe working environments expose populations to carcinogens.
- Demographic and genetic elements further compound the issue. Increasing life expectancy means that a larger proportion of the population is living into age groups where cancer is more prevalent. Furthermore, limited access to genetic testing and screening delays early detection, especially for inherited cancer syndromes.

Challenges in Prevention and Care

- India faces several systemic and structural challenges in managing its cancer burden. One of the most pressing is the issue of late detection. Fewer than 5% of people in the country are currently covered under the national cancer screening programme. Many individuals delay seeking medical help until symptoms become severe, thereby diminishing survival prospects.
- The healthcare infrastructure is inadequately equipped to meet the growing demand. With only around 2,000 oncologists serving nearly 10 million cancer patients, the doctor-to-patient ratio is critically low. Additionally, the availability of radiotherapy equipment, oncology-trained nurses, and specialized treatment centres is limited.
- The high cost of cancer treatment poses another formidable barrier. A large proportion of patients—up to 80%—find hospitalisation and chemotherapy financially inaccessible. Out-of-pocket expenditure (OOPE) continues to push millions into poverty each year, as documented by the NITI Aayog Health Expenditure Report (2021).
- Public awareness about cancer is also alarmingly low. Cultural stigma, ignorance about the importance of early detection, and reliance on traditional remedies often result in delays in receiving appropriate care. Moreover, significant gaps in data collection due to insufficient cancer registries mean the actual burden may be far greater than currently estimated. To address this, the Parliamentary Committee has urged the government to declare cancer a notifiable disease.

Government Policies and Initiatives

- To counter the crisis, several national-level initiatives have been introduced. The **National Programme for Prevention and Control of Cancer, Diabetes, Cardiovascular Diseases and Stroke (NPCDCS)** aims to facilitate screening, early detection, and referrals through the primary and district healthcare systems.
- **Ayushman Bharat – PM Jan Arogya Yojana (PM-JAY)** provides up to ₹5 lakh per family annually to cover secondary and tertiary care, including cancer treatment. The **National Cancer Grid (NCG)**, comprising over 300 cancer centres, works to standardize treatment protocols and promote research collaboration.
- The **Pradhan Mantri Swasthya Suraksha Yojana (PMSSY)** seeks to strengthen tertiary healthcare by establishing AIIMS-like institutions and upgrading existing medical colleges. Additionally, the government has announced plans to incorporate HPV vaccination for girls aged 9–14 under the **Universal Immunisation Programme (UIP)**, a move that could drastically reduce cervical cancer incidence.

Global Context and Best Practices

The WHO's 2024 report identified cancer as the second leading cause of death worldwide, with 20 million new cases reported in 2022. Countries such as the UK and Australia have implemented best practices worth emulating. The UK's National Health Service (NHS) provides free, population-based

cancer screening. Australia is nearing the elimination of cervical cancer through an aggressive HPV vaccination programme. Rwanda has emerged as a global leader in HPV vaccination implementation in resource-limited settings.

Strategic Way Forward

- To effectively tackle the cancer crisis, India must adopt a comprehensive, multi-pronged strategy. Enhancing cancer registries by making cancer a notifiable disease and integrating data into digital health platforms will improve surveillance and policy planning.
- Expanding screening services at primary health centres—particularly for breast, cervical, and oral cancers—is essential. Incorporating artificial intelligence tools can help scale up diagnostics. Public cancer hospitals need to be scaled up, with PM-JAY coverage expanded and the use of affordable, generic cancer drugs encouraged.
- Preventive measures must be prioritized. Nationwide campaigns promoting tobacco cessation, reduced alcohol consumption, balanced diets, and physical activity should be reinforced, building on platforms such as the FIT India Movement. The planned nationwide rollout of the HPV vaccine must be implemented effectively, with a focus on adolescent girls, school-based delivery systems, and public awareness to reduce vaccine hesitancy.
- Further, investment in biotechnology and indigenous medical innovations will help create cost-effective treatments. Decentralizing cancer care by setting up Comprehensive Cancer Care Centres at district and state levels is crucial for expanding access.
- Public-private partnerships can play a transformative role in improving diagnostics, rehabilitation, and palliative care services. Mental health support, counselling, and pain management must be integrated into oncology care to improve patient quality of life. Lastly, international collaboration with bodies like WHO and IAEA can offer vital technical, financial, and research support.

Conclusion

India's escalating cancer crisis poses both a health emergency and a developmental challenge. With future projections indicating a surge in cases and deaths, the country must shift from fragmented responses to a robust, integrated national cancer control strategy. Leveraging technological innovation, enhancing community engagement, and ensuring equitable access through universal healthcare are imperative if India is to avert the grim prospect of becoming the global epicentre of cancer.

The Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) Faces a Credibility Crisis

Context

Archaeology, as a scientific discipline, seeks to reconstruct history through the careful study of material remains and objective analysis. However, in India, archaeology has frequently become a battleground where political agendas influence historical narratives just as much as empirical evidence does. The recent controversies involving the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) and the Keeladi excavations exemplify this tension. These events expose the ongoing conflict between scientific rigor and political pressures, while also highlighting the institutional challenges that undermine the ASI's credibility and scholarly integrity.

The Keeladi Excavations: Challenging Established Historical Narratives

- The Keeladi excavations, which began in Tamil Nadu in 2014, rapidly gained attention as one of India's most important archaeological ventures. Early phases of the excavation yielded over 7,500 artefacts that suggested the presence of a literate, urban, and secular society in South India during the Early Historic Period. These findings posed a significant challenge to the dominant narrative that India's second urbanisation was confined largely to the Gangetic plains,

potentially bridging a historical gap between the Iron Age (12th–6th century BCE) and the Early Historic period (6th–4th century BCE).

- However, the project's progress was disrupted in 2017 when the lead archaeologist, K. Amarnath Ramakrishna, was abruptly transferred, and the ASI dismissed the site's importance while halting further excavations. This move sparked widespread suspicion that political considerations, rather than scientific ones, were driving institutional decisions. The controversy led to both academic criticism and political confrontations between the Tamil Nadu state and the Union government.
- Eventually, the Madras High Court intervened, transferring responsibility for the project to the Tamil Nadu State Department of Archaeology. This department expanded the scope of excavation, uncovering over 18,000 artefacts. The Keeladi case highlights a fundamental issue: archaeology in India is not only about uncovering history but also about deciding which versions of the past gain official recognition. By downplaying Keeladi's evidence regarding Dravidian antiquity, the ASI demonstrated how state institutions can suppress alternative historical narratives, even when supported by rigorous scientific methods such as stratigraphic sequencing and Accelerator Mass Spectrometry dating.

Challenges Confronting the ASI

- One key challenge is **methodological inconsistency and selective rigor**. While the Union government claims that isolated findings should not prompt drastic historical revisions without extensive corroboration, the ASI's own record is inconsistent. For example, the rediscovery of Iron Age artefacts at Adichanallur in Tamil Nadu in 2004 was ignored for over 15 years despite evidence of a civilisation dating back 3,000 years, requiring judicial intervention to prompt publication.
- This selective application of caution reveals an underlying bias where scientific rigor is often secondary to political or ideological priorities. Findings that disrupt dominant narratives, like those from Keeladi pointing to Dravidian urbanism, are dismissed as inconclusive. Conversely, sites supporting nationalist or mytho-historical views are promoted readily. Such double standards erode the ASI's credibility and illustrate what scholars term **methodological nationalism**—an approach privileging a singular, state-approved interpretation of India's history.
- Institutional and structural weaknesses further hinder the ASI. Critics such as Avikunthak, Verma, Menon, and Chakrabarti have noted the agency's arbitrary personnel policies, reliance on outdated methods like the Wheeler system, and absence of a coherent research framework. These deficiencies result in fragmented and poorly contextualized data rather than comprehensive historical narratives.
- The ASI's insularity is another major concern. Unlike institutions such as Germany's Deutsches Archäologisches Institut or France's Institut National de Recherches Archéologiques Préventives, the ASI rarely publishes its findings in peer-reviewed international journals. Instead, its research is circulated internally via monographs and bulletins, limiting academic scrutiny and global engagement. This lack of transparency fosters distrust, stifles debate, and curtails India's contributions to international archaeological scholarship.

The Way Forward: Reforming the ASI

- To restore its credibility, the ASI requires comprehensive reform. Structural changes must reduce bureaucratic interference, granting the agency financial and intellectual independence. Modern excavation techniques should replace outdated methodologies, coupled with stringent peer review and increased international collaboration.
- Transparency should become a priority by ensuring that research findings are widely published and open to global scholarly assessment. Additionally, Indian archaeology must embrace a

pluralistic epistemology, acknowledging the diversity and complexity of the subcontinent's past rather than enforcing a monolithic national narrative.

Conclusion

The controversies surrounding the ASI and the Keeladi excavations reflect broader tensions within Indian archaeology. Without a shift toward openness, rigor, and inclusivity, the ASI risks further damaging its legitimacy as the guardian of India's archaeological heritage. The stakes extend beyond individual sites; the very possibility of reconstructing India's multifaceted past depends on an institution that values scientific integrity over political expediency.

Detoxifying India's Entrance Examination System

Context and Crisis

- Each year, nearly 70 lakh students in India contend for a limited number of undergraduate seats through fiercely competitive entrance exams like JEE, NEET, CUET, and CLAT. The extreme mismatch between the number of aspirants and available seats in premier institutions has spawned a multibillion-rupee coaching industry, perpetuating a high-pressure culture that exerts an enormous toll on young minds.
- Recent developments—ranging from financial irregularities in coaching centres to the tragic rise in student suicides—have exposed the deep-rooted flaws in this examination-driven system. The time has come to fundamentally rethink undergraduate admissions in India by shifting away from a hyper-competitive model toward one anchored in fairness, equity, and student well-being.

The Coaching Industry and Its Consequences

- The booming coaching industry represents one of the most visible—and damaging—manifestations of the existing system. In the case of the JEE alone, which sees around 15 lakh applicants annually, coaching centres often charge exorbitant fees ranging from ₹6 to ₹7 lakh over two years. This places an immense financial burden on families and transforms adolescence into a period of relentless academic pressure rather than holistic growth.
- Children as young as 14 are funneled into intensive coaching regimes, where they are made to solve problems from advanced texts such as Irodov and Krotov—far beyond what undergraduate studies require. This high-stakes grind often results in anxiety, depression, social withdrawal, and, in devastating cases, suicide.
- Although governments have attempted to regulate the coaching sector, such efforts fail to address the root cause: an entrance examination system that amplifies marginal percentile differences into decisive outcomes. This approach inherently disadvantages talented students who lack access to expensive coaching, while privileging those with financial resources. Consequently, what should ideally be an assessment of fundamental understanding in school-level subjects is distorted into a race governed by artificial and exclusionary rankings.

The False Promise of Meritocracy

- The current structure sustains a dangerous illusion of meritocracy. Philosopher Michael Sandel warns against societies where success is interpreted solely as a result of individual brilliance, discounting the roles of systemic privilege and sheer luck. In India, this illusion is even more deeply ingrained. A student from a well-off urban background, with access to elite coaching and educational support, is vastly more likely to secure a top rank than a rural counterpart with similar potential but fewer resources.
- This results in an admissions ecosystem that masquerades as fair while reproducing structural inequalities. True merit becomes obscured by socio-economic disparities, and access to elite education is framed not by capability, but by capital.

International Perspectives: Lessons in Reform

- India can draw inspiration from global practices that have successfully addressed similar challenges. The Netherlands, for instance, has adopted a weighted lottery system for medical school admissions. Students who meet a minimum threshold are all eligible, with higher academic performance providing only a slight advantage. This model reduces bias, encourages diversity, and alleviates pressure, acknowledging that minute score variations do not meaningfully reflect differences in competence.
- China's "double reduction" policy, enacted in 2021, offers another instructive example. By severely limiting for-profit tutoring and nationalising educational support systems, the Chinese government sought to ease the financial and emotional burdens on students and families. These reforms demonstrate that structural change—when guided by equity—can yield a more balanced and humane educational environment.

Charting a New Course for India

- A more just and effective admissions system in India must begin with restoring faith in the school education framework. The Class 12 board examinations already offer a rigorous benchmark of academic readiness. A baseline threshold—such as 80% in core subjects like physics, chemistry, and mathematics—could be used to identify a qualified pool of applicants. Within this pool, a weighted lottery could be implemented, wherein higher marks marginally increase the probability of selection without dominating the process.
- To preserve affirmative action, existing reservation policies should be integrated within this framework, with special provisions to prioritise students from rural backgrounds and government schools. This would promote social mobility and justice while preserving academic standards.
- If entrance exams continue to be used, they must be severed from the private coaching industry. Coaching could either be banned outright or brought under public ownership, with high-quality, free online resources made universally accessible. Additionally, to reduce the rigid hierarchy among institutions like the IITs, the government could implement annual student exchange programmes and faculty rotations across campuses. Such steps would foster academic integration, enhance diversity, and equalise the quality of education.

Conclusion: A Crossroads for Indian Education

- India's entrance examination system now stands at a pivotal moment. The choice is between continuing with a narrow, toxic model that pushes students into a high-stakes rat race, or adopting an admissions process built on fairness, compassion, and inclusivity. A lottery-based or partially randomised selection mechanism would liberate students from the exhausting treadmill of coaching and restore their adolescence as a time of learning, growth, and discovery.
- Elite education must be reimagined as a space accessible to all who are capable—not just those who can afford it. The future of India's youth, and of the nation itself, hinges on whether it can redefine merit to include equity, and whether it can create an environment where young people thrive not as machines chasing scores, but as well-rounded learners and citizens.

Breaking the Smog – Pathways to Cleaner Air in India

Introduction

Air pollution remains India's most critical environmental hazard, with concentrations of PM10 and PM2.5 consistently breaching World Health Organization (WHO) guidelines in the majority of its urban centers. This is not merely a seasonal concern—it is a year-round crisis that escalates during the winter months and has far-reaching consequences on public health, economic productivity, and environmental sustainability. Confronting this crisis requires more than piecemeal solutions; it demands a comprehensive strategy encompassing structural reforms, cross-sectoral coordination, and active public involvement.

Primary Drivers of Air Pollution in India

- **Transport Sector:** The transport sector is a major contributor to urban air pollution, largely due to its deep-rooted dependence on fossil fuels. India's rapidly expanding vehicular population often lacks modern emission controls, compounding the issue. Even in metropolitan areas equipped with extensive metro rail systems, traffic congestion remains a severe problem due to inadequate last-mile connectivity, forcing people to rely on private vehicles.
- Policy implementation has been inconsistent, particularly regarding the enforcement of age limits on commercial vehicles. Moreover, while electric vehicle (EV) adoption has gained momentum in policy discourse, practical barriers—such as limited charging infrastructure and insufficient financial incentives—continue to impede widespread transition. The underdeveloped state of public transport in many cities exacerbates the problem by encouraging personal vehicle use.
- **Industrial Sector:** Industries, particularly micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs), contribute significantly to air pollution due to their reliance on coal, biomass, and other unapproved fuels. Even where air pollution control devices have been installed, their operation and maintenance are often inadequate or irregular. These gaps in enforcement and technology usage contribute to unchecked emissions from industrial zones.
- **Municipal Waste Mismanagement:** Urban waste is another substantial source of air pollution. Open burning of garbage, especially plastic waste, and frequent fires at overburdened landfill sites release harmful pollutants directly into the atmosphere. The root of the problem lies in the absence of systematic waste segregation at the source and the inadequacy of treatment and recycling infrastructure.
- **Re-suspended Dust:** Dust from unpaved roads, large-scale construction activities, and barren urban tracts significantly increases PM10 levels, particularly in cities undergoing rapid development. Despite being a preventable source, dust pollution is often overlooked in air quality management strategies.
- **Agricultural Practices:** The burning of agricultural residue, particularly in Punjab and Haryana, is a major cause of deteriorating air quality during the winter months, especially in the Delhi-NCR region. Alongside stubble burning, excessive use of nitrogen-rich fertilizers in agriculture releases substantial quantities of ammonia into the air, contributing to secondary pollutant formation.
- **Rural Contributions:** While often less visible in public discourse, rural emissions—arising from the use of biomass for cooking and heating—also add to the pollution burden. These pollutants are not confined to rural boundaries; they often drift into urban airsheds, further complicating efforts to improve city-level air quality.

Impacts of Air Pollution

The consequences of air pollution are profound and multifaceted. From a public health perspective, it exacerbates respiratory and cardiovascular conditions, increases the risk of lung cancer, and disproportionately affects the poor and marginalized, deepening existing inequalities. The economic toll is equally significant, with lost productivity, high rates of absenteeism, and escalating healthcare expenditures straining both individual households and national resources. Environmental impacts include degradation of soil health, reduction in biodiversity, and diminished agricultural output, all of which threaten long-term sustainability.

Insights from China's Experience

China's approach, particularly the transformation of Beijing's air quality, offers valuable lessons. Over the decades, the country adopted a phased strategy:

- Between 1970 and 1990, the focus was on regulating emissions from coal-fired power plants.
- From 1990 to 2000, attention shifted to curbing industrial and vehicular pollution.
- Post-2000, China embraced a regional, multi-source strategy addressing pollution holistically.

Key elements of China's success included the promotion of cleaner fuels, vehicle scrappage programs, intelligent traffic management systems, and enhanced public transport infrastructure. Initiatives such as the "Great Green Wall"—a vast afforestation campaign designed to combat desertification and dust storms—have been bolstered by satellite monitoring and extensive citizen engagement, demonstrating the effectiveness of combining technological and community-driven approaches.

Strategic Interventions for India

- **Transport Reforms** must involve expanding EV charging infrastructure, strengthening financial subsidies for EV buyers, and strictly enforcing scrappage policies for outdated vehicles. Public transport systems—especially metro rail networks—must be improved, with a focus on seamless last-mile connectivity. Additionally, the adoption of AI-driven traffic management systems can optimize urban traffic flow and reduce emissions.
- **Industrial Policy** should encourage a transition to cleaner fuels such as natural gas, and make it mandatory for industries to install real-time emissions monitoring systems to ensure accountability and transparency.
- **Municipal Waste Management** needs an overhaul, starting with mandatory segregation of waste at the household level. Investments in treatment facilities must be scaled up, potentially leveraging carbon credit mechanisms to finance infrastructure upgrades.
- **Dust Management** requires paving and regular maintenance of urban roads, along with stringent enforcement of dust suppression measures at construction sites.
- **Agricultural Reforms** should focus on promoting technologies like the Happy Seeder, which enables residue management without burning. Additionally, replacing chemical fertilizers with biofertilizers can significantly cut ammonia emissions.
- **Rural Clean Energy Initiatives** should involve the widespread installation of biogas plants and comprehensive awareness campaigns highlighting the health impacts of biomass combustion. These efforts will not only benefit rural communities but also reduce pollutant drift into urban areas.

Policy Recommendations

- Addressing India's air pollution crisis effectively will require a paradigm shift in environmental governance. One key measure is the adoption of **regional airshed management**, recognizing that pollution does not respect administrative boundaries. Air quality strategies must be integrated with **climate change objectives**, ensuring coherence between environmental and energy policies.
- A dedicated allocation within the **national health budget** should be made for air pollution control, reflecting its direct and growing impact on public health. Large-scale **afforestation efforts**, modelled on China's Great Green Wall, can also serve as natural air purifiers and climate buffers. Lastly, **citizen engagement** is critical; sustained public awareness campaigns can catalyze behavioral changes that complement policy and technological interventions.

Conclusion

India's air pollution crisis is persistent, complex, and deeply interwoven with patterns of urbanization, industrialization, and energy use. Temporary solutions like water sprinkling or artificial rainfall provide only superficial relief. What the country truly needs is a comprehensive, long-term response that aligns air quality management with broader climate and development goals. By implementing systemic sectoral reforms, fostering interdepartmental collaboration, and involving communities in decision-making, India has the opportunity to transform its smog-laden cities into healthier, more livable spaces—ensuring that clean air is no longer a privilege, but a guaranteed public good.

Generative AI – Unlocking India's Tech Future

Introduction

Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI) refers to advanced AI systems capable of producing original content—including text, images, videos, and code—by learning patterns from vast datasets. Tools such as ChatGPT, Copilot, and MidJourney exemplify its transformative potential across industries. Despite global investments exceeding \$1 trillion in GenAI, financial returns have so far been relatively modest, revealing a disconnect between the prevailing hype and tangible, scalable outcomes. This paradox underscores the need for pragmatic strategies to convert innovation into impact.

India's GenAI Landscape

- India's GenAI ecosystem is evolving rapidly, despite some short-term financial setbacks. In early 2024, funding for Indian GenAI startups witnessed a 50% decline compared to the previous year. However, this dip in funding contrasts sharply with a sevenfold surge in sectoral activity, indicating a robust wave of innovation and experimentation.
- Adoption within industries is steadily gaining momentum. About 75% of companies in India have developed GenAI strategies that are currently at the Proof of Concept (PoC) stage. Yet, only 40% have progressed to full-scale production, highlighting significant barriers in translating early-stage experiments into operational solutions. Adoption is most evident in sectors such as telecommunications, retail, and enterprise services, where models are being fine-tuned for domain-specific applications to increase relevance and effectiveness.

Barriers to Widespread Adoption

- The path to mainstream GenAI deployment is hindered by several structural challenges. One of the foremost issues is the complexity of integration. Incorporating GenAI into existing systems often requires a complete redesign of digital infrastructure, turning what starts as a promising pilot into an expensive and prolonged experiment.
- Data-related limitations further constrain implementation. The fragmented, biased, or insufficient quality of datasets not only reduces model accuracy but also raises the risk of generating harmful or unreliable outputs. Weak data governance frameworks exacerbate these issues, making it difficult to ensure accountability and consistency.
- India also faces a pressing talent gap. Although the country boasts a growing number of AI professionals, the demand far outpaces supply, particularly for specialized roles such as data scientists, machine learning engineers, and AI ethicists. This shortfall delays deployment and affects the scalability of GenAI solutions.
- Regulatory and ethical concerns present additional hurdles. Bias and discrimination embedded in training datasets often manifest in GenAI outputs. At the same time, emerging regulations around data protection and compliance introduce stricter requirements that increase entry barriers, especially for smaller players.

India's Competitive Advantage in the Global AI Race

- Despite these challenges, India is uniquely positioned to become a global leader in GenAI due to several inherent strengths. With a median age of just 28 years and over 790 million broadband connections, the country enjoys a demographic and digital advantage that facilitates rapid tech adoption.
- India's expanding deep-tech startup ecosystem is thriving, supported by both domestic markets and growing international demand. Indian developers play a pivotal role in global innovation, frequently contributing to open-source AI projects on platforms such as GitHub.
- Moreover, India possesses the world's second-largest AI talent pool, with over 420,000 professionals, and an expanding domestic market that offers immense opportunity for scalable solutions. This combination of talent, market size, and digital infrastructure offers a solid foundation for GenAI growth.

Strategic Roadmap for Indian Enterprises

- To realize GenAI's full potential, Indian enterprises need to adopt a multi-pronged strategy that moves beyond isolated experimentation and toward measurable, scalable implementation.
- The first step is transitioning from Proof of Concept to full-scale deployment. Companies should prioritize high-impact, measurable use cases, and scale successful pilots in collaboration with startups to bring innovation into production.
- Building talent pipelines is equally critical. Investments in upskilling initiatives, along with strong partnerships between industry, academia, and small and medium enterprises (SMEs), can bridge the skills gap.
- Infrastructure development must also be prioritized. Strengthening data governance frameworks will be essential to ensure ethical and reliable outcomes. At the same time, public initiatives—such as the Telangana AI Mission's AI supercomputer and the INDIAai Mission—can help democratize access to advanced computing resources, especially for smaller players.
- Innovation must be fostered through collaborative models. Large enterprises should co-create solutions with startups, while SMBs can benefit from peer partnerships to develop niche AI applications. Ensuring that all projects are guided by clear performance metrics and aligned with tangible business outcomes will be essential to delivering measurable return on investment and sustaining long-term growth.

Global Lessons in AI Deployment

India can draw important insights from international experiences in AI implementation. The failure of the MD Anderson-IBM Watson partnership illustrates the dangers of over-ambition and poor scalability planning. In contrast, more modest and narrowly defined AI applications—such as systems designed to identify financial aid eligibility—have proven both sustainable and impactful. These contrasting cases underscore the value of realistic scope and targeted implementation in achieving success with GenAI.

The Broader Arc of GenAI Adoption

As with previous technological revolutions, GenAI is expected to progress along a typical adoption curve—initial excitement, followed by practical integration and normalization. The true potential of GenAI will only be realized when innovation is consistently linked to realistic goals and measurable results. Sustained growth will depend on aligning technical capabilities with long-term value creation.

Conclusion

- India stands at a pivotal moment in the global GenAI movement. With its youthful population, vast talent base, and dynamic startup ecosystem, the country is well-positioned to lead in this transformative field. While significant obstacles persist—ranging from data quality and infrastructure gaps to talent shortages and regulatory constraints—India's inherent advantages provide a solid launching pad.
- Through strategic reforms, robust public-private collaboration, and an emphasis on scalable, outcome-driven innovation, India can unlock GenAI's full potential. If approached with foresight and coordination, generative AI can evolve from a promising technology into a foundational pillar of India's future tech economy.