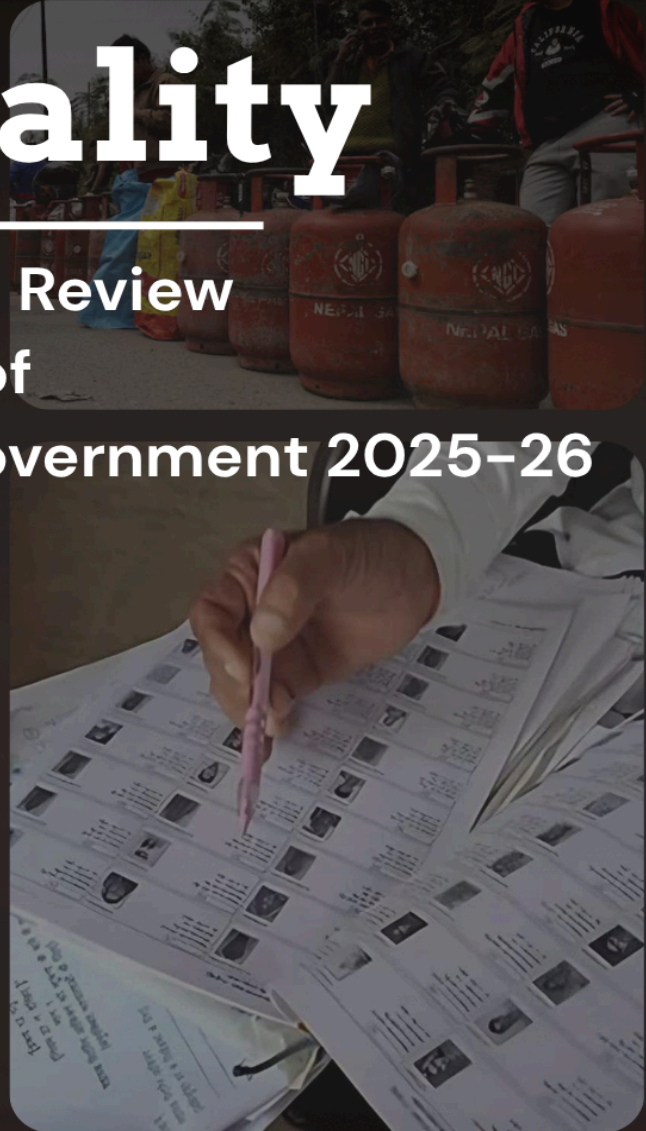


Promises & Reality

Citizen Review
of
Year 2 of NDA III Government 2025-26



Co-ordinated by
Wada Na Todo Abhiyan

PROMISES & REALITY

2026

Citizen's Review of Year 2 of the NDA-III Government

Coordinated by
Wada Na Todo Abhiyan

Editor: Bijoy Basant Patro
Contributing Editors: Avinash Kumar, Aditi Anand
Coordinated by: Adrian D'Cruz

Cover Page Description

- Top left: IOCL workers line up for LPG Gas in Panipat (March 2026)
- Top right: Public lines up for LPG Gas refills in Delhi (March 2026); Credits: Reuters
- Middle left: A protestor holds up a banner at a protest against the Trans Rights Amendment Bill March 2026); Credits: The New Indian Express
- Middle and bottom right: Election Commission official inspects voter lists and a booth level officer inspects documents of voters during the SIR exercise in Bihar (Oct 2025); Credits: India Today and Akashvaani News
- Bottom left: Women workers demonstrate as part of the nationwide general strike organized by the Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU) in May 2025; Credit: AICCTU and The Hindu

Published on: June 20, 2026

NOTE FROM CONVENORS

Wada Na Todo Abhiyan is a national campaign formed in 2004 by over 3,000 civil society organisations to promote governance accountability while amplifying the needs and voices of marginalised communities. One of our key, consistent contributions is this collaborative annual report, which reviews the elected Union government's performance across sectors, issues, and communities, assessing its actions against electoral promises and Constitutional mandates.

Our first review was conducted in 2005 during the UPA-I administration, followed by annual editions in subsequent years. Over time, we have also published consolidated reviews, including a nine-year review of the UPA (I & II), a four-year review of NDA-I, and a four-year review of NDA-II. Most recently, in July 2025, we released *'Promises & Reality: A Citizen's Review of Year 1 of NDA-III'*.

Continuing this collective effort, we now present **Promises & Reality: Citizen Review of Year 2 of the NDA-III Government**. Spanning more than 30 chapters, this year's Governance Review Report is structurally centered around the foundational principles of the Preamble of the Indian Constitution. We believe that during periods of transition and uncertainty, as this past year has undeniably been, any analysis of public policy must be anchored in the timeless spirit and language of our Preamble.

The report seeks to offer a comprehensive, inclusive, and grounded analysis of governance by examining public policy through the lens of justice, liberty, equality, fraternity, secularism, and federalism—the core values that define our national identity. These principles represent the original promise that "We, the People" made to ourselves.

The contributors to this report include individual researchers, academic experts, networks, and rights-based campaigns—many of whom are long-standing practitioners and renowned authorities in their respective fields. All contributions have been made on a purely voluntary basis to safeguard the absolute integrity and independence of this review.

Each edition of this report reaffirms the imperative to uphold economic, social, and civil rights—including freedom of expression, the right to life, and personal liberty—at a time when civic spaces continue to shrink and new structural challenges emerge. This annual exercise remains a sincere labour of commitment to ensuring that citizen voices are never left out of governance and policy dialogue.

As we look toward the remaining years of this government's term, we hope this report helps strengthen democratic accountability and encourages others to keep alive the processes of public participation and dialogue that remain essential to a vibrant democracy.

With deep gratitude to the Steering Group, the campaign secretariat, our contributors, and all those who gave their time and energy to make this volume possible

Convenors,

Wada Na Todo Abhiyan

Contributors

Akeel Usmani and Ananya Sharma (NCPEDP)
Anirban Bhattacharya
Anuradha Raman
Aparajita Sharma, Chirashree Ghosh (Forum for Creches and Childcare Services)
Asha Raveendran
Avinash Kumar
Beena Pallical, Grijesh Dinker and Pritika Pariyar (NCDHR)
Chandrayee, JAGORI
Dharmendra Kumar
Dr Anupama Uppal
Dr Juhi Priyanka Horo
Dr Manju Kumari
Dr Ritu Dewan
Dr Swati Nupur Tigga
Dr Swati Raju
Dr. Amir Ullah Khan, Moumita Barman, Lubna Ludheen (CDPP)
Dr. Mukhtar Alam, Gig Workers Association
Gitanjali, Rituparna, Raghav Dhar, Christy and Omkar Shinde (Nazariya)
Jawed Alam Khan, IPSA
Jitendra Kumar
John Dayal
Juheb Jhony
Mitra Ranjan (Right To Education Forum)
Noshir Dadrawala
Prashant Chavan
Prof Sukumar
Rajesh Upadhyay
Shweta Tambe
Siddharth Joshi
Sonam Prabhakar
Soumya Dutta
Tanweer Fazal
Tejasvita Malhotra
Violet (NinelsMine Campaign)
VR Raman

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Contributors	6
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	8
EQUALITY	14
Dalits	15
Dalit Women	24
Adivasi	30
Women	38
Menstrual Health	45
Children	53
Youth	61
People with Disabilities	73
LGBTQIA+	78
De-notified, Semi-Nomadic, and Nomadic Tribes	85
Economy and Inequality	94
Credit and Banking	100
Labour Rights/Social Protection	105
Urban Poor and Migrant Workers	114
Farmers	122
Food Security/Nutrition	128
JUSTICE	139
Access to Justice and Judiciary Processes	140
Law as an Instrument of Oppression	145
Education (School)	151
Higher Education/Skill Building	156
Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene (WASH)	160
Housing (Right to the City)	168
Environment and Climate Change	173
Forest and Land Rights	179
LIBERTY	191
Media	192
Voluntary Sector	198
Electoral Democracy	202
Civic Space	206
SECULARISM	219
Muslims	220
Minority Budget	226
Christians	230
FEDERALISM & FRATERNITY	234
Federal Distribution of Power	235
Parliamentary Processes	246
Budget and Financial Accountability	257

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report is a collaborative civil society effort presenting a "Promises & Reality" assessment of governance, rooted in equality, justice, secularism, and federalism as envisaged by our Constitution for the year 2025-26. It examines official claims of progress against ground-level evidence across marginalised communities, the economy, civic space, and democratic institutions, highlighting persistent gaps between policy intent and lived realities.

India currently finds itself at a significant crossroads, navigating complex socio-economic shifts and policy transitions that directly challenge the traditional pillars of its democratic and secular fabric. This pivotal juncture demands that we move beyond business-as-usual approaches to reinforce our institutional foundations, prioritise inclusive economic growth, preserve open civic spaces, and address growing social hostilities. To collectively ensure that our electoral democracy remains a space that is deeply representative of every citizen, any rigorous analysis of modern governance must be anchored in a framework that transcends temporary political transitions.

To address this, Wada Na Todo Abhiyan's *Promises & Reality Report 2026* deliberately transcends conventional evaluation metrics to examine the current state of the nation through the foundational lens of the Preamble of the Indian Constitution. Grounded in WNTA's two-decade-long legacy of promoting governance accountability, this comprehensive review anchors its structural critique of public policy, electoral systems, and marginalized communities within the constitutional promises espoused in the Preamble. By reconfiguring the traditional assessments of democracy, governance, and development around the explicit values of **Equality, Liberty, Justice, Secularism, Fraternity and Federalism**, this report serves as a diagnostic tool to evaluate how closely current state actions align with the core constitutional covenant made to every Indian citizen.

EQUALITY

In the Preamble's core principles, equality represents a fundamental tenet of our democracy, that all persons must be free from discrimination. Social, economic, legal and political equality does not mean the absolute equality of all persons but rather the absence of barriers to access the same opportunities, the same rights and the same liberties. In saying so, the crucial aspect of this principle lies with the measures in place to provide particular protections to people from marginalised backgrounds.

Almost 80 years after Independence, and despite incremental policy gestures, caste-based violence remains pervasive, with 158 Dalits and 36 Adivasis facing atrocities daily, alongside sharp rises in denial of access to public spaces (592%) and social boycotts (240%). Curriculum revisions removing Dalit history, alongside a marginal 1.8% rise in SC budget allocations that fails to meet the mandated 14.6% targeted share, point to a weakening commitment to addressing historical injustice.

Dalit women continue to face compounding disadvantages: while financial inclusion and decision-making indicators have improved, crimes against Dalit women and girls have risen nearly 50% since 2015, conviction rates remain as low as 23%, and economic gains have not translated into secure employment.

Among Adivasi communities, nearly 48,000 forest rights claims have been rejected nationwide, over 46% of tribal households in surveyed districts live below the poverty line, and almost 20% of heavily tribal villages remain entirely absent from official rural development data.

On menstrual health, a landmark Supreme Court ruling recognised sanitation access as a constitutional right, yet the Court declined to mandate paid menstrual leave, leaving 90% of India's female workforce in the informal sector without basic facilities.

Children's welfare spending has stagnated at under 2.5% of the Union Budget, while restrictive documentation requirements have excluded migrant and informal-sector children from Anganwadi services, contributing to a decline in school enrolment from 27 crore to under 25 crore children over a decade.

For youth, skill development budgets were slashed by over 55% mid-year, with placement rates under flagship schemes remaining below 8%, while privatisation of higher education continues to restrict access for marginalised and economically weaker groups.

Persons with disabilities saw post-SIR voter list revisions remove tens of thousands of registered voters in states like Bihar and West Bengal, even as disability remains largely untracked across crime, employment, and welfare data (Equality: PwDs).

For LGBTQIA+ communities, particularly transgender persons, the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Amendment Act, 2026 has drawn legal challenges for shifting gender recognition from self-identification to government-appointed medical boards, undermining the NALSA judgment, even as welfare allocations remain grossly inadequate at roughly ₹1,575 per person annually.

De-notified and Nomadic Tribes, an estimated 16.5 crore people, remain without official enumeration or a unified constitutional category, with the SEED scheme severely underutilised and demands for a permanent national commission unmet.

On the economy, India's global GDP rank fell to sixth even as per capita income ranks 172 of 218 nations, with the top 10% controlling 58% of national income while the bottom half holds just 15%. Social sector spending fell to 2.3% of GDP, with MGNREGA allocations cut by over 65% even as defence spending rose to nearly 15% of the budget.

New labour codes have restricted union activity, raised retrenchment thresholds, and excluded gig and informal workers from core protections, while the replacement of MGNREGA with the VB-GRAMG scheme removes the legal guarantee to rural employment.

Urban poverty interventions remain fragmented, with the new DJAY-S mission utilising only a fraction of allocated funds and homeless shelter infrastructure falling far short of the 2011 Census-estimated need.

For farmers, the Seed Bill 2025 and Electricity Bill 2025 have drawn sustained opposition for prioritising corporate interests, while crop insurance and PM-KISAN allocations have declined in real terms amid continuing farmer suicides linked to debt.

JUSTICE

A cornerstone of the Indian constitution, justice is the expectation of equitable treatment, parity of rights, and access to the legal system for all the subjects of the state, that guarantees each person a

meaningful and respectable life. All citizens of India are sworn to be provided social, economic, and political justice; freedom of speech, thought, and religion; and equality of opportunity and status under the Indian Constitution. The concept of justice is not confined to equal treatment under the law although that is a fundamental facet; but it includes the concept of distributive justice – signifying the elimination of inequalities in wealth, income, and property by fairly distributing resources among all individuals for collective growth. Therefore, justice includes crucial themes such as education, access to water and sanitation, housing, land rights and a right to environmental commons along with access to fair treatment under the judiciary system.

The citizen's review of Access to Justice over the past year finds that India's prisons remain overcrowded at 112.7% capacity, with undertrials comprising nearly three-quarters of inmates and over 4.9 crore cases pending in district courts. Religious and caste minorities continue to be disproportionately represented among undertrials relative to their population share.

The use of laws such as the UAPA to detain activists, journalists, and dissenters without timely bail continues, exemplified by prolonged incarcerations and India's press freedom ranking of 159 out of 180 countries,

In education, achieving universal enrolment by 2030 would require bringing back 32.2 million out-of-school children, while in higher education, despite rising allocations for IITs and IIMs, caste representation among faculty remains severely skewed and dropout rates among marginalised students remain high.

On water and sanitation, despite a landmark ruling recognising menstrual health as a constitutional right, implementation lags, with only 58% of households having fully functional water supply and contamination incidents, such as in Indore, causing fatalities.

The housing crisis disproportionately affects economically weaker sections, with affordable housing supply in major cities collapsing from over 52% to just 17% of total units between 2018 and 2025, even as vacant luxury inventory remains high.

Land conflicts affecting 1.42 crore people persist amid accelerating infrastructure and mining expansion, while Forest Rights Act implementation remains uneven, with rejection rates exceeding 70-86% in some states.

On environment and climate, the MoEFCC budget remains under 0.1% of total expenditure even as coal production crosses symbolic milestones, with critics warning that reliance on unproven technologies like CCUS diverts resources from proven renewable and adaptation solutions.

LIBERTY

Closely tied with justice and equality is the founding principle of liberty, expressed in Article 21 and 19 of the Constitution stating that “no person shall be deprived of his life or personal liberty except according to procedure established by law and grants freedom of speech and expression without fear of state repression; thereby providing one of the most robust legal safeguards for personal liberty.

In the India of 2026, media independence continues to erode, with legacy outlets largely echoing government narratives on contentious issues such as the Special Intensive Revision, while government advertising spending sustains financial dependence among major outlets.

Civil society faces intensified regulatory pressure, with a proposed 2026 FCRA amendment empowering authorities to seize NGO assets, over 22,000 FCRA registrations already cancelled, and India categorised as "Partly Free" and an "electoral autocracy" by international indices.

The Special Intensive Revision exercise has resulted in roughly 5 crore voters being excluded from rolls across completed states, disproportionately affecting Muslims, women, and migrant workers, with projections suggesting up to 10 crore exclusions nationwide once complete.

SECULARISM

Indian secularism is based on Sarva Dharma Sambhava (equal respect and protection for all religions) as opposed to the separation doctrine of the west, with the State recording no official religion according to the Constitution. Even though the word secular was added in the 42nd Constitutional Amendment in 1976, this principle was implicit in the founding document and therefore at the dawn of our nation's democracy.

Unfortunately, hate speech incidents targeting religious minorities rose 13% in 2025, with Muslims the target in 98% of cases, alongside killings by both state and non-state actors and continued fallout from the Waqf (Amendment) Act, 2025. State wide review of all madrassas and the Waqf Amendment Bill 2025 places land ownership by religious administrative committees in peril. Low usage of the minority affairs budget and dropping funds for the minority scholarship schemes have been the trend of the past few years, which has resulted in Muslims only representing only about 4.6 per cent of total higher education enrolment, severely disproportionate to their 14–15 percent population.

Christians faced over 700-900 documented incidents of hostility in 2025, including violence, anti-conversion prosecutions, and exclusion from village graveyards and welfare schemes.

FEDERALISM & FRATERNITY

Federal tensions have sharpened over language policy, the stalled 2026 delimitation bill (which would have disproportionately shifted political representation toward northern states), and unresolved governance crises in Ladakh, Jammu & Kashmir, and Manipur.

Fiscal indicators show declining total and revenue expenditure as a share of GDP, rising interest burdens, and continued underspending on education and health relative to recommended benchmarks, alongside severe underutilisation of minority welfare.

Recommendations

Across more than 30 chapters, civil society practitioners and experts have put forward a broad set of structural recommendations overall, with more subject-specific recommendations included within the chapters. These proposals are fundamentally guided by the values of Secularism, Justice, Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity enshrined in the Preamble of the Constitution of India and articulated in the Directives Principles of State Policy.

- ❖ Enshrine and enforce a universal Right to Education spanning from birth until the completion of secondary education.

- ❖ Guarantee a comprehensive Right to Health and Nutrition for all citizens, especially marginalised citizens
- ❖ Ensure universal access to the Public Distribution System (PDS) for marginalised communities through localised, independent, and transparent delivery networks.
- ❖ Institutionalise the involvement of youth and marginalised groups in governance by building direct pathways from Gram Panchayats and municipalities to high-level decision-making bodies.
- ❖ Move governance frameworks beyond service and duties to focus explicitly on rights and partnership, grounded in core constitutional values.
- ❖ Repeal all legislation that infringes upon the right to self-determination and bodily autonomy.
- ❖ Minimize bureaucratic barriers by simplifying documentation requirements for welfare schemes and establishing community-based identity facilitation mechanisms.
- ❖ Implement a rational Minimum Support Price (MSP) backed by a legal guarantee of procurement instead of focusing on digitisation and direct benefit transfers.
- ❖ Reinstate and robustly fund MGNREGA using realistic demographic projections and real-time demand to ensure streamlined, timely wage payments.
- ❖ Reorient macro-budgetary policy away from corporate-centric stimulus frameworks toward sustainable livelihood generation and public welfare safety nets.
- ❖ Rewrite recent labour legislation to guarantee social security, basic rights, and powerful independent enforcement mechanisms for informal and gig workers.
- ❖ Address urban poverty through a comprehensive, universal, and shock-responsive social protection system based on a life-cycle approach instead of a piecemeal approach
- ❖ Ensure consistent implementation of legal safeguards regarding prolonged detention and bail while prioritizing legal aid, prison reform, and vulnerable individuals.
- ❖ Invest in small-scale rural school infrastructure within 3 km of every habitation, prioritizing teacher availability, libraries, and functional toilets as per the law.
- ❖ Explicitly recognise the human rights to water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) in national law.
- ❖ Enforce Supreme Court directives on sanitation workers through time-bound mechanisation, modern infrastructure investments, and comprehensive social protection.
- ❖ Decentralize urban development by empowering Tier-2 and Tier-3 municipalities with the financial and technical capacity to handle local infrastructure needs.
- ❖ Recognize Gram Sabhas and tribal councils as primary self-governance institutions, declaring any land acquisition or eviction without their prior informed consent unlawful.
- ❖ Protect natural ecosystems by prioritizing natural forests over plantations, expanding ecological restoration, and securing wildlife corridors and wetlands.
- ❖ Repeal the Unlawful Activities Prevention Act (UAPA) and other overbroad, draconian laws to protect free expression and restore the principle of bail as the rule.
- ❖ Overhaul laws used to censor the media and completely halt the arbitrary use of internet shutdowns.
- ❖ Revive a political culture of consultation and restraint that treats states as constitutional partners and curtails the overreach of gubernatorial discretion.

- ❖ Restore legislative rigour by mandating parliamentary standing committee scrutiny for all major bills.
- ❖ Develop a weighted delimitation model for the expanded 848-seat house that balances population with development and diversity indexes to prevent regional political marginalisation.

Conclusion

Across all constitutional values, this report finds that the gap between official claims of transformative progress and the lived realities of marginalised communities, civic institutions, and democratic processes continues to widen. Structural underfunding, regulatory tightening of civil society and the press, electoral roll exclusions affecting tens of millions, and unresolved federal and land-rights tensions point to a year in which institutional accountability and inclusive implementation remain the most urgent unmet priorities.

EQUALITY

Dalits

Conditions of Dalits and Adivasis in India Remain Largely Unchanged

Intro: The socio-economic conditions of Dalits and Adivasis in India remain largely unchanged due to the entrenched caste system, which fosters hostility and exclusion, especially when these communities assert their rights.

Caste remains a fundamental framework shaping social, economic, and political life in India, influencing interactions and access to opportunities. Despite constitutional safeguards and welfare policies, significant gaps in implementation affect vulnerable communities, particularly Dalits, who face structural barriers. Issues such as bureaucratic hurdles, discrimination, and uneven policy execution raise concerns about the effectiveness of these interventions. Here, we analyse recent developments and challenges, aiming to understand the impact of current measures on systemic inequities and identify areas needing urgent reform.

Access to Justice

The socio-economic conditions of Dalits and Adivasis in India remain largely unchanged due to the entrenched caste system, which fosters hostility and exclusion, especially when these communities assert their rights. An analysis of caste-based atrocities from 2019 to 2023, based on NCRB data, indicates a troubling rise in targeted violence, exacerbated by discriminatory social structures, institutional apathy, and barriers to justice. Many cases also go unreported.

Every day in India, 158 Dalits experience caste-based atrocities, averaging 7 per hour, while 36 atrocities against Adivasis indicate a pattern of ongoing violence. Key crime metrics include a 1.8 per cent rise in murders and a notable 45.2 per cent increase in attempted murders, alongside a 45.5 per cent rise in criminal intimidation. Additionally, there has been a staggering 592.3 per cent increase in the denial of access to public spaces, revealing persistent caste segregation. Organized social boycotts and forced displacements have surged by 240 per cent, indicating systematic efforts to isolate and displace Dalit communities.

Gender-based violence against Dalit women and children has seen alarming increases, with rape cases rising by 20.9 per cent and rape of Dalit girls by 23.5 per cent. New forms of digital and physical harassment, including a 25.6 per cent increase in stalking and a 38.9 per cent rise in voyeurism, further violate privacy and bodily autonomy. Daily, 12 Dalit women and girls are raped, and 10 face gender-based assaults. Police responses are inadequate; despite a slight rise in charge sheeting rates from 78.5 per cent to 81.2 per cent, the conviction rates are not improving. In 2023, 16,454 cases remained pending investigation, contributing to significant delays in the justice system for survivors. Judicial delays and an extremely low conviction rate of 31.9 per cent in atrocity cases against Dalits indicate a slow judicial process, with 93.8 per cent of trials completed leaving many cases pending.

This situation contributes to weakened evidence, witness intimidation, and prolonged trauma for survivors, alongside a high acquittal rate of 63.1 per cent (NCDHR, 2026). The findings highlight systemic failures, poor investigations, and weak prosecutions, particularly in serious crimes like rape and murder. Comprehensive reforms are needed, including the establishment of Exclusive Special Courts and improved police accountability, to better protect victims and uphold equality and human rights in India.

Education:

- a. **Change in Curriculum:** Socioeconomic and caste hierarchies have long influenced India's education system (Deka, 2015), affecting educational quality, particularly among marginalised people. Despite many improvements, inequities remain. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 strives to improve education in these communities, and the National Curriculum Framework for School Education (NCFSE) 2023 is a crucial project.

NCFSE 2023 introduces a new 5+3+3+4 educational structure that reflects children's developmental stages and promotes interdisciplinary learning (Ministry of Education, 2023). It prioritises digital education, basic literacy, vocational training, and multilingual education, addressing gaps based on location, religion, caste, and language. However, the curriculum has historically served as a site of exclusion for Dalit communities (Scheduled Castes) while also holding the potential for social transformation.

The NCF 2005 introduced a significant shift by endorsing a critical engagement with caste, promoting a "critical and empathic" understanding of caste issues and discussions around inequality and social justice. However, scholarly work indicates that the implementation of this framework in classrooms has been inconsistent (Mittal, 2020).

Recent NCERT curriculum revisions, including content rationalization, reframing of narratives, and competency-based learning, have sparked debate due to removal of topics related to social movements, caste, and Dalit voices (Banerjee, 2023). Key issues affecting Dalit communities include their systematic erasure and underrepresentation in educational curricula (Gadate, 2021). Research indicates that Dalit histories are often omitted from textbooks, which marginalizes their contributions and identities (Sonker, et.al. 2023). This absence weakens representation and self-identity among Dalit students and reinforces dominant caste narratives as the prevailing historical accounts.

Curriculum changes in NCERT reveal a conflict between inclusion and exclusion, with frameworks like NCF 2005 promoting equity while actual revisions often marginalise Dalit voices, diminish discussions on caste oppression, and reinforce dominant narratives. For Dalit communities, the curriculum holds political significance and requires genuine reform that includes their histories, literature, and perspectives, employs critical pedagogy rather than tokenism, enhances teacher training to mitigate caste bias, and facilitates community involvement in curriculum design.

- b. **Attempts to include Manusmriti in Dharmashastra studies:** Although it has been dropped now, but the very idea of inclusion of Manusmriti in Dharmashastra studies at the reputed Delhi University (Jha, 2025; De, 2025; Kumar, 2025) raises serious concerns in the context of the Indian Constitution.

The constitution was explicitly designed to dismantle the hierarchal and exclusionary principles embedded in texts like Manusmriti and to guarantee equality, dignity and fundamental rights to all citizens. Reintroducing such texts without critical engagement risks undermining constitutional morality and questions the very foundation of justice, liberty, and equality that define modern India.

Budget:

An analysis of Dalit Adivasi Budget also known as DABA 2025-26: A total of Rs.1,68,478.38 crore has been allocated for SC communities, reflecting a marginal increase of 1.8 per cent. This funding increase does not correlate with new targeted schemes introduced by the finance minister. Only Rs. 62,150 crore for SC welfare are earmarked for targeted schemes, making up just 3.9 per cent of total funds, respectively. Of the 236 SC schemes, only 30 are targeted, raising serious concerns for these communities. A scrutiny of allocations reveals that Rs 62,150.03 crores is designated for SCs which falls short of the required 14.6 per cent.

In education, funding for Post Matric Scholarships has decreased from Rs 6,359.98 crores to Rs 5,900 crores for Dalits. Approximately Rs 3,116.40 crore is allocated for Dalit women. The funding for the Prevention of Atrocities against SCs is inadequate in light of increasing violence. Of this, only Rs 138 crores is allocated for SC/ST women under the Prevention of Atrocities Act. Dalits receive Rs 130 crore through the National Overseas Scholarship. The NAMASTE scheme for manual scavenging is slightly increased to Rs 130 crores, and the Safai Karamchari Finance Development Corporation receives only Rs 0.01 crores. Overall, the Ministry of Labour and Employment has Rs 5,284 crores, up by Rs 1,679 crores from last year, with Rs 3,340 crores for the New Employment Generation Scheme. (NCDHR, 2025).

Environment/Climate Change (Shared responsibility for the commons)

In India, the control and access to the natural resources, such as land, water, and forests, have been historically designed by the caste system. Dalit communities were systematically excluded from equitable access and were often forced to live in segregated, environmentally vulnerable areas on the margins of villages, like village peripheries, flood-prone lands, drought-affected regions, or areas with poor infrastructure. Because of this structural marginalization, they are disproportionately exposed to climate risks like water scarcity, extreme heat, cyclones, floods, and loss of livelihoods. This structural exclusion increases their exposure to environmental risks and limits their ability to build resilience.

Post-independence development models – such as industrialization, large dams, and extractive industries – have contributed to environmental degradation and displacement. The burden of these impacts has disproportionately fallen on marginalized communities, including Dalits, who often lack the resources and political voice to challenge it effectively.

India's climate governance framework encompasses a range of initiatives aimed at environmental conservation, climate adaptation, and disaster resilience. The National Mission for a Green India seeks to expand forest cover and protect existing forest through schemes such as the Green India Mission National Afforestation programme and Forest Fire Prevention and Management, supported by an increased allocation of about Rs. 220 crore.

Mission Mausam, with an outlay of Rs. 2000 crore for 2024-26, aims to enhance weather and climate forecasting through advanced surveillance systems, artificial intelligence, and next generation radars and satellites. The National Adaptation Fund for Climate Change (NAFCC) supports adaptation projects in sectors such as agriculture, forestry and water resources, particularly for vulnerable communities, while the finance commission has allocated Rs. 2.28 lakh crore (2021-26) for disaster risk reduction and management. At the national level, the National Action plan on Climate Change (NAPCC) was expanded from eight to nine missions with the addition of the National Mission on Human Health and

Climate change in 2025-26. While this addition reflects growing recognition of climate-related health risks, the framework continues to be criticised for its limited attention to caste-based vulnerabilities, particularly those faced by Dalit communities engaged in high risk occupations such as sanitation work and informal labour, thereby retaining a predominantly sectoral and technocratic approach to climate governance.

The year 2025–26 has been marked by intensifying climate impacts and emerging local responses, with significant implications for marginalised communities, including Dalits.

1. **Escalation of Extreme Weather Events:** India experienced extreme weather events on nearly 99 per cent of days in 2025¹, causing large-scale crop damage, loss of lives, and livelihood disruption. The survey², done by the Yale programme on Climate Change Communications, shows that over 70 per cent of Indians experienced severe heatwaves, and more than half faced droughts, water shortages, and pollution impacts. Dalit communities, often engaged in informal labour (agriculture, sanitation, construction), faced disproportionate exposure to heat stress and unsafe working conditions.
2. **Climate-induced disaster events in one year:** India experienced severe climate and disaster events that caused thousands of deaths, widespread displacement, and major infrastructure damage. According to the Centre for Science and Environment (CSE) and *Down To Earth*, extreme weather events caused at least 4,419 deaths in 2025, damaged over 181,000 houses, and affected nearly 17.4 million hectares of cropped land nationwide³. Heavy rain, floods, and landslides alone accounted for around 2,440 deaths, while lightning and storms caused about 1,456 deaths⁴.

In Uttarakhand, flash floods and landslides in August 2025 left at least four people dead and around 50 missing⁵. Several states including Himachal Pradesh, Assam, Jammu & Kashmir, Bihar, Andhra Pradesh, and Gujarat witnessed large-scale displacement due to floods, cyclones, and extreme rainfall, though consolidated national displacement data for 2025–26 was not officially released. However, climate displacement estimates and disaster reports indicate that millions were temporarily displaced across India during the year due to floods, cyclones, erosion, and extreme weather events⁶.

3. **Climate-Induced Migration & Livelihood Crisis:** With 14 million Indians estimated to be displaced by climate change and environmental crises, a number expected to exceed 45 million over the next 25 years, climate-induced displacement and migration are a blind spot in India's policy and public finance frameworks. Net-zero targets and mitigation measures – the government increased its budgetary allocation for renewable energy by 143 per cent – overshadow adaptation issues, such as human mobility, with the National Adaptation Fund for Climate Change cut from Rs 118 crore in 2015 to zero⁷. Emerging discourse highlights that climate migration in India is deeply shaped by caste, with Dalits facing dispossession and insecure migration pathways⁸.
4. **Livelihood & Social Protection Concerns:** Concerns were raised that changes to rural employment frameworks could undermine livelihood security for Dalit labourers, especially in climate-affected regions⁹. The government is exploring a climate-linked insurance scheme to provide faster payouts after disasters like floods and heatwaves¹⁰. The climate policies are caste blind and totally exclude the social securities and livelihood opportunities of the Dalit communities. The weakening of employment guarantees directly impacts climate resilience capacity. The insurance schemes may help, but access, awareness, and affordability barriers remain.

Ground-level developments in 2025–26 clearly show that climate change is not just an environmental issue – it is a social justice issue shaped by caste, livelihood, and access to resources. The climate impacts are intensifying structural vulnerabilities. The policy responses are also emerging, but not fully inclusive. The updated NAPCC included community-led efforts; the matter of concern is if Dalits will get adequate amounts of institutional support, focus, resources, and equitable participation. A just climate response must move beyond disaster relief and focus on rights-based, caste-sensitive, and community-driven resilience building.

Several adaptation-focused schemes have been shifted or underfunded, reducing clarity on budget commitments (Outcome budget). Climate adaptation receives less explicit emphasis compared to mitigation and infrastructure. There is always limited transparency on how funds reach the most vulnerable communities. There is also little clarity on whether climate funds are aligned with the Special Component Plan and Tribal Sub Plan norms, ensuring targeted benefits for Dalit and Adivasi communities. Many schemes (afforestation, climate-smart agriculture, DRR funds) do not explicitly address caste-based exclusion in access to land, water, and commons. Dalit participation in the planning and implementation of climate programmes remains limited. Underfunding of adaptation disproportionately affects Dalits, who are more dependent on climate-sensitive livelihoods. The NAPCC speaks about the vulnerable groups, but in the absence of a clear distinction of these groups, it often leads to the systematic exclusion of Dalits and Adivasis.

In essence, while the current budget signals movement towards climate resilience, it still falls short of embedding social justice and caste equity, which are essential for making “shared responsibility for the commons” meaningful in practice.

In the context of climate change, this historical marginalization continues to shape vulnerability. Although Dalit communities contribute the least to environmental degradation, they face the greatest risks. Therefore, the idea of “shared responsibility for the commons” must account for historical injustices and unequal access to resources, and be grounded in principles of equity, inclusion, and social justice.

Policy change:

- a. **MGNREGA/NAREGA:** MGNREGA profoundly affects Dalit communities by providing economic opportunities that alleviate rural poverty, promoting social inclusion through equal wages and local employment (Ansari, 2025), and enhancing political empowerment by strengthening citizenship claims (Ramesh, 2026).

Additionally, it serves as a critical tool for social and economic change for Dalit women, despite facing implementation challenges (Roja, et.al. 2024). Recent policy changes in 2025-2026 indicate a significant restructuring of the NREGA framework. Key shifts include transitioning from a rights-based to a scheme-based model (Dash & Ghildiyal, 2025), with new proposals suggesting an increase in workdays from 100 to 125, but eliminating demand-driven guarantees and instead implementing fixed budgets.

Funding changes involve a reduced central funding with a 60:40 Centre-state cost-sharing model (Mehrotra, 2026), which may lead to uneven execution, particularly in poorer states. Administrative alterations focus on increased centralised monitoring to combat alleged misuse (ToI, 2026), including contractor involvement and reduced autonomy for Gram Panchayats (ToI, 2026). Additionally, new operational restrictions introduce seasonal pauses and caps on employment (Dash & Ghildiyal, 2025).

Policy changes have negatively impacted Dalit communities through several channels: (a) The shift from guaranteed work entitlements to scheme-based allocations has created uncertainty in employment; (b) Funding changes threaten job implementation in poorer states where many Dalits reside, causing delays in payments (Jamkhandi, 2026); (c) Contractor-based systems erode anti-caste protections, reinforcing local hierarchies and compromising Dalit workers' dignity (Tol, 2026); (d) Some political opposition labels these reforms as "anti-Dalit" due to reduced livelihood security (Mohan, 2025); (e) There is a decline in Scheduled Castes' participation and inclusion, exacerbated by ongoing policy dilution (Goyal, et.al. 2023).

- b. **Right to Information/Digital Personal Data Protection Act:** The Right to Information Act, 2005 aims to enhance transparency and accountability in governance by enabling citizens, particularly marginalized groups, to access state-held information. It serves as a "pro-poor accountability mechanism," allowing these communities to access welfare entitlements, expose local corruption, and demand affirmative action implementation.

Policy changes in the RTI Amendment (2019) and the DPDP Act, 2023, have significant implications for transparency and privacy. The RTI Amendment centralizes control over Information Commissioners, raising concerns about reduced independence and accountability (Ali, 2025). The DPDP Act introduces a privacy-centric approach, modifies RTI provisions, expands personal data exemptions, and permits denial of information classified as personal data.

Critics argue these amendments could undermine the effectiveness of the RTI, suggesting a shift towards prioritizing privacy over transparency (Tol, 2026). The DPDP amendment restricts access to welfare information, creating serious challenges for Dalits, by allowing denial of beneficiary data, it weakens the RTI and disproportionately affects marginalised groups (Nitnaware, 2023). Limited access to details like scholarship lists, beneficiary records, and fund allocation makes it harder for Dalit communities to detect exclusion and corruption.

Weakening accountability in caste-based discrimination is highlighted by recent changes that allow denial of access to police records and disciplinary proceedings under the RTI framework, citing "personal data" concerns (Kishwar, et.al. 2025). This amendment hinders the ability to track atrocity cases, challenge police inaction, and expose caste bias, ultimately reinforcing structural impunity within caste governance. Research indicates that marginalized groups experience significant information and digital access inequalities. The data-centric governance model introduced by DPDP simultaneously restricts access to information. Academically, there exists a structural conflict between privacy regimes and transparency frameworks (Kumar, 2025).

- c. **Post Matric Scholarship:** The promotion of higher education is essential for enhancing social mobility for Scheduled Caste (SC) students in India. The government has launched various schemes, with the Post Matric Scholarship (PMS) being the largest, offering financial support for education. However, PMS faces challenges such as poor design, lack of transparency, and insufficient funds.

The COVID-19 pandemic has worsened disparities in educational access, exposing marginalized students to further obstacles like inadequate digital infrastructure and financial hardships, pushing many into informal employment (NCDHR, 2021). The PMS is implemented through Direct Benefit Transfer (DBT), with states submitting

annual action plans that are evaluated to ensure allocations meet actual needs. As stated in the report of the parliamentary standing committee on Social Justice and Empowerment (2025-26), Eighteenth Lok Sabha (Seventeenth Report), a representative from the Department of Social Justice and Empowerment explained that the income eligibility criteria for the next Finance Commission cycle will increase from ₹2.5 lakhs to ₹4.5 lakhs.

Previously, there was no budget for awareness creation, leading to a lack of knowledge in villages. A change has been made to allocate one per cent of the budget for awareness. The disability allowance has been modified from a 10 per cent annual increase to a fixed amount of ₹10,000 per year.

Raising the income ceiling from ₹2.5 lakh to ₹4.5 lakh is a positive change that addresses inflation, expands access to scholarships for Dalit families, acknowledges structural inequality, and supports informal workers. This adjustment reflects current economic realities and helps include those previously excluded due to outdated financial thresholds.

Although it seems to be a positive step, yet it remains conservative. It may be insufficient for urban families supporting higher education and excludes "near-poor" Dalit students just above the threshold. The fixed ceiling fails to account for family size or multiple dependents, prompting suggestions for a higher limit (e.g., ₹6–8 lakh) or a tiered support system. Recommendations include regional adjustments for urban areas and periodic revisions linked to inflation or education costs to enhance inclusion and fairness for more Dalit students.

REFERENCES

1. Ali, R. (2025). Cong warns of rising efforts to dilute RTI, seeks reform. *Times of India*. Accessed on 5 May 2026 from <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/hyderabad/cong-warns-of-rising-efforts-to-dilute-rti-seeks-refo-rms/articleshow/124510635.cms>
2. Ansari, H. R. (2025). Empowering Marginalized Communities: A Policy Analysis of MGNREGA's Impact on Dalits and Adivasis. *International Journal for Research Trends and Innovation*. 10 (4). 146-154.
3. Banerjee, R. (2023). On the Recent Change Made by NCERT in School Textbooks- Two Articles. *Janata Weekly*. Accessed on 5 May 2026 from <https://janataweekly.org/on-the-recent-changes-made-by-ncert-in-school-textbooks-two-articles/>
4. Dash, D.K. & Ghildiyal, S. (2025). G RAM G to replace NREGA, guarantee 125 days of work. *Times of India*. Accessed on 5 May 2026 from <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/g-ram-g-to-replace-nrega-guarantee-125-days-of-work/article-show/125989702.cms>
5. De, A. (2025). Delhi university drops Manusmriti from curriculum after student protests. *India Today*. Accessed on 5 May 2026 from <https://bestcolleges.indiatoday.in/news-detail/delhi-university-drops-manusmriti-from-curriculum-after-student-protests-3966>
6. Deka, P. P. (2015). Indian caste hierarchy system and education. *International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research and Development*, 2(9), 539-542.

7. Gadate, S. (2021). How Textbooks Sanitise Slavery, Make Caste Invisible. Accessed on 5 May 2026 from <https://www.newsclick.in/how-textbooks-sanitise-slavery-caste-invisible>
8. Goyal, A., Kumar, R., & Goyal, A. (2023). Is MGNREGA Inclusive of Scheduled Caste/Scheduled Tribe and Women? A Case Study of Haryana, India. *Contemporary Voice of Dalit*, Accessed on 5 May 2026 from <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/2455328X231169638>
9. Jamkhandi, G. (2026). Rs. 54 Cr NAREGA dues stall works, distress farmers in Dharwad. *Times of India*. Accessed on 5 May 2026 from <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/hubballi/rs-54cr-nrega-dues-stall-works-distress-farmers-in-dh-arwad/articleshow/130520569.cms>
10. Jha, S. (2025). Manusmriti in DU's Dharmashastra Studies curriculum; ancient text to guide modern student, course covers social and moral order. *Times of India*. Accessed on 5 May 2026 from <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/delhi/how-manusmriti-will-guide-du-students/articleshow/121786482.cms>
11. Kishwar, S. D., Khatoon, S., & Vatsa, K. (2025). Revisiting Right to Information in India: Is the DPDP Act counterproductive to RTI Act? *Oxford Human Rights Hub*. Accessed on 5 May 2026 from <https://ohrh.law.ox.ac.uk/revisiting-right-to-information-in-india-is-the-dpdp-act-counterproductive-to-rti-act/>
12. Kumar, R. (2025). Delhi University says Manusmriti won't be taught in any course. *NDTV*. Accessed on 5 May 2026 from <https://www.ndtv.com/education/delhi-university-says-manusmriti-wont-be-taught-in-any-course-8657293>
13. Kumar, D. (2025). Impact of the Digital Personal Data Protection Act, 2023 on Third-Party Information under the Right to Information Act, 2005: A Critical Analysis. *International Journal for Multidisciplinary Research*, 7 (4). 1-8.
14. Mehrotra, K. (2026). India Pioneered Job Guarantees. A new law could weaken them, critics says. *Washington post*. Accessed on 5 May 2026 from <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2025/12/30/india-jobs-program-changes/>
15. Ministry of Education. Government of India. (2023). National curriculum framework for school education (NCFSE) 2023.
16. Mittal, D. (2020). Engaging with 'caste': Curriculum, pedagogy and reception. *Space and Culture, India*, 8(1), 101-110.
17. Mohan, V. (2025). G RAM G 'anti Dalit', restore MGREGA: Punjab Assembly passes resolution. *Times of India*. Accessed on 5 May 2026 from <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/chandigarh/g-ram-g-anti-dalit-restore-mgnrega-punjab-assembly-passes-resolution/articleshow/126258560.cms>
18. National Campaign on Dalit Human Rights, (2021). Confronting the Pandemic: Response and Recovery for Dalit and Adivasi Students. Accessed on 6 May 2026 from <https://www.ncdhr.org.in/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Confronting-the-Pandemic-Response-and-Recovery-for-Dalit-and-Adivasi-students.pdf>
19. National Campaign on Dalit Human Rights, (2025). Dalit Adivasi Budget Analysis 2025-26. Accessed on 6 May 2026 from <https://www.ncdhr.org.in/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/DABA-2025-1.pdf>
20. National Campaign on Dalit Human Rights, (2026). Five years of Caste-based Atrocity: An Analysis of Crimes against Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes in India, 2019-2023. Accessed on 6 May 2026 from <https://www.ncdhr.org.in/wp-content/uploads/2026/03/NCDHR-report-march-6-Pages-for-web.pdf>
21. Parliamentary Committee Reports, (2026). Seventeenth Report of the Standing Committee on Social Justice and Empowerment (18th Lok Sabha) on 'Demands for Grants for the year 2026-27' pertaining to the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment (Department of Social Justice & Empowerment). Accessed on 6 May 2026 from https://eparlib.sansad.in/bitstream/123456789/3019910/1/18_Social_Justice_And_Empowerment_17.pdf
22. Ramesh, P. (2026). When Work Became a Right: The Social Life of MGNREGA. *Behan Box*. Accessed on 5 May 2026 from <https://behanbox.com/2026/02/15/when-work-became-a-right-the-social-life-of-mgnrega/>
23. Roja, M. Sujata, C. & Subhashini, A.B. (2024). Empowerment of Dalit Women: MGNREGS and its impact on Dalit Women. *International Journal of Humanities Social Science and Management (IJHSSM)*. 4(6), 852-856.

24. Sonker, S., Gaur, B., & Singh, L. (2023). Exclusion of contributions of Dalit's and other marginalized communities from Indian history: A systematic review and sociological analysis of Indian curriculum. *Research Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*, 14(4), 207-214.
25. Times of India, (2026). NAREGA restructured to prevent misuse of public funds: MP. Accessed on 5 May 2026 from <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/mysuru/nrega-restructured-to-prevent-misuse-of-public-funds-mp/articleshow/126468889.cms>
26. Times of India, (2026). Priyank alleges Centre diluted NREGA, pushed rural workers under contractors. Accessed on 5 May 2026 from <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/hubballi/priyank-alleges-centre-diluted-nrega-pushed-rural-workers-under-contractors/articleshow/127565138.cms>
27. Times of India, (2026). SC to examine if Data protection Act Blunts RTI Act. Accessed on 5 May from <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/sc-to-examine-if-data-protection-act-blunts-rti-act/articleshow/128444614.cms>

Dalit Women

Ending Gender Discrimination and Violence against Dalit Women

Intro: Low development outcomes among Dalit women in education, financial inclusion, ownership of resources, and access to dignified livelihoods are deeply shaped by caste- and gender-based inequalities. These structural barriers continue to undermine their empowerment, autonomy, and overall gender equality.

Dalit women and girls face continuous caste- and gender-based discrimination that shapes every aspect of their lives from an early age. Despite legal protections, untouchability continues through exclusion, segregation, and restricted access to education, healthcare, mobility, livelihoods, and decision-making. Limited access to skill training, land, credit, and economic opportunities pushes many into insecure and exploitative labour rooted in caste-based occupational hierarchies.

They remain highly vulnerable to physical and sexual violence, child marriage, and harmful practices such as the Jogini/Devadasi system, often facing backlash when asserting their rights. Poor access to quality sexual and reproductive healthcare, including high rates of anaemia, poor maternal health outcomes, and limited family planning support, further deepens these inequalities.

The intersection of caste and gender creates compounded disadvantages for Dalit women and girls across education, health, livelihoods, political participation, and protection from violence. Structural inequalities and entrenched social norms continue to limit the effectiveness of measures aimed at advancing Dalit rights and gender justice, making targeted interventions essential for achieving meaningful equality and SDG 5.

Education, Dropout & Access to Employment

Educational attainment – beyond the basic ability to read and write – serves as an indicator of skills, opportunities and chances for social mobility, forming a key foundation of empowerment that enables Dalit women to challenge systemic barriers and claim their rights. As per the 2011 Census, the Dalit literacy rate stands at 66 per cent, below the national average of 74 per cent. Among Dalit women and girls, only 56.4 per cent are literate – 52.6 per cent in rural areas and 68.6 per cent in urban areas – showing that nearly half remain illiterate due to structural discrimination and

exclusion from education. While enrolment for Dalit girls and boys is high at the primary level, with 99 per cent completing eight years of schooling, dropout rates rise sharply thereafter. By Class 8, enrolment for Dalit girls falls to 73 per cent, reflecting growing barriers related to safety, poverty, caste discrimination, and household responsibilities, and participation in higher education is even more limited, with only 16 per cent enrolled – roughly 2 in every 10 Dalit girls – highlighting deep gaps in access and opportunity (NSSO 75th Round, 2017).

These educational gaps are linked to Dalit women's concentration in low-paid, informal sector work driven more by survival needs than choice. Dalit girls also face overlapping barriers – caste-based harassment, safety concerns, caregiving responsibilities, unaffordable schooling costs in local private schools, poor infrastructure, transition challenges, early marriage, and discriminatory practices in School Management Committees. These reasons make caste-based discrimination a central factor in dropout spikes after Class 8 and again after Class 12

Financial Autonomy, Mobility & Ownership of Resources

According to the National Family Health Survey, Dalit women's financial autonomy shows a mixed trend – working women's decision-making on spending their own income has slightly declined (from 20.2 per cent to 17.6 per cent), the share of women who can decide where to spend money has increased (from 43.1 per cent to 51.2 per cent). Access to bank accounts rose sharply from 11.6 per cent in 2005–06 to 79.4 per cent in 2019–21, likely driven by government financial inclusion schemes. Awareness of microcredit programmes has grown modestly, though actual credit uptake remains low (rising only from 4.7 per cent to 13 per cent). Women's decision-making power within households improved substantially. The share of women deciding on major household purchases rose from 53.1 to 79.6 per cent, and those making healthcare decisions increased from 63 to 81.1 per cent. Similarly, more women can now visit family or relatives freely (from 60.3 per cent to 81.2 per cent), indicating enhanced mobility and social participation. Ownership and access to assets and technology have expanded but remain limited. Nearly half of SC women (48.3 per cent) now own a mobile phone, while ownership of a house (43.3 per cent) and land (30 per cent) in their name is still low. However, freedom of movement remains constrained – only 44 per cent of Dalit women can go alone to markets, health centres, or outside the village. Encouragingly, acceptance of wife beating has declined from 58.4 to 48.6 per cent, reflecting gradual attitudinal change toward gender-based violence (NFHS 2005–06 to 2019–21).

In the informal sugarcane harvesting sector, for instance, workers are recruited in pairs, and payments are usually made to husbands, fathers, or male partners instead of directly to women. This wage structure reinforces women's financial dependence

despite their equal contribution to labour. Similarly, women in the Jogini system often have little or no negotiating power with their sexual patrons regarding child support or financial assistance. Many survive on daily wage labour and occasional customary offerings while raising their children on their own. Survivors of violence also largely come from extremely low-income families, often living in mud houses with very limited access to government entitlements and basic resources.

Digital Exclusion & Media Access

A sharp gender- and caste-based digital divide severely limits Dalit women's access to information and opportunities. Limited use of and access to newspapers and the internet among Dalit women reduce their avenues for awareness of rights, education, employment and support systems, restricting decision-making, social networks and autonomy. Newspaper readership among Dalit women has dropped sharply – from 27 per cent in 2015–16 to just 11 per cent in 2019–21 – and only 27 per cent have ever used the internet. In a digital age where connectivity can empower women, this exclusion reinforces dependence on family or community authority, deepening social and economic marginalisation and constraining Dalit women's ability to claim rights, seek help or engage in public life. (NFHS-4&5)

Employment & Labour Exploitation

Rural employment among Dalit women remains higher than urban employment, with their overall employment rate increasing from 24 per cent in 2017–18 to 31 per cent in 2023–24 (PLFS 2023–24 & 2017–19). However, this rise does not necessarily indicate genuine economic empowerment. A large proportion of rural Dalit women continue to engage in informal and agricultural labour that is low-paid, insecure, and driven by economic distress rather than choice. In urban areas, higher unemployment among Dalit women reflects limited job opportunities despite education, along with mismatches between qualifications and available work, employment preferences, and gender-based barriers within the labour market.

These trends suggest that while more Dalit women are entering the workforce, the industrial and service sectors are failing to absorb them, forcing many into agricultural labour out of necessity rather than opportunity. Additionally, as men migrate to better-paying non-farm jobs, women are increasingly left to manage agricultural work. Although this contributes to the feminisation of agriculture, it does not translate into greater control over land, credit, or financial resources. Dalit women continue to have limited access to land ownership, formal credit systems, and control over their earnings (NFHS-5).

Intersecting disadvantages such as landlessness, low levels of education, caste-based exclusion, and lack of social protection continue to confine Dalit women

to exploitative forms of labour, including contractual, daily-wage, bonded, and informal sector work in plantations, construction, domestic work, sanitation, and other precarious occupations. These conditions are not accidental but are sustained through caste patriarchy and economic systems built on structural dispossession. This is evident in the experiences of Dalit sugarcane cutters, whose working conditions closely resemble bonded labour through advance-based recruitment systems, recurring debt, wage deductions, penalties, and coercive practices when payments fall short. Children also migrate with families and assist in labour, often violating child labour norms. Similarly, families of violence survivors and Joginis remain concentrated in low-paid informal work, reinforcing intergenerational cycles of poverty, marginalisation, and vulnerability to exploitation and abuse.

Nature of Crimes against Dalit Women and Girls

Crimes against Dalit women and girls recorded under the SC/ST Act include rape, attempt to rape, assault to outrage modesty, insult to modesty, kidnapping and abduction for marriage, and procurement of minor girls. These crimes reflect the intersection of caste- and gender-based violence faced by Dalit women and girls.

Scale and Magnitude of Violence

Government data from 2023 presents an alarming picture of caste-based sexual violence in India, with an average of 12 Dalit women and girls being raped every day. Nearly three out of every ten rape cases involve minor girls, while two out of every ten victims in cases of assault to outrage modesty are also underage, highlighting the heightened vulnerability of Dalit girls to sexual violence. Between 2015 and 2023, the NCRB recorded 66,199 cases of crimes against Dalit women and girls. This reflects an almost 50 per cent increase in reported offences, rising from 5,713 cases in 2015 to 8,529 cases in 2023. During this period, crimes against Dalit women and girls constituted 15 per cent of all recorded crimes against the Dalit community, mirroring the broader rise in caste-based violence across the country.

Predominant Forms of Violence

Sexual violence remains the most common form of caste-based gender violence. Together, rape and assault to outrage modesty account for 91 per cent of the total 66,199 crimes reported against Dalit women and girls over the past nine years – as also in 2023 (93 per cent). Particularly concerning is the escalation in vulnerability of minor Dalit girls, as cases of rape against them rose sharply since the category began to be recorded in 2017. Attempt to rape cases continue to receive limited recognition despite representing serious acts of sexual violence (NCRB 2015-23).

States Reporting High Incidents

Together, UP, Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh have always recorded 50-60 per cent of total crimes against Dalit women and girls. Other states shift positions in the atrocity ranking list – but rarely exit it. For states like Bihar, low reporting of crimes against Dalit women and girls must be read alongside crimes against the entire Dalit community to get a fuller picture.

Here, low reporting does not mean sexual violence incidents are less – it is often deliberately subsumed within broader incidents of violence against the community. (NCRB 2004-23).

Police Disposal of Cases

According to NCRB data for 2023, the police disposal of cases related to crimes against Dalit women and girls under the SC/ST Act and other laws reflects an average charge sheet rate of 75 per cent and a pendency rate of 29 per cent, meaning that nearly one in every four cases remains under investigation. Cases related to rape, assault, and procurement of minor girls recorded charge sheet rates above 80 per cent, whereas other offences showed comparatively lower rates. Although higher charge sheet rates in rape and assault cases indicate some level of progress, the high pendency in other offences suggests that non-sexual crimes against Dalit women and girls are often trivialised or not treated with equal seriousness.

Attempt to rape cases, in particular, continue to witness low charge sheet rates and high pendency despite involving clear intent of sexual violence. Their limited recognition in both official data and public discourse points to broader systemic gaps in addressing violence against Dalit women and girls. NCRB trends over the last nine years reflect similar patterns, with the unusual spike in 2015 likely linked to increased pressure and reporting following the 2013 Criminal Law Amendment Act.

Court Disposal and Conviction Rates

According to NCRB data for 2023, court disposal of cases related to crimes against Dalit women and girls under the SC/ST Act and other laws continues to reflect serious gaps in justice delivery. The average conviction rate remains low at 23 per cent, while the acquittal rate is extremely high at 72 per cent. In addition, the average pendency rate stands at 94 per cent, indicating that the vast majority of cases remain unresolved.

Conviction rates are particularly poor in cases such as attempt to rape and insult to modesty, which record convictions below 20 per cent, while procurement of minor girls has a conviction rate of only 13 per cent. Assault, rape, and kidnapping cases also show weak outcomes, with only one in three rape trials resulting in conviction. Most cases are dismissed due to lack of evidence, and very few are reopened.

Acquittal rates remain alarmingly high across offences, including 69 per cent in assault cases and 64 per cent in rape cases, with the highest acquittal rates seen in cases involving procurement of minor girls. Pendency rates exceeding 92 per cent across offences reveal severe delays within the justice system, leaving nearly nine out of ten cases unresolved. At the same time, rising cases of procurement of minor girls point towards increasing trafficking, forced marriage, and sexual exploitation, yet even charge-sheeted cases rarely result in convictions.

NCRB trends from 2015–2023 consistently show high pendency and low conviction rates, with occasional fluctuations linked to periods of increased national advocacy and reporting.

Conclusion: Impact on Survivors

Caste-based sexual violence has severe long-term impacts on survivors' mental, physical, and social well-being. Survivors often experience trauma, anxiety, depression, sleeplessness, fear, withdrawal, and repeated retraumatisation during legal processes. Many face school dropout, restricted mobility, social stigma, victim-blaming, economic insecurity, forced migration, child marriage, and continued caste-based exclusion. Survivors also face serious sexual and reproductive health consequences, including injuries, unsafe pregnancies, miscarriages, and increased health risks, reinforcing long-term marginalisation and vulnerability.

The above report has been extracted from a study by the All India Dalit Mahila Manch for an evidence based study – “Dalit Women’s Long Road to Justice: Monitoring 10 Years of SDG 5 in India through Caste, Gender and SRHR Lens”.

Adivasi

Educational and Economic Empowerment of Scheduled Tribes: A Critical Analysis of Article 46 of the Indian Constitution

Intro: Notwithstanding obstacles, Article 46 remains a fundamental framework directing state policies to safeguard tribal people from exploitation and to promote their educational and economic progress within an inclusive and equitable society

Adivasi or tribal communities, officially acknowledged as Scheduled Tribes (STs), embody India's indigenous populace with unique cultural, linguistic, and socioeconomic characteristics (**Mader, 2024**). The different tribal populations of India comprising approximately 8.6 per cent of the national populace (exceeding 104 million individuals), they are formally classified as Scheduled Tribes (STs) in the Indian Constitution. These communities are recognized for their own languages, profound ecological links, and singular socioeconomic customs (**Subramanian and Joe, 2024**). Many tribal communities historically resided in remote, mountainous, and wooded regions where subsistence agriculture, hunting, gathering, and the sustainable use of forest resources constituted their primary means of livelihood. Their traditional institutions and indigenous knowledge systems, which regulated communal life and resource management, formed the basis for their social and economic systems, closely linked to the natural environment (**Guedje et al., 2017**). Article 46 of the Constitution of India represents one of the most significant constitutional commitments toward the welfare, dignity, and empowerment of Scheduled Tribes (STs), particularly in tribal-dominated state such as Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, Odisha, and Madhya Pradesh.

Article 46 directs the state to promote with special care the educational and economic interests of scheduled tribes and protect them from social injustice and all forms of exploitation (**National Commission for Scheduled Castes, 2026**). In the context of all tribal states, this constitutional objective carries exceptional importance as the states are home to major tribal communities such as the Gond, Bheel, Baiga,

Santhal, Munda, Oraon, Ho, Kharia, and Birhor tribes, whose historical experiences have been marked by socio-economic exclusion, land alienation, poverty, displacement, illiteracy, and cultural marginalization (**Prabhakar et al., 2023**).

The expectation among tribal communities was that a state with a large tribal population would ensure greater political participation, equitable development, and preservation of indigenous identity. However, despite constitutional safeguards and welfare schemes, tribal populations continue to face multiple structural inequalities that hinder the realization as well as real implications of Article 46 of the Constitution of India (**Bain, 2021; Riamei, 2023**).

One of the primary objectives of Article 46 is the promotion of educational interests among Scheduled Tribes because education is recognized as the most powerful instrument for social mobility, empowerment, and reduction of inequality (Daripa, 2017). The previous studies have highlighted that tribal communities in India experience serious educational disadvantages due to poverty, inadequate infrastructure, language barriers, geographical isolation, teacher shortages, and social discrimination (**Gawas, 2010; Andrabi, 2014; Gawas, 2018**). Research conducted by Parida and Das (2025) that tribal children continue to encounter severe educational barriers in remote rural areas where schools lack qualified teachers, transportation facilities, libraries, digital resources, and culturally inclusive curricula.

The exclusion of tribal languages and histories from mainstream school curricula further contributes to alienation among indigenous students, reducing classroom participation and increasing dropout rates.

Another report by **Down to Earth (2026)** stresses that education is a fundamental right for every child aged 6 to 14 years in India. The Right to Education (RTE) Act, established in 2009, ensures free and equitable educational access for all students, regardless of caste, class, gender, religion, or geographical location. However, access to education continues to pose a considerable difficulty for numerous youngsters residing in isolated tribal areas. The report focuses obstacles to educational access encountered by youngsters in the West Singhbhum area of Jharkhand State. The findings are derived from the author's observations during

school visits and community interactions conducted as part of a field survey. West Singhbhum is predominantly a rural area inhabited by indigenous populations, confronting considerable social difficulties, such as low literacy rates, elevated poverty levels, and restricted economic prospects.

A home survey conducted by Aspire in 2023-24 encompassed all children across 16 blocks of West Singhbhum. The results indicate that over 50,000 school-aged children (6-17 years) are presently out of school, with 9.2 percent having withdrawn and 8.2 % having never been enrolled. Furthermore, a recent survey in Jharkhand reported that nearly 88% of tribal respondents believed that tribal languages and indigenous cultural histories were absent from educational institutions, thereby weakening cultural representation and identity within formal education systems (**The Times of India, 2026**).

Article 46 therefore obligates the State not merely to provide educational access but also to ensure culturally responsive, inclusive, and equitable education for tribal communities. The reservation policies in educational institutions, scholarships, hostels, Eklavya Model Residential Schools, vocational training programmes, mid-day meal schemes, and free educational materials have certainly improved enrollment rates among Scheduled Tribes; however, the persistence of low literacy levels and high dropout rates, especially among tribal girls, indicates that constitutional goals are yet to be fully realized (**Pandey and Kakati, 2025**).

Gender inequality exacerbates tribal education challenges, since females frequently encounter early marriage, domestic labour responsibilities, poverty, and insufficient safety when attending schools. In a study **Ghosh (2007)** noted that disparities in literacy across genders among tribal communities in Jharkhand are significant and indicative of wider socio-economic inequality impacting indigenous women.

Consequently, fulfilling the educational objectives of Article 46 necessitates the enhancement of school infrastructure, the incorporation of tribal languages into primary education, the advancement of teacher training, the expansion of digital access, and the assurance of community involvement in educational governance.

Alongside educational advancement, Article 46 also emphasizes the promotion of economic interests of Scheduled Tribes, recognizing that social justice cannot be

achieved without economic empowerment and livelihood security. Tribal communities traditionally depended on agriculture, forests, handicrafts, and common natural resources for their survival, but industrialization, mining, and infrastructural development have profoundly disrupted these traditional livelihood systems (**Xaxa, 2008; Ranganatha, 2014**). The mineral-rich tribal states, despite their abundant resources, witness indigenous communities enduring poverty, unemployment, migration, and economic instability. Development-induced displacement has become a significant danger to tribal welfare, since mining projects, dams, industrial zones, and infrastructural expansion have resulted in extensive seizure of tribal lands without sufficient rehabilitation or compensation.

Article 46 aims to safeguard Scheduled Tribes from exploitation; however, exploitative practices persist in various forms, including land appropriation, bonded labour, inequitable salaries, displacement, illicit mining, and manipulation by contractors and intermediaries (**Negi and Azeez, 2022**).

A recent Indigenous Navigator survey in Jharkhand's tribal districts indicated that over 46 per cent of tribal households persistently reside below the poverty line, and migration among tribal youth remains significantly elevated due to insufficient local employment opportunities and skill development initiatives. The survey also identified pervasive land disputes and insufficient legal acknowledgement of traditional tribal territories, underscoring the persistent difficulties in safeguarding tribal economic rights.

The economic exploitation is exacerbated by inadequate enforcement of constitutional protections, including the Fifth Schedule, the Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act (PESA), and the Forest Rights Act, which were intended to safeguard tribal land, forest rights, and self-governance (**Indigenous Navigator, 2026**).

Inadequately Implemented Forest Rights Act

The execution of the forest right acts has been inconsistent, opaque, and administratively deficient, constraining the tribal groups capacity to obtain legal acknowledgement of forest-dependent livelihoods and communal resources. The implementation of the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers

(Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006, popularly known as the Forest Rights Act (FRA), has been under scrutiny since the Union Ministry of Tribal Affairs' (MoTA) March 2026 Monthly Progress Report (MPR) in March showed widespread rejections of community claims. The data revealed that a total of 47,901 CFR / CFRR claims have been rejected across India. The titles issued under CFR / CFRR in many states remain far below the actual potential area eligible under the law. While MoTA is insisting on mapping of potential CFR / CFRR areas in the form of FRA Atlas so that monitoring and review can be made from time to time with the states, CFR / CFRR titles issued in different states are far away from the actual potential area

The state-wise data indicated large-scale rejections in several forested states, including 9,254 claims in West Bengal, 7,197 in Jammu & Kashmir, 6,285 in Madhya Pradesh, 4,270 in Karnataka, 3,658 in Chhattisgarh, 3,090 in Uttarakhand, 2,455 in Rajasthan, 2,331 in Gujarat, 2,144 in Maharashtra, 1,737 in Jharkhand, 1,682 in Telangana, and 1,470 in Andhra Pradesh. Other states including Odisha, Assam, Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, and Tripura have also reported rejections.

Lack of Data on Tribal Settlements

Tribal communities residing in remote areas still lack adequate healthcare facilities, sanitation infrastructure, roads, and social security coverage. Social exploitation also occurs through cultural stereotyping and political marginalization, where tribal identities are frequently misunderstood or ignored in mainstream development narratives (**Sarangi, 2013**).

The promotion of educational and economic interests of Scheduled Tribes must go beyond token welfare measures and instead focus on long-term empowerment through quality education, sustainable livelihoods, land security, healthcare access, digital inclusion, entrepreneurship development, and participatory governance (**Thornberry, 2013**). Therefore, enhancing tribal languages and cultural knowledge within educational institutions can foster cultural confidence and diminish alienation among tribal adolescents.

Official numbers on India's tribal population need to be seen in the following context: Of the estimated 1,45,000 villages with "more than 25 per cent of tribal population", data on "infrastructure gap" under the Mission Antyodaya is available only for

1,17,064 villages. This means that close to 20 per cent, or 27,936 villages, are by the Government’s admission off the official radar that monitors “programmes for the development of rural areas” (Harsha, Sushmita, March 2023)

Table I: Tribal Dominated Village-wise Infrastructure Gap Analysis — All India

Village-wise Infrastructure Details	No. of village out of 1,17,064 Tribal Dominated Villages	% with access
Availability of Banks in the village	10,945	9.34
All-weather road	77,551	66.25
Availability of PDS	58,068	50.40
Health		
PHC	3,453	2.95
CHC	7,114	6.10
Sub-centre	18,185	15.53
None	88,295	75.42

Remedying long-standing issues such as upholding their rights that exist only in the statute book, bridging shortfalls in healthcare provisioning, recognising traditional

knowledge systems, and above all, taking political and policy cognisance of the unique conditions that surround India's Scheduled Tribes, are required to redirect India's Scheduled Tribe populations towards the long road to development.

Article 46 incorporates the constitutional commitment to social justice, equality, and dignity for scheduled tribes, and its effective execution in the state is crucial for both tribal welfare and the enhancement of democratic inclusivity and human rights in India (Minz, 2020). Notwithstanding ongoing obstacles, Article 46 remains a fundamental framework directing state policies to safeguard tribal people from exploitation and to promote their educational and economic progress within an inclusive and equitable society (**Karthikeyan and Senthilkumar, 2022; Majhi and Baskey, 2026**).

Endnotes

1. Andrabi, A. A. (2014). Tribal Education and Government Interventions. *International Research Journal of Management Sociology & Humanity*, 5(3), 316-323.
2. Asher, M. (2023, March 20). Fending for themselves: Adivasis, forest-dwelling communities and the devastating second wave of COVID-19. *The Hindu Centre for Politics and Public Policy*. <https://www.thehinducentre.com/the-arena/fending-for-themselves-adivasis-forest-dwelling-communities-and-the-devastating-second-wave-of-covid-19/article66640859.ece>
3. Bain, P. M. (2021). The Inherent Rights of Tribal Women. *Jus Corpus LJ*, 2, 773.
4. Daripa, S. K. (2017). Tribal education in India: Government initiative and challenges. *International Journal of Research in Social Sciences*, 7(10), 156-166.
5. De, D. (2025). *Indigenous Peoples and the Politics of Indigeneity in India: A Local Perspective on a Global Movement*. Springer Nature.
6. Down To Earth. (2025, November 28). *Nearly 48,000 rejected Community Forest Rights claims show FRA implementation failures: Experts*. <https://www.downtoearth.org.in/forests/nearly-48000-rejected-community-forest-rights-claims-show-fra-implementation-failures-experts>
7. Gawas, V. M. (2018). Right to education under the constitution of India and development among the scheduled tribes: A socio-legal study. *International Journal of Law*, 4(3), 63-72.
8. Ghosh, A. K. (2007). The gender gap in literacy and education among the scheduled tribes in Jharkhand and West Bengal. *Sociological bulletin*, 56(1), 109-125.
9. Guedje, N. M., Tadjouteu, F., Tchamou, N., & Ndoye, O. (2017). The use of traditional ecological knowledge in sustainable use and management of plant resource through a community-based and participatory assessment. *Int. J. Biol. Chem. Sci*, 11(4), 1611-1626.
10. <https://indigenoustravel.org/news/small-grant-in-india-toward-the-setting-up-and-strengthening-of-pesa> (Accessed on 21st 2026).
11. Indigenous Navigator. (2026). Small grant in India toward the setting up and strengthening of PESA. Available on
12. Karthikeyan, L., & Senthilkumar, M. (2022). Tribal development in India: Some policy perspective. *Special Education*, 1(43).
13. Mader, P. (2024). Orchestrating self-empowerment in tribal India: Debt bondage, land rights, and the strategic uses of spirituality. *World Development*, 174, 106440.

14. Majhi, S. K., & Baskey, S. K. (2026). Evolution of policy frameworks and constitutional provisions for tribal in India since 1947. *Journal (IERJ)*, 12(3), 547-555.
15. Minz, S. K. (2020). Tribal development policies in India: Its implications and prospects. *Mukt Shabd Journal*, 9(5), 818-829.
16. Mishra, S. (2010). Right to education and the tribal of Orissa. *The Indian Journal of Political Science*, 859-868.
17. National Commission for Scheduled Castes. (2026). Constitutional Safeguards. Available on <https://ncsc.nic.in/constitutional-safeguards> (Accessed on 18th May 2026).
18. Negi, D. P., & Azeez, E. P. (2022). Impacts of development induced displacement on the tribal communities of India: An integrative review. *Asia-Pacific Social Science Review*, 22(2), 5.
19. Pandey, R., & Kakati, B. K. Empowering Tribal Education: Insights from Eklavya Model Residential Schools in Sixth Scheduled States of India. *Man and Society*, 31.
20. Parida, J., & Das, A. (2026). Barriers and facilitators to education for tribal populations in India: A mixed-methods systematic review. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 108976.
21. Prabhakar, S., Nimesh, A., & Prabhakar, P. (2023). Assessment of start-up ecosystems for tribal women entrepreneurs in India. In *Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Efforts of Businesses in Rural Areas* (pp. 1-22). IGI Global Scientific Publishing.
22. Ranganatha, B. (2014). Tribal identity and the implications for Political and Cultural Development: A Sociological Analysis. *International Journal of Applied science and engineering* , 2 (1), 27.
23. Riamei, J. (2023). Ethnic diversity and politics of inclusion: Tribes in North East India. *Journal of Development Policy and Practice*, 8(1), 93-109.
24. Sarangi, T. K. (2013). Legalising Rights through Implementation of Forest Rights Act 2006. *Critical Review on Odisha and Jharkhand'(Working Paper No 126, RULNR Working Paper No 20, May, Centre for Economic and Social Studies*.
25. Subramanian, S. V., & Joe, W. (2024). Population, health and nutrition profile of the Scheduled Tribes in India: a comparative perspective, 2016–2021. *The Lancet Regional Health-Southeast Asia*, 20.
26. The Times of India. (2026). Over 46% of state tribals face economic hardship: Survey. Available on <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/ranchi/over-46-of-state-tribals-face-economic-hardship-survey/articleshow/121470246.cms> (Accessed on 18th May 2026).
27. Thornberry, P. (2013). Indigenous peoples and human rights. In *Indigenous peoples and human rights*. Manchester University Press.
28. Xaxa, V. (2008). *State, society, and tribes: Issues in post-colonial India* . Pearson Education India.

Women

Gender Justice Remains a Distant Hope without Effective Implementation

Intro: The trends in sociopolitical and economic scenarios in the country, with its promise of women led development, is characterized by tokenistic resource allocations, credit-linked access and reforms limited within a narrower, exclusionary and homogenous version of gender equality and women empowerment.

The past year of the NDA government marks notable shifts in India's policy and legal landscape. Several reforms and revisions reinforce a unified centralized governance structure, for example, the consolidation of 29 labour laws into four labour codes, the Special Intensive Revision (SIR), the implementation of the Uniform Civil Code, and others. These reforms disproportionately impact women and gender diverse people, especially from marginalized social locations and identities – impeding their social, economic, political agency and participation.

On the other end of this reality, India's development agenda promises to shift policy focus from women's welfare to women's leadership across sectors and institutions. Schemes and provisions focused on credit access, entrepreneurship and skilling drives, access to housing, drinking water and cooking fuel are being prioritized¹¹. Some of the recent rights-based legal reforms also create opportunities to facilitate women's economic and political participation – like the one-third reservation of seats for women in the Lok Sabha and state legislative assemblies under the Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam, the increased punishment for crimes against women in the Bharatiya Nyay Sanhita, and the Supreme Court directives ensuring compliance under Sexual Harassment at Workplace Act, among others.

Challenges persist in terms of practical gender equality outcomes and effectiveness of these provisions on the ground. Global data records increased gender disparities in India, specifically in economic and political participation, dropping India's rank on the Global Gender Gap Index, from 129 to 131 out of 144 countries¹².

Gender based violence and access to justice

In the past year, the widely covered incidents of violence against women in the media, including the rape and murder of the resident doctor at her workplace at RG Kar medical College and Hospital in Kolkata, the series of honour killings in Delhi NCR, Jharkhand and Haryana, dowry deaths and gang rapes in public spaces across states are not isolated incidents – these maintain the trends in nature and rates of crimes against women in India for past several decades. The latest Crime in India report records 4,41,534 registered cases of crimes against women¹³. While cruelty by husband and relatives at 27 per cent are the highest reported, civil society organisations supporting women survivors of violence emphasise the need for national level disaggregated data on multiple forms of violence within and outside homes – to collect evidence and undertake targeted measure to prevent and respond to the alarming number of intersecting forms of gender based violence that often goes unnoticed.

Recent reports highlight the frequent experiences and severe underreporting of natal family violence¹⁴; rise in incidents of violence, low conviction rates and huge number of pending cases in gender based violence against Dalit and Adivasi women¹⁵; violence at workplace and in public spaces against urban and rural women in the informal sector¹⁶ – key factors impeding access to justice include severe implementation gaps in redress systems, along with social stigma, fear of retaliation, loss of livelihood, lack of information on available services and lack of trust in legal systems among survivors – especially women workers from informal sectors¹⁷.

The stark rise in cybercrime targeted at women also raise concerns on safety of women across digital and physical spaces. National Cyber Crime Reporting Portal records 76,657 cybercrime reports by women, majority of which are complaints on sexually obscene material¹⁸. In its report on 'Cyber Crimes and Cyber Safety of Women' in 2026, the Standing Committee on the Empowerment of Women highlights the rise in cybercrimes targeting women and children and recommends expansion in investigation capacity, accountability of digital platforms, increasing women

workforce in cyber security, increased outreach and a survivor-centric reporting mechanism targeted for cybercrimes¹⁹.

The glaring evidence on the continuum of gender based violence highlights how violence is experienced distinctly by women from different social locations (single women, women with disabilities, Dalit, Adivasi and Muslim women, trans and gender queer persons, women in the informal and agriculture sector in urban and rural areas), and across different spaces they navigate (homes, workplaces, public spaces) and how systemic exclusion – determined by discriminatory patriarchal, capitalist, caste based, ableist social and cultural norms – creates additional barriers for accessing justice²⁰.

Without transparent, simplified and systematic implementation plan, targeted allocation and earmarking of financial resources, role clarity and accountability of service providers and robust monitoring systems, emergency measures like Women's Helpline, scaling up and provisions for extended shelter in OSCs, rehabilitation and employment linkages through Samarthyaa sub-scheme, SHe Box portal and PoSH Act provisions for sexual harassment at workplace will remain ineffective.

Access to decent work and social protection

India appears in the bottom five of the Economic Participation and Opportunity subindex in the Global Gender Gap Report 2025, with women accessing less than one-third of the economic resources available to men. Towards bridging this gap, the New Labour Codes commit a safe and inclusive workspace for women workers²¹. However, the lack of recognition and value historically associated with women's work, must be taken into account while understanding the enabling components of the labour codes.

The Code on Wages institutes equal pay for equal work – but the criteria for determining gender-based discrimination in wages remains intact, which has been inadequate in addressing the occupational segregation and structural discrimination women workers face²². The definition of 'establishment' (and the threshold of number

of workers in an establishment), across all four codes, misses the opportunity to explicitly include households as 'workplace' and therefore formally including women dominated paid domestic work within the regulations related to employer obligations, wrongful termination and other provisions²³. The labour codes practically exclude domestic work, sanitation and security from core work. It fails to address the lack of access to decent working conditions and gender and caste based occupational segregation in these sectors. Women workers would be able to fully benefit from the women-centric provisions in the codes – like night shifts, expansion of maternity benefits, flexible work provisions and work across all establishments – when in practice, workplaces recognize the structural inequalities women face, including unpaid care burden, and unsafe public spaces, that hinder women from entering workforce.

The PLFS 2025 records 44.4 per cent women citing child care and home-making as the main reason for not entering the workforce. While the announcement of skill training of care workers on elderly care and existing schemes like PALNA, Jal Jeevan Mission, Pradhan Mantri Ujjwala Yojana, Pradhan Mantri Matru Vandana Yojana attempts to recognise and reduce care burden of women, piecemeal investments in care would be inadequate to bridge the gap in comprehensive support and redistribution of women's unpaid care work. First of all, targeted and integrated investments in care is required, which includes formal recognition of paid domestic and care workers – extending social security provisions, scheduling minimum wage, and enhancing access to social protection and justice²⁴. Secondly, along with access to credit and cash transfers, provisions for women's entrepreneurship, skilling, recently announced exclusive retail spaces like SHE Marts – it is crucial to address the gender gap in higher education, health and nutrition, gap in financial and digital literacy that impedes entry, retention and growth of women in employment. And finally, safe and inclusive workspaces, affordable and safe transport for increased mobility and ensuring institutional accountability, effective implementation and wider awareness on schemes, laws and provisions is urgently required to ensure women's meaningful economic participation and enhanced access to justice.

Political participation and representation

Earlier this year, the Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam 2023 came into effect, providing 33 per cent reservation for women in the Lok Sabha and State Legislative Assemblies – implementation being subject to the 2027 census and delimitation exercise. While this could bridge gender disparities²⁵ in political representation and decision making, participation of women in elections were disproportionately affected by the SIR, especially in case of women in rural areas and married women. Historical drops in gender ratio of voters in West Bengal and Uttar Pradesh once again reminds of the structural barriers in achieving gender equality goals in the country. Even with women winning unreserved seats (comprising 49.7 per cent seats) in Panchayati Raj Institutions across states²⁶, the issues of proxy leadership of ‘*sarpanchpati*’ and tokenistic representation of women without participation in decision making remains a key challenge.

The Long Road to Gender Justice

In 2025-26, gender rights movements in India faced a severe setback with the enactment of the Transgender Amendment act, stripping away the right to self-identify one’s gender, directly violating the 2014 Supreme Court landmark judgment, which recognized bodily autonomy and the right of every individual to determine their gender.

Furthermore, the Uniform Civil Code, envisaged as an instrument for advancing gender justice in the Constitution, came into effect with a very different approach. It expanded State surveillance, curtails fundamental rights, institutionalizes control over individual choice and agency, patriarchal practices of succession and inheritance, and reinforces orthodox boundaries of religion, caste, and gender²⁷.

This year’s gender budget recorded 11.55 per cent increase in allocations, with four new ministries reporting. This increase is mainly attributed to new schemes under Part B and C, including VB GRAM G and Jal Jeevan Mission. While targeted allocations for health, education, nutrition, rural and urban development, marginalized groups including women and girls, Dalit, tribal and minority communities remain unchanged (excepting 31 per cent increase in allocations for people with disabilities). A staggering percentage of these funds remains allocated

toward general or non-targeted schemes rather than specific development goals for these communities²⁸.

The trends in sociopolitical and economic scenario in the country, with its promise of women led development, is characterized by tokenistic resource allocations, credit-linked access and reforms limited within a narrower, exclusionary and homogenous version of gender equality and women empowerment. While India has enacted progressive laws and gender sensitive schemes, bottlenecks in implementation and accessibility concerns are persistent. The structural inequalities, resource constraints and lack of effective implementation have practically paralysed active institutions, policies and legal frameworks intended for advancing gender equality in India.

References

1. NITI Aayog (2025) NITI Aayog. (2025). *India voluntary national review 2025*. Government of India.
2. World Economic Forum (2025) World Economic Forum. (2025). *Global gender gap report 2025*. <https://www.weforum.org/publications/global-gender-gap-report-2025/>
3. National Crime Records Bureau (2025) National Crime Records Bureau. (2025). *Crime in India 2025*. Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India.
4. National Campaign on Dalit Human Rights (2026) National Campaign on Dalit Human Rights. (2026). *Dalit and Adivasi budget analysis 2026*. NCDHR.
5. Shakti Shalini (2023)
6. Shakti Shalini. (2023). *The unspoken*. Shakti Shalini.
7. Kapoor (2025). *The natal family: A neglected site of domestic violence against women*. Swayam.
8. ActionAid India. (2022). *Gender-based violence on women informal workers in India: Identifying challenges and mitigation strategies*. ActionAid India.
9. Forum for Policy Dialogue on Water Conflicts in India, & Mahila Kisan Adhikaar Manch. (2022). *Everyday violence against women in agriculture*. FPC & MAKAAAM.
10. Jagori. (2025). *Navigating care work, safety and informality*. Jagori.
11. Martha Farrell Foundation. (2025). *Work without security*. Martha Farrell Foundation.
12. Chigateri, S. (2021). *Labour law reforms and women's work in India: Assessing the new labour codes from a gender lens* (pp. 31–32). Institute of Social Studies Trust (ISST).
13. Dhar, S., & Kapoor, A. (2025). *Building feminist just futures: Strategies to end gender-based violence*. *Gender & Development*, 33(3), 705–726. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13552074.2025.2394851> (Include DOI if available)
14. The Telegraph India. (2025, December 18). *Cybercrime against women jumps to 76,657 in 2025; obscene content tops complaints, says government*. <https://www.telegraphindia.com/india/cybercrime-against-women-jumps-to-76657-in-2025-obscene-content-tops-complaints-says-government/cid/2152003>
15. PRS Legislative Research. (n.d.). *Report summary: Cyber crimes and cyber security of women*. <https://prsindia.org/policy/report-summaries/cyber-crimes-and-cyber-security-of-women>

16. Press Information Bureau. (n.d.). Factsheet details (ID: 150499). Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India.
<https://www.pib.gov.in/FactsheetDetails.aspx?Id=150499®=3&lang=1>
17. Economic and Political Weekly. (n.d.). The specificity of domestic work requires sui generis legislation. <https://www.epw.in/engage/article/specificity-domestic-work-requires-sui-generis>
18. BehanBox. (2026, March 17). Why India's budget fails to recognise care work.
<https://behanbox.com/2026/03/17/why-indias-budget-fails-to-recognise-care-work/>
19. The Hindu. (2015, April 10). Govt. claims women winning unreserved panchayat seats in significant numbers.
<https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/govt-claims-women-winning-unreserved-panchayat-seats-in-significant-numbers/article70893003.ece>
20. The India Forum. (n.d.). India's uniform civil code: Promises equality, delivers surveillance.
<https://www.theindiaforum.in/essay/indias-uniform-civil-code-promises-equality-delivers-surveillance>
21. BehanBox. (2026, February 10). Budget 2026: Women and marginalised groups have been shortchanged again.
<https://behanbox.com/2026/02/10/budget-2026-women-and-marginalised-groups-have-been-shortchanged-again/>

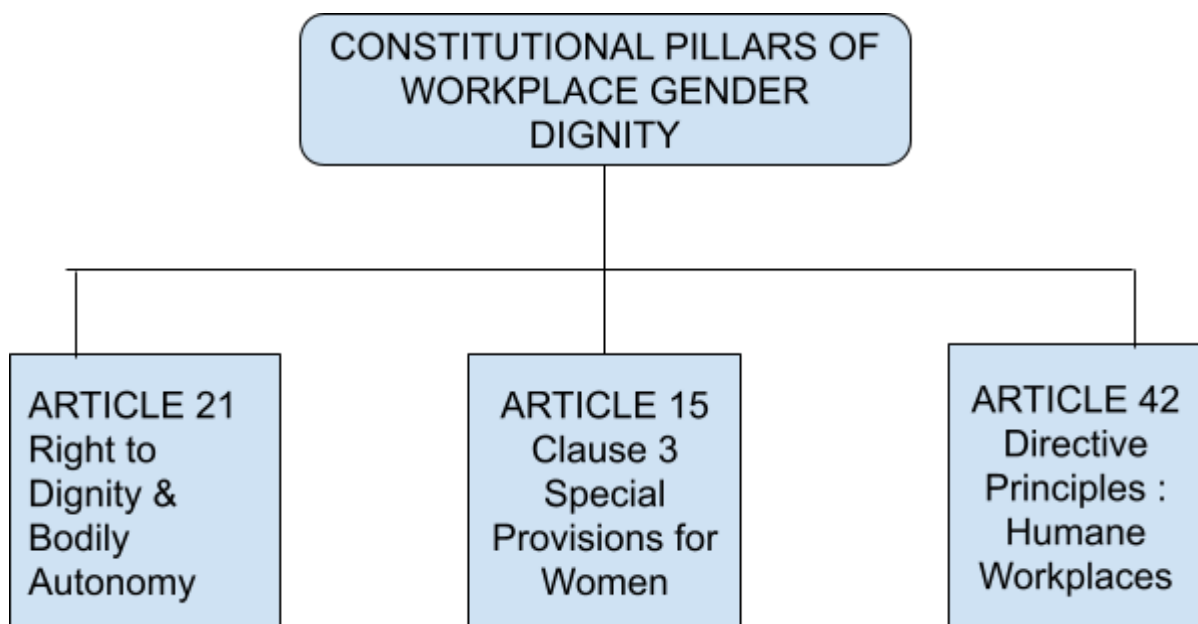
Menstrual Health

Menstrual Hygiene Facilities and Women's Health at the Workplace: A Review

Intro: The World Health Organisation calls for menstrual Health to be recognized, framed and addressed as a health and human rights issue, not a hygiene issue.

The systematic exclusion of menstrual health from India's formal labor and infrastructural policies has historically acted as a quiet barrier to women's economic independence. For decades following independence, industrial and commercial growth frameworks operated under a "gender-neutral" architectural and scheduling template. This approach treated the distinct biological requirements of the female workforce as private, optional, or secondary concerns. Consequently, standard working spaces ranging from agrarian fields to early corporate high-rises were built without the dedicated sanitation infrastructure needed to support a changing demographic. This structural gap forced women to face a choice between managing their health in poor conditions or compromising their professional consistency.

From a constitutional perspective, this structural neglect stands in direct tension with the foundational guarantees of the Indian Republic. The legal argument for embedding menstrual hygiene and biological dignity into the workplace rests on three constitutional pillars: Articles 21, 15(3), and 42.



Article 21 (The Right to Life and Personal Liberty): Modern jurisprudence has expanded Article 21 far beyond survival. It establishes that the right to live includes the right to live with human dignity, bodily privacy, and personal autonomy. Forcing a worker to operate in an environment without clean water or private spaces directly compromises this constitutional guarantee.

Article 15, Clause 3: This clause empowers the State to make special provisions for women and children. It acknowledges that achieving true equality requires addressing distinct biological and historical realities, rather than applying identical rules to unequal situations.

Article 42 (Directive Principles of State Policy): This article explicitly instructs the State to ensure just and humane conditions of work, alongside providing maternity relief.

Despite these clear principles, early policy efforts remained scattered and limited to specific regions. In 1992, the Government of Bihar took a unique step by introducing two days of paid special menstrual leave per month for female government employees to address these systemic challenges. However, for the next thirty years, this remained an isolated model. At the national level, policy focus remained primarily on maternal health, leaving broader daily biological health and workplace access largely unaddressed.

Over the 2025–2026 fiscal year, the Union Government shifted its focus toward the structural and economic barriers affecting menstrual health, introducing targeted changes to infrastructure and supply chains.

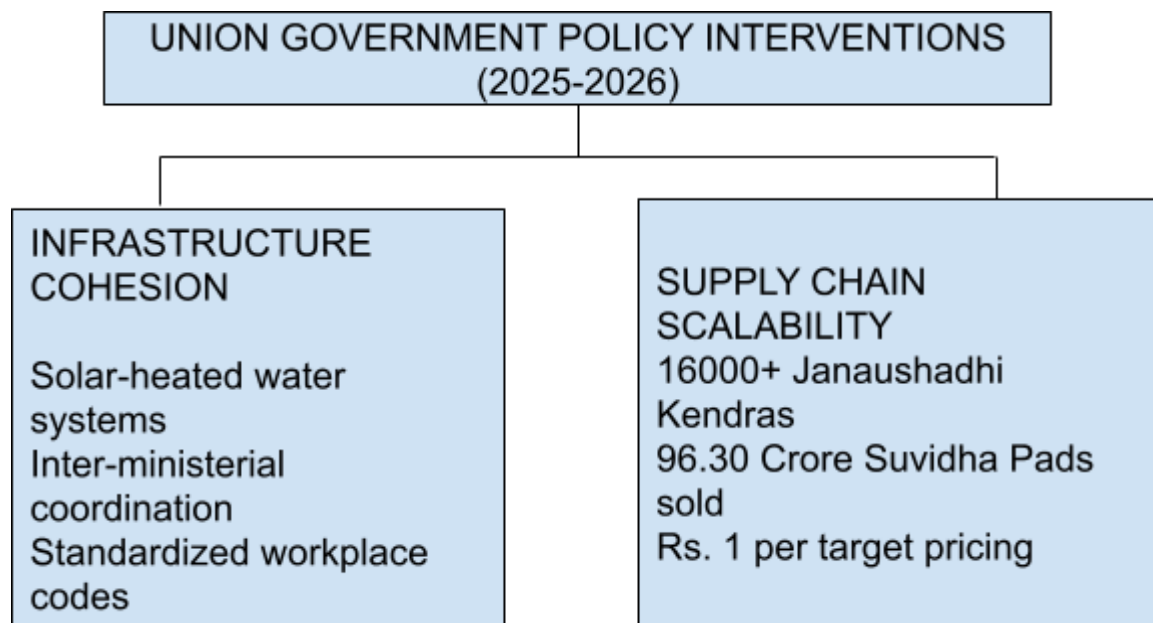
Infrastructure Cohesion and Clean Energy

The Ministry of Health and Family Welfare revised the execution strategy for the National Menstrual Hygiene Policy. Recognising that standalone sanitation initiatives often fall short due to local maintenance issues, the updated guidelines emphasize inter-ministerial coordination. The Ministry partnered with the Ministry of Power to deploy decentralized solar-powered water heating units across public sector workspaces, rural health sub-centers, and central administrative buildings. This initiative aims to provide a reliable warm water supply, resolving a major technical barrier to maintaining proper workplace hygiene.

Scaling Subsidized Distribution Networks

To address affordability, the **Ministry of Chemicals and Fertilizers** expanded the **Pradhan Mantri Bharatiya Janaushadhi Pariyojana (PMBJP)**. By November 2025, the government established more than 16,000 functional **Janaushadhi Kendras** nationwide.

Through this expanded retail footprint, the government scaled the distribution of its **"Suvidha"** oxo-biodegradable sanitary napkins. Sold at a heavily subsidized price of **₹1 per pad**, these napkins met strict ASTM D-6954 environmental standards. This large-scale push succeeded in distributing over 96.30 crore pads by the close of the calendar year, creating a reliable baseline of affordable supplies for lower-income and contractual workers who previously relied on unhygienic alternatives.



Standardizing Workplace Regulatory Codes

In February 2026, the Ministry of Labour and Employment issued revised compliance manuals under the framework of the new Labour Codes. The updated rules require commercial establishments with more than 30 female employees to digitize their workplace safety logs. These logs must confirm the presence of operational incinerators and private changing rooms. This step moves the policy away from generic welfare advice and toward measurable, auditable standards for employers.

Supporting the Transition from Education to Work

To address the challenges young women face when entering the higher education space, the University Grants Commission (UGC) issued a binding public advisory to all higher education institutions. The directive linked institutional funding to the provision of free sanitary pad vending machines and clean restroom spaces. The goal is to reduce absenteeism among female students, and, ensure that infrastructure gaps do not disrupt their path to professional employment.

The past year saw significant developments driven by judicial rulings and regional policies, highlighting the tension between national legal standards and localised workplace rules.

The Supreme Court's Dual Approach to Menstrual Health

In early 2026, the Supreme Court of India delivered two major decisions that defined the legal boundaries of menstrual policy:

1. Establishing the Constitutional Baseline (January 30, 2026): In *Dr. Jaya Thakur v. Government of India & Ors.*, the Court formally recognized access to clean menstrual hygiene facilities as an essential part of the Right to Life under Article 21. The bench ruled that a lack of functional, private toilets in public institutions amounts to

institutional discrimination. It forces a biological disadvantage on women that compromises their access to education and work. The landmark judgment mandated that central and state governments enforce gender-segregated sanitation standards with clear penalties for non-compliance.

2. The Decision on Mandatory National Leave (March 13, 2026): Conversely, the Supreme Court took a cautious approach regarding a petition seeking a nationwide mandate for paid menstrual leave. A bench led by the Chief Justice of India declined to create a uniform legal requirement. The Court expressed concern that a rigid, legally mandated leave policy could inadvertently cause employers to hesitate when hiring women, potentially restricting their career advancement in competitive fields. The judiciary ruled that leave structures involve complex economic variables best addressed by state legislatures, trade unions, and individual corporate bodies.

State-Level Innovations and Legal Backing

With no central law in place, individual states introduced their own legislative models:

REGIONAL POLICY IMPLEMENTATION MODELS
BIHAR: 2 Days Paid Leave/Month (Est.1992, State Govt Sphere)
KERALA: 2% Attendance Relaxation Across Higher Education (2023)
KARNATAKA: 1 Day Paid Leave/Month (Private & Public Spheres, 2025-26)
TRIPURA: Human Rights Commission Suo Motu Accountability Mandate

Karnataka's Legislative Framework (April 15, 2026): Karnataka became the first state to mandate a menstrual health policy covering both the public and private sectors. The policy requires one day of paid menstrual leave per month for female workers aged 18 to 52 across factories, plantations, and commercial offices. In *Chandravva Hanamant Gokavi v. State of Karnataka*, the Karnataka High Court upheld the rule against legal challenges. The Court stated that recognizing biological differences is essential to achieving real, substantive workplace equality. The judgment explicitly directed the state to protect unorganized, contract, and daily-wage laborers, ensuring the rule applies beyond white-collar environments.

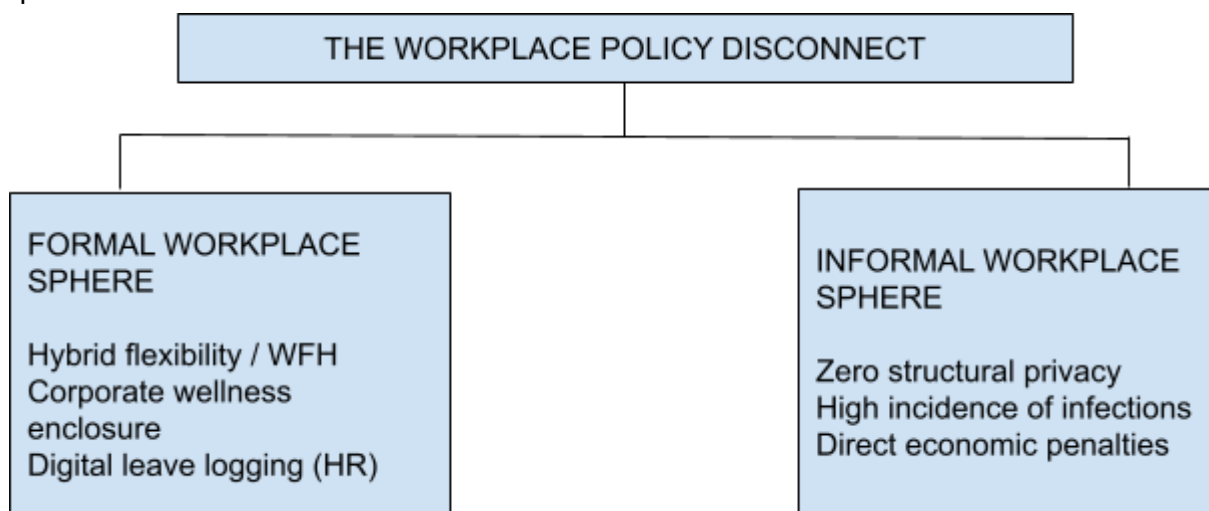
Tripura's Human Rights Initiative (May 11, 2026): The Tripura Human Rights Commission (THRC) took *suo motu* notice of the Supreme Court's decisions. The Commission issued an official demand to the state government for a comprehensive plan within 30 days to set up

proper resting facilities and flexible hours for menstruating workers in the state's public sector.

Despite progressive policy language over the 2025–2026 period, structural implementation gaps remain pervasive across multiple fronts:

The Disconnect in the Informal Sector

The primary gap in India's current policy framework is the sharp divide between white-collar corporate offices and the informal labor market. While formal tech parks and corporate headquarters increasingly offer wellness rooms and flexible leave, 90 per cent of India's female labour force works in the informal sector—including agricultural fields, brick kilns, construction sites, and small garment workshops. In these environments, basic sanitation is frequently absent, leaving workers with little access to clean water or private changing spaces.



A major consequence of poor facilities is workplace "presenteeism," where employees report to work while managing severe pain or inadequate hygiene setups. Without resting rooms or flexible scheduling, workers often push through physical distress. This situation impacts near-term productivity and can lead to long-term reproductive health complications due to delayed care or lack of clean facilities.

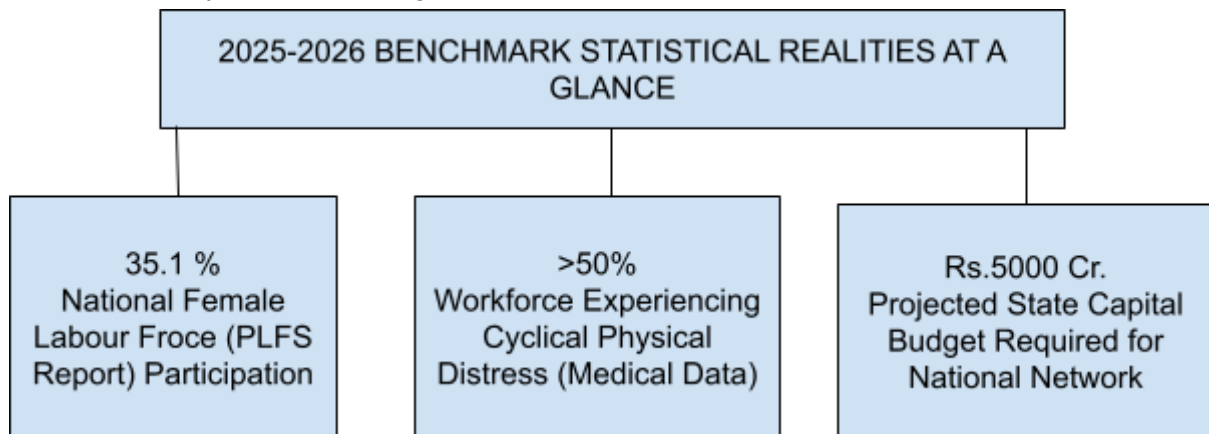
While the distribution of low-cost sanitary pads has scaled up significantly, waste disposal infrastructure remains incomplete. Many commercial centers and public offices lack functional, low-emission incinerators. As a result, used sanitary products are often mixed with general municipal waste, forcing sanitation workers to handle hazardous materials without adequate protective equipment.

Lack of Inclusive Language

Current workplace health policies remain tied to strictly binary language. By framing these rules exclusively around cisgender women, current guidelines fail to account for transgender men and non-binary individuals who menstruate. This group faces unique challenges, as gender-segregated facilities rarely offer safe, neutral access points, exposing them to potential stigma or exclusion.

National Labor Trends: Data from the January 2026 Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) places India's female Labour Force Participation Rate (LFPR) at 35.1 per cent. Economists note that reducing workplace health friction and improving basic infrastructure are critical steps toward closing the rural-urban employment gap.

The Impact of Pain and Distress: Clinical data compiled in national health reports indicate that over 50 per cent of menstruating workers experience regular physical discomfort. Between 15 per cent and 25 per cent deal with moderate-to-severe dysmenorrhea or underlying conditions like endometriosis, which directly affect workplace attendance and career continuity when unmanaged.

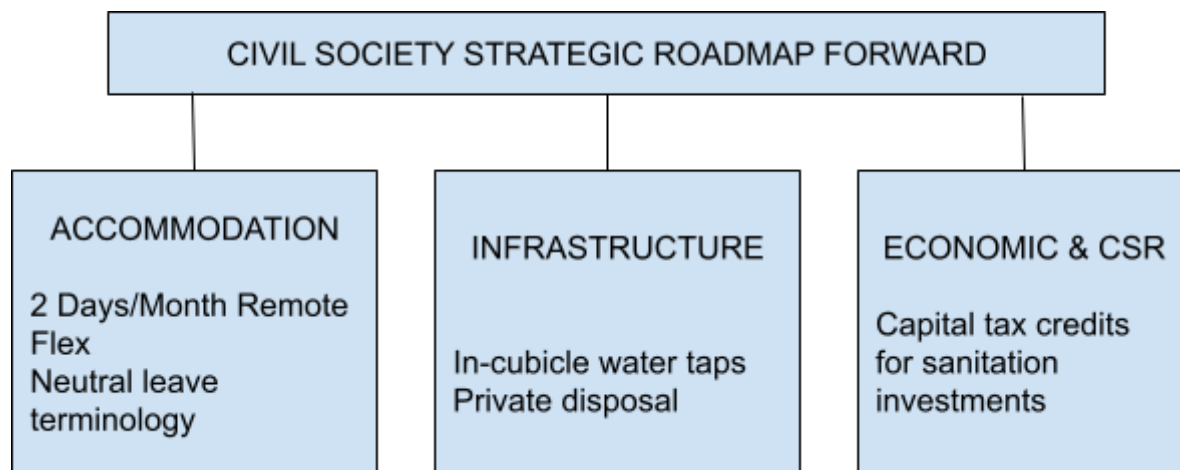


Financial and Resource Scale: Public health assessments estimate that building a comprehensive, nationwide network of public sanitation and supply facilities requires a baseline capital allocation of approximately ₹5,000 crore. This funding would bridge gaps across schools, local government offices, and transit hubs by combining state budgets with corporate social responsibility funds.

Welfare Supply Milestones: The Ministry of Chemicals and Fertilizers confirmed that cumulative sales of eco-friendly, ASTM-compliant "Suvidha" napkins reached 96.30 crore pads by late 2025, demonstrating the high baseline demand for affordable hygiene alternatives.

To establish fair, supportive conditions without creating hiring biases, civil society organizations suggest shifting focus toward flexible workplace accommodations and structural improvements.

Roadmap Forward:



Shifting to a Universal Accommodation Model

Rather than pursuing rigid, mandatory leave laws that could lead to unintended discrimination in hiring, policies should focus on structural flexibility. Civil society recommends a framework that grants workers the option of up to two days of remote work (Work-From-Home) per month or flexible shift configurations. This approach supports employees' health needs without penalizing their physical attendance or career advancement.

Improving In-Cubicle Sanitation Standards

Industrial and municipal building codes should be updated to mandate better privacy and utility standards within restrooms. Facilities should feature private stalls equipped with internal water taps, secure latches, small mirrors, and discreet disposal bins. Improving the immediate physical setup helps eliminate common sources of infection and reduces workplace stress.

Integrating CSR Incentives for Public Infrastructure

The Ministry of Corporate Affairs could update its rules to allow companies to count investments in public or community sanitation infrastructure directly toward their mandatory Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) targets. This change would incentivize private firms to fund high-quality sanitation facilities in nearby informal markets, transit hubs, and industrial zones.

Upgrading Disposal Infrastructure

To manage waste sustainably, the Swachh Bharat Mission should integrate specialized disposal systems into local waste management networks. This includes providing localized, low-emission incinerators and training municipal sanitation workers to handle and process biodegradable hygiene products safely, reducing environmental and occupational hazards.

Adopting Gender-Inclusive Policies

Finally, policy language should move away from strictly binary terms to ensure protection for all individuals who menstruate, including transgender and non-binary workers. Updating corporate and administrative guidelines helps ensure equal access to safe facilities and leaves without exposure to workplace stigma.

Endnotes/ Endnotes

1. National Health Mission (NHM). (2026). *Menstrual Hygiene Policy for School-Going Girls and Transitioning Workforces*. Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, Government of India.
2. Supreme Court of India. (2026). *Dr. Jaya Thakur v. Government of India & Ors*. Writ Petition (Civil) No. 1000 of 2022 (Judgment delivered January 30, 2026).
3. Press Information Bureau (PIB). (2025). *Update on the Expansion of Pradhan Mantri Bharatiya Janaushadhi Pariyojana and Suvidha Supply Chains*. Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, Government of India.
4. Ministry of Labour and Employment. (2026). *Compliance Handbook for Employers Under the Four Labour Codes (Central Government Sphere)*. Government of India.
5. Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation (MOSPI). (2026). *Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) – Annual Report Jan 2026*. Government of India.
6. Supreme Court of India Centre for Research and Planning (CRP). (2025). *White Paper on Structural Intersectional Realities and Menstrual Health*. Supreme Court of India.
7. Karnataka High Court. (2026). *Chandravva Hanamant Gokavi v. State of Karnataka and Ors*. Writ Petition No. 4482 of 2025 (Judgment delivered April 15, 2026).
8. Tripura Human Rights Commission (THRC). (2026). *Suo Motu Order on State Menstrual Welfare Framework*, Order No. 3 issued May 11, 2026.

Children

2025–2026: Shifting Child Rights in the Imagination of a Viksit Bharat

Intro: It is surprising that despite allocations for 159 programmes and schemes coming from 24 departments and ministries, the share of children in the Union Budget is below 2.5 per cent of the total budget.

India's constitutional vision places children at the centre of justice, equality, dignity, and human development. With children comprising approximately ²⁹40 per cent of the country's population, the Constitution obligates the State to ensure their health, development, education, and protection. Policies such as the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS), launched in 1975 and now restructured as Saksham Anganwadi, reflected this commitment by addressing malnutrition, health, and early childhood development, particularly for marginalized communities. Today, ICDS remains one of the largest programme of its type in the world, reaching nearly 9 crore beneficiaries through over 14 lakh anganwadi centres.

Children under three years are supported through supplementary nutrition, growth monitoring, immunization, and healthcare services under ICDS. In addition, the National Creche Scheme launched in 2006 once supported nearly 23,000 creches, later expanding under the Rajiv Gandhi Crèche Scheme. However, after its restructuring into the PALNA scheme in 2022, the number of functioning creches has drastically declined to around 2,000³⁰ nationwide. While the discourse on childcare and "future-ready children" has gained prominence, actual investments in universal and equitable childcare support have weakened.

A similar policy shift is visible across sectors affecting children. Increasing emphasis on literacy, numeracy, vocationalisation, and targeted schemes often fragments children's rights and prioritizes economic productivity over holistic well-being. In the pursuit of a "Viksit Bharat," equity, inclusion, and the constitutional promise of survival, protection, development, and education for every child risk being overshadowed by narrow agendas.

Budget Analysis – Declining investment for nearly 2/3rd of country's population

The budget for children (BfC) 2025-2026 shows an incremental increase from the previous year as shown in the table below. In 2025-26, the Ministry has been allocated Rs 26,890 crore, an increase of 16 per cent over the revised estimates of 2024-25 (see Table 1). Between 2015-16 to 2025-26, the Ministry of Women and Child Development's expenditure has grown at an annual average rate of 4 per cent. The Ministry's expenditure as a proportion of the total expenditure by the central government declined from 0.96 per cent in 2015-16 to 0.5 per cent in 2025-26.

Statement 12 in the 2022-23 Union Budget features a total of 159 programmes/schemes, which is a significant 31 per cent increase in the number of programmes which received attention in the previous budget. It is surprising that despite allocations for 159 programmes

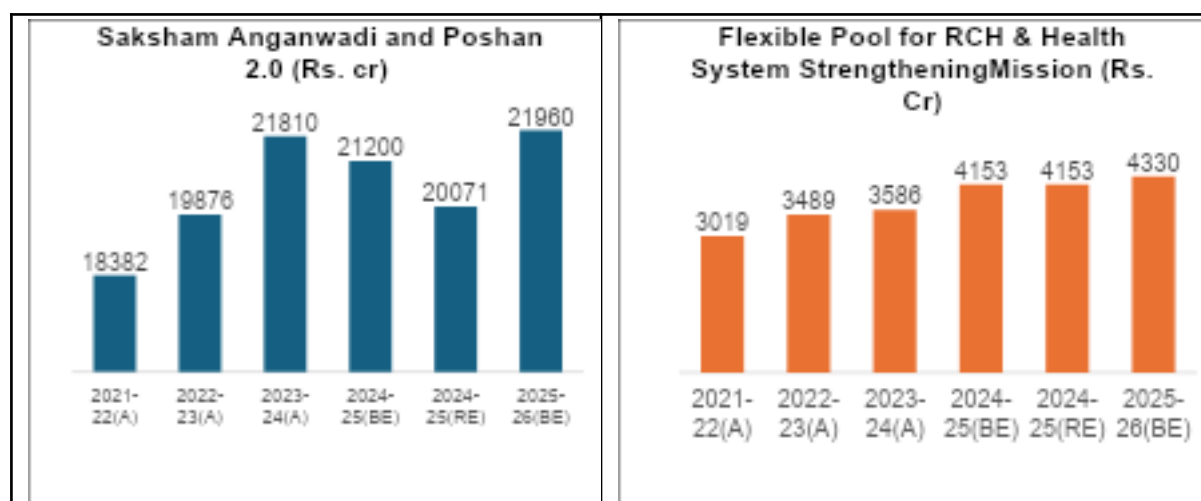
and schemes coming from 24 departments and ministries, the share of children in the Union Budget is below 2.5 per cent of the total budget. The following table shows the allocation on flagship schemes and programmes by the Ministry of Women and Child Development (MWCD).

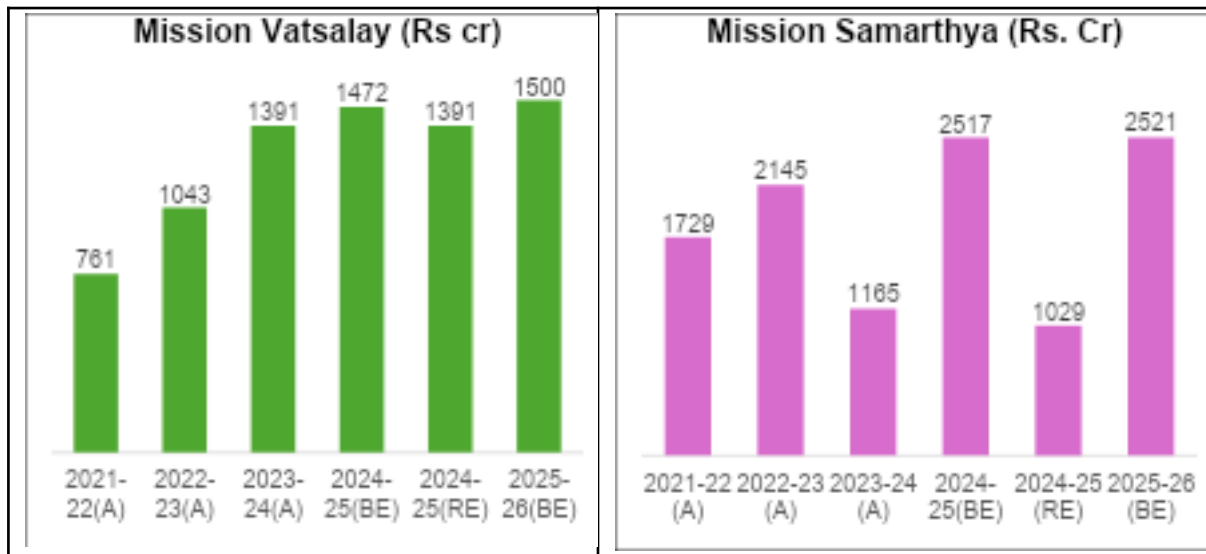
Table 1: Allocation on Flagship Schemes

Scheme / Programme	2023–24 Aand Children)	2024–25 RE (₹ crore)	2025–26 BE (₹ crore)	% Change (2024–25 RE to 2025–26 BE)
Saksham Anganwadi and Poshan 2.0	21,810	20,071	21,960	9%
Mission Shakti	1,522	1,451	3,150	117%
└ Samarthya	1,165	1,029	2,521	145%
└ Sambal	357	422	629	49%
Mission Vatsalya	1,391	1,391	1,500	8%
Schemes funded from Nirbhaya Fund	500	30	30	0%
Others*	271	240	250	4%
Total	24,696	23,183	26,890	16%

Source: PRS factsheet 2025-2026

For the young child, Rs. 33,154 crore has been allocated for Early Childhood Development (ECD) in the union budget which is only 1 per cent higher than 2024-25(BE). Converting this nominal spending in per child term implies an allocation of Rs. 2031 per annum. However, total ECD budget in terms of Union government's total budget and country's GDP shows a declining share from the previous year's budget estimates. The schematic budget allocation is as follows:

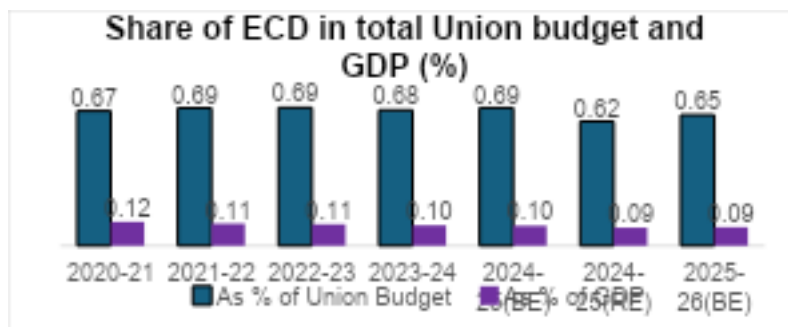




Source: Analysis by Author

The share of overall budget allocation as percentage of GDP and union budget are as follows:³¹

132111



In Jharkhand the Finance Ministry allocated funds(39 crore) for 1000 anganwadi cum creches under the Palna scheme in 2025.

Source: Analysis by Author²

Education outcomes and investments under the Ministry of Education (MoE) similarly indicate persistent challenges in ensuring equitable access and quality for all children. Budget for school education of children show a marginal increase from Rs 37,500 crore to Rs 41,249 except PM Shri schools which increased by ₹1,450 crore, taking its total allocation to ₹7,500 crore (a 66 per cent surge compared to the previous year's Revised Estimates). Total allocation of SMSA -the flagship scheme for school education increased from the previous year substantially. However, the focus deviated from universalisation of education and complete implementation of the RTE Act, to AI enabled infrastructure, digital infrastructure and hands-on STEM and vocational training.

Policy Barriers & Exclusion Mechanisms – Aadhaar, FRS, documentation

¹ Letter no.452.pdf

² Same as 3

Certain policy initiatives like the Facial Recognition System (FRS), compulsory aadhar card for admission in schools and Anganwadi centres have adversely impacted children from migrant families and working in the informal sector. Such policy is bringing the total beneficiaries of Saksham Anganwadi down over the years. Last year there was a 9 per cent decrease in the number of beneficiaries. See table below:

Table 2: Beneficiaries under Poshan Tracker

Year	Registered/Reported Beneficiaries (crore)	Change from Previous Year (crore)	% Change
2023–24	10.02	-0.19	-1.9%
2024–25	9.89	-0.13	-1.3%
2025–26	8.98	-0.91	-9.2%

Source: Poshan Tracker

- **Marginalising the already marginalized**

In a recently concluded study by National FORCES titled “ *Mapping vulnerabilities to ensure universal access and equity in Childcare: A case study of Bihar, Jharkhand and Rajasthan* ” found that children of migrant workers, or those facing difficulty in acquiring Aadhar cards due to poverty conditions, are deprived of their right to education, childcare facilities and other benefits. In one case study from Chandauti, Gaya, Rina’s (name changed) husband had migrated for work, leaving her solely responsible for childcare. She stayed with her maternal family for support, but her child could not be enrolled in the nearby Anganwadi because her address proof belonged to another locality. As she explained:

“I am the daughter (beti) of this locality, not the daughter-in-law (bahu) and so not eligible for accessing my own or my children’s rights”

Similarly, introduction of compulsory Aadhaar linking, KYC requirements, and facial recognition technology for the distribution of services like THR, (Take Home ration) require beneficiaries to have their photo matched against stored records each time they collect rations. This has its limitations.

Shabana’s case highlights how documentation and residency norms can exclude children from essential services. Her young daughter lives with her maternal grandmother, but her Aadhaar is linked to her paternal household address. Due to this mismatch, the child is not officially registered at the local Anganwadi centre and therefore cannot access services such as supplementary nutrition, early learning, and health support. This situation reflects broader systemic gaps, where rigid administrative requirements fail to account for complex family arrangements.

Sector/Community Specific Major News and Updates SMSA the Ground during 2025-26

- **Lack of Access and Equity**

Children today are deprived of the basic infrastructure in Anganwadi centres, creches and schools. Basic infrastructure in schools improved significantly after the coming of the RTE Act 2009. However, the pace at which rationalization (merging, consolidating or closing) of

schools is taking place, most children are deprived of their right to education. From almost 99 per cent enrollment which was achieved after 2009, the report (School Education System in India: Temporal Analysis and Policy Roadmap for Quality Enhancement) released recently found that while 26.95 crore children were enrolled in schools in 2014-15, their numbers declined to 24.69 in 2024-25.³

NEP 2020, brings early years of education in the ambit of school education which has been an excellent policy win for all children. However, the challenges of implementation have pushed children out of any institutional support or basic infrastructure. Many anganwadis which have shifted to schools as per the central government directive⁴ are facing problems due to lack of infrastructure like child friendly toilets, lack of teaching learning materials, professional development gaps of teachers and Anganwadi workers, to name a few. It is reported that 2.5 Lakh Anganwadi have been relocated or mapped with schools which have standard 1.

- **Invisibilising the needs of Under 3 children and lactating mothers**

The Anganwadi centres are more than pre-schools and so the responsibilities of the Anganwadi worker and helper are different from a nursery or Grade 1 teacher. A co-located Anganwadi centre is also accountable for the under 3 children and pregnant and lactating mothers which is critical for the holistic development of these cohort of children.

Pregnant & lactating mothers	Children 0-3 years	Children 3-6 years
1.15 crore	8.9 crore	7.5 crore

Source: Census 2011

The guidelines issued by the central government for co-location of Anganwadi centres in schools with grade 1 infrastructure have considered these critical components in ad-hoc manner.

- **Preparedness for ECE at the Anganwadi Level**

Additionally, Anganwadi's are still struggling with the Early Childhood Education (ECE) component. In a recent study conducted by UP FORCES on "Status on implementation of NEP in UP: A snapshot study reveals that responses from ABSA and BSA indicate multiple access-related barriers to early childhood education at the district level. **The limited number of Anganwadi Centres (33 per cent)** emerges as the most significant constraint, restricting coverage and outreach. **Migrant children (17 per cent)** further disrupt continuity in early learning, particularly among vulnerable populations. **Long distances to centres (17 per cent)** pose additional challenges for regular attendance, especially in remote areas. Concerns related to Children With Special Needs (**CWSN**) (**17 per cent**) highlight gaps in inclusive access and support systems. The remaining point towards issues related to the

³

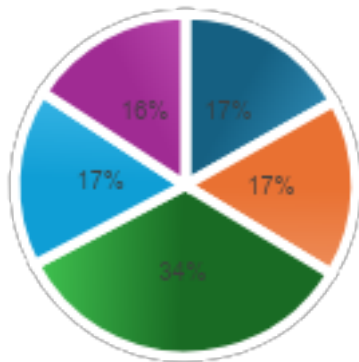
https://www.telegraphindia.com/india/niti-aayog-report-flags-closure-of-one-lakh-government-schools-in-10-years-prnt/cid/2161048#goog_rewarded

⁴

<https://www.deccanherald.com/education/centre-issues-guidelines-to-co-locate-anganwadis-with-primary-schools-3710548>

families of the children. Together, these factors point to structural and contextual barriers that hinder equitable access to Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE), underscoring the need for expanded infrastructure, targeted inclusion strategies, and localized planning to ensure universal access as envisioned under NEP 2020.

Factors impacting ECCE at the district level in Uttar Pradesh



Source: UP FORCES Study

Therefore, for seamless transition of children from Anganwadi centre to grade 1 this will require preparedness, convergence between ministries and training of Anganwadi workers and teachers.

Lack of trained school and ECE teachers/trainers

The quality of ECE delivery remains a challenge, with studies showing that, on average, [effective learning time on ECE is only 35 minutes per day](#). Only 9 per cent of pre-primary schools have dedicated ECE teachers. The ratio of Anganwadi child-to-teacher averages at 33:1, exceeding the recommended 20:1 maximum.

Recommendations from Civil Society

Right to Education from birth till Secondary Education

- Ensure right to education from birth to 17 years through a strong public education system integrating specific needs of the under 3 children and lactating mothers.
- Budget for children including ECD should be increased to ensure implementation of the policy commitments. A separate budget head for ECCE and community
- Stop the closure and merger of government schools in the name of rationalisation or consolidation⁵.
- Fill all teachers' vacancies. Ensure all teachers and ECCE personnel are professionally qualified and well trained, have scope for career progression, receive a

⁵ Mehta, AC (023). Impact of School Closures & Merges on Access to Education in India, 2023: An Analysis of uDISEPlus 2021-22 data. Accessed from [https://educationforallinindia.com/impact-of-school-closures-and-mergers-in-india/#:~:text=From%202017%2D18%20to%202021%2D22%2C%20there%20has%20been.percent\)%20during%20the%20same%20periodon](https://educationforallinindia.com/impact-of-school-closures-and-mergers-in-india/#:~:text=From%202017%2D18%20to%202021%2D22%2C%20there%20has%20been.percent)%20during%20the%20same%20periodon) 1 March 2023

dignified wage and working conditions, and are free from activities that are non-educational or unrelated to core ECCE & Teaching functions.

- Stop exclusion of marginalised children from their basic right to institutional support due to administrative barriers. Viz. Creche/Anganwadi /School

Right to Health and Nutrition

- Ensure universal access to Palna scheme and ensure THR(Take Home ration) accessible to all children under 3s
- Extend the mid-day meals to students of class 9-12 and should be given even on school holidays
- Revise the cost of SNP as recommended in the Budget speech 2025-2026
- Include nutritious breakfasts to the scheme for all children including those under the anganwadi scheme.

Improved Public Investment for Children

- Provide 6 per cent of the GDP (public spending) as stated in the National Education Policy, 2020 and 10 per cent of the Education budget for ECD
- Upgrade public services (toilets, schools, health and education) to a standard that eliminates private players in these areas as seen in the case of world-class government run institutions like the IIT, IIMs, IIITs etc of India.
- Invest at least 2.5 per cent of the GDP public spending on Health
- Invest 9 Lakh expenditure cost annually for running a creche and minimum wages for creche and anganwadi workers

Targeted intervention and schemes for marginalised children

- Make policies related to children more inclusive so that children with intersecting vulnerabilities can access all services without any barrier.
- Engagement is critical for implementation of targeted schemes for the young child particularly for children with special needs, Dalit and tribal children and girls.
- Map vulnerability indicators for making schemes and programmes accessible and equitable for all children in the country.

Endnotes

1. Mehta, A. C. (2023). *Impact of school closures & merges on access to education in India, 2023: An analysis of uDISEPlus 2021-22 data*. Education For All in India.
<https://educationforallinindia.com/impact-of-school-closures-and-mergers-in-india/>
2. Deccan Herald. (2025). *Centre issues guidelines to co-locate Anganwadis with primary schools*.
<https://www.deccanherald.com/education/centre-issues-guidelines-to-co-locate-anganwadis-with-primary-schools-3710548>
3. The Telegraph India. (2025). *NITI Aayog report flags closure of one lakh government schools in 10 years*.
<https://www.telegraphindia.com/india/niti-aayog-report-flags-closure-of-one-lakh-government-schools-in-10-years-prnt/cid/2161048>

4. Centre for Budget and Governance Accountability. (2025). *Factsheet on Union Budget 2025-26 and early childhood development (ECD)* [Unpublished manuscript].
5. Press Information Bureau. (2025). *Press release page (PRID: 2147385)*. Ministry of Education, Government of India. <https://www.pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=2147385®=3&lang=2>

Youth

Give Youth a Formal Role in Governance Structures

***Intro:** The youth should be given a meaningful role in deciding the course of their lives and that of their communities and the country. This requires involving them in governance mechanisms, by creating pathways from local governance institutions like gram panchayats and municipalities to the highest levels of decision-making.*

Our nation's treatment of the youth has demonstrated opposing tendencies of paternalism and radical optimism. An inter-play of these orthogonal instincts can be seen in the Constitutional Assembly Debates where several members lauded the bravery, courage and commitment of the young to the country's independence movement, but the only specific provision made for them is the one which makes the state responsible for protecting the youth from 'exploitation' and 'moral and material abandonment' under Article 31(f) of Part IV (Directive Principles of State Policy) of the Indian Constitution. This see-sawing between acknowledging the potential of the young as harbingers of change and the need to tame those very impulses to 'guide' them in the 'right' direction can be seen in the latest draft of the National Youth Policy released in 2025.

Draft National Youth Policy 2025

India's first National Youth Policy was released in 1988 and was revised previously in 2003 and 2014. A comparison of the NYP 2003 and NYP 2014 shows the influence of the international discourse. The definition of the youth was changed from 13-35 years (NYP2003) to 15-29 years (NYP2014) to align with the international norms. Further, for the first time, the NYP 2014 spoke of focussed policy attention on youth in the light of the country's *demographic dividend*.¹

Demographic dividend is often defined as the favourable ratio of working age population (15-64 years) to dependent age population (< 15 years and > 64 years), also referred to as the dependency ratio. India's dependency ratio had been on a rise since the 1970s, but at the turn of the millennium, it crossed previous highest post-independence levels and was to stay on an upward trajectory for several decades (see Figure 1). An increasingly higher proportion of this working age population (15-64 years), was to comprise the youth population (15-29 years), creating a *youth bulge*. But, as NYP2014 also recognized, converting this demographic dividend into a growth dividend required '*investments*' in development of the youths.

NYP2014 had recommended a review of the policy after a 5-year period. After the review process, a draft of NYP 2021 was placed in the public domain for comments in April 2022,² and subsequently a revised draft was published in July 2023.³ In 2025, a third draft was placed in public domain for suggestions.⁴ Despite going through multiple revisions in the last five years, the government has not been able to come up with a final policy.

While the discourse of *demographic dividend* and *youth bulge* brought increasing attention to the youth question, it ended up narrowly focussing on the economic aspect, to the relative exclusion of questions of the social lives and civic participation of the young. While NYP2003 had prescribed 'suitable participation in decision-making bodies' as one of the privileges of the youth, later policies spoke of 'participation in economy' and 'participation in the country's development journey'⁵, to the exclusion of any mention of their role in relevant decision-making forums.

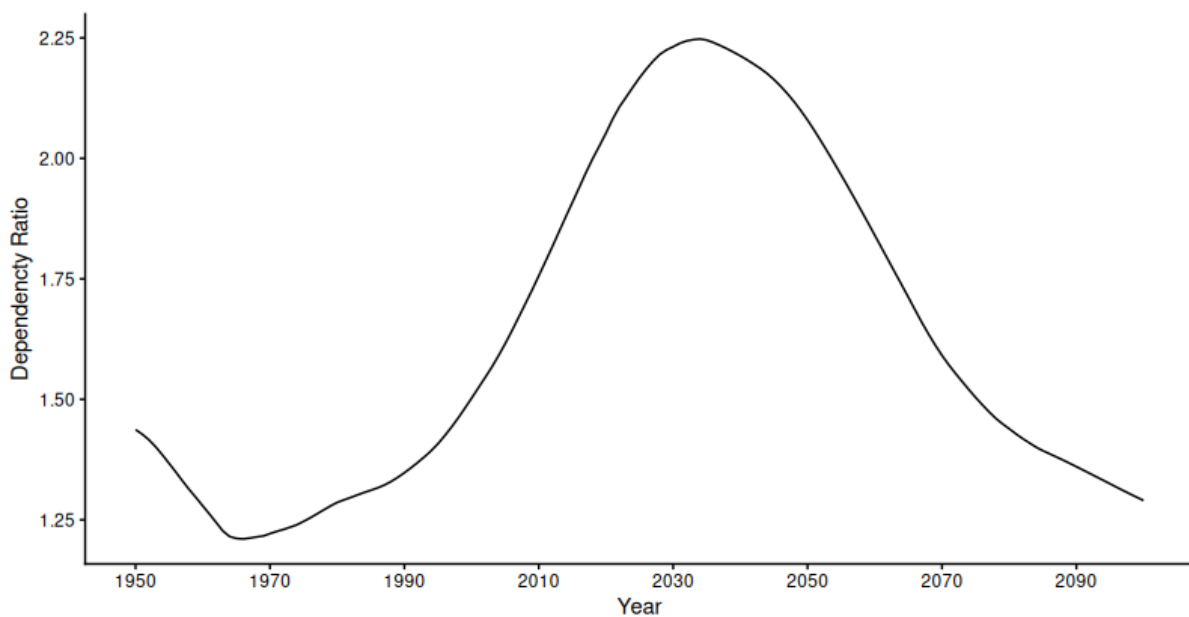


Figure: Dependency Ratio in India (Source: World Population Prospects, 2024, UN Population Division)

India's dependency ratio is going to peak in 2030, after which it would start declining (see Figure 1 above). India is still a young country, with an estimated median age of 30.27 years in 2026, and would remain so with the median age increasing to 32.38 years (2031) and 34.48 years (2036) in the next decade.⁶ But the youth population, estimated to be 367 million in 2026, will decline to 356 million (2031) and 345 million (2036), comprising 25.7%, 24.1% and 22.7% of the total population, respectively. Given the challenge of taking advantage of this rapidly *dissipating* demographic dividend, it is disappointing that the government has not been able to finalize the Youth Policy in the last five years, despite multiple rounds of iterations.

The Draft NYP2025 affirms the principles of non-discrimination and equity, as enshrined in Article 14 and 16 of the Constitution. Are the provisions of the policy and the measures taken by the government in the last year adequate to fulfil this promise? We attempt to answer this question by taking up three of the six focus areas identified by the policy - Education, Skilling and Employment; Entrepreneurship and Innovation; and Volunteerism and Youth Leadership.

Higher Education: Access and Equity

Enrolment at all levels of education has improved for all social groups in the last few decades, but the progress has been uneven.⁷ Access to higher education is of particular concern to the youth because higher education is linked with better learning potential. Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) for higher education in the Table below, shows that the trend of increasing access holds true across genders and caste categories.

Table: Gross Enrollment Ratio (GER) in Higher Education

Year	All			Scheduled Castes			Scheduled Tribes		
	Male	Female	Both	Male	Female	Both	Male	Female	Both
2021-22	28.3	28.5	28.4	25.8	26.0	25.9	21.4	20.9	21.2
2020-21	26.7	27.9	27.3	22.4	23.9	23.1	18.8	19.1	18.9
2019-20	24.8	26.4	25.6	21.5	23.2	22.3	17.0	17.0	17.0
2018-19	24.4	25.5	24.9	21.4	22.8	22.0	16.7	16.1	16.4
2017-18	24.5	24.6	24.6	21.0	21.0	21.0	16.0	14.5	15.3

Source: All India Survey of Higher Education Report, 2021-22.

While the enrolment ratio for female students is converging with those of male students, those for scheduled castes and scheduled tribes remain much lower than their counterparts from privileged castes. But there are no concrete measures under either the NYP2025 or National Education Policy (NEP) to address this gap. Further, the scholarship schemes for these groups are also inadequately funded.

In terms of access, it is important to note that while availability of colleges and courses in the higher education domain has seen an unprecedented uptick in the last 30 years since liberalization, a large part of this expansion has come in the private sector, with active policy encouragement. In 2021-22, of the total 42,825 colleges where 3.03 crore students were enrolled across various courses, over 78.5 per cent colleges were private (either aided or unaided) and accounted for 65.2 per cent of the total enrolments.⁸ The increase in average household incomes and increasing aspirations has meant that the enrolment rates among the poorest economic class has increased, both in absolute and relative terms.

In 2007, the Gross Enrolment Ratio for the richest and the poorest quintile was 40 per cent and 4 per cent respectively, which increased to 50 per cent and 14 per cent respectively by 2017, thus showing a narrowing of the gap.⁹ But the increasing privatization of the higher education sector has meant that the cost of high-demand courses like that of Engineering and Medical degrees equals or exceeds annual income of the poorest quintile of households, because of which the entry of youths from these households into higher education is largely into Humanities and Commerce streams. These differential gaps in terms of course selection can be seen across gender and caste lines as well, with female students and those from Scheduled castes and scheduled tribes, less likely to enrol for STEM courses than others.¹⁰

The Table below shows the share of various social groups in the total number of students enrolled and passed-out across all courses. The share of female students, while lower than those of male students, becomes better among students passing out, which implies that while female students have lower access to higher education, once they get in, they do better than their male counterparts.

Table: Share of various Social Groups in Total Students Enrolled and Passed-out

Share in	Male	Female	SC	ST	OBC	PWD	Muslims	Other Minorities
Enrolment	52.18	47.82	15.31	6.26	37.76	0.21	4.87	2.09
Passing out	49.17	50.83	13.04	5.70	34.90	0.11	3.49	1.78

Source: All India Survey of Higher Education Report, 2021-22.

The opposite holds true for other marginalized social groups whose share in students passing out is lower than their share at the admissions stage, even when their shares in enrolment remains much lower than their share in the total population.

While there are several factors which explain why drop out rates in higher education among students from marginalized social groups are higher than those from other categories, one that bears highlighting here is the active discrimination faced by them *after* they enter higher education institutions.¹¹ The manner in which University Grants Commission (Promotion of Equity in Higher Education Institutions) Regulations, 2026 were stayed by the Supreme Court, despite that fact that these regulations were framed in pursuance of directions issued by another bench of the apex court in a petition filed by the mothers of Rohith Vemula and Payal Tadvi,¹² demonstrates the long distance we have in front of us to realize the constitutional ideals of equality and fraternity in academic spaces.

Lastly, the academic environment should foster free thinking, allowing the youth to experience liberty in its true sense. But in the last decade, academic freedom and autonomy of educational institutions has come under increasing threat. According to the [Academic Freedom Index](#) developed by V-Dem Institute of the University of Gothenburg, Sweden, academic freedom in India started seeing a decline in the 2010s, and has taken a sharp nosedive since 2014, since the present dispensation came to power in 2014 (see Figure below), falling below levels reached during the Emergency (1975-77). The space to air views incongruent with the ideology of the ruling party has shrunk drastically, with cancellations of academic events, institutions of rules for pre-approval of academic events, physical attacks on academic programmes, changes in curriculum based on ideological preferences and appointment of individuals favouring the ruling dispensation's ideology to critical positions in academic institutions.¹³ The Draft NYP2015 places extensive emphasis on innovation, but understands it narrowly and research and development funding and patents. Although both of these are necessary as *outcomes*, innovation as a *process* cannot be delinked from fostering creative thinking, which requires a free and untrammelled academic environment.

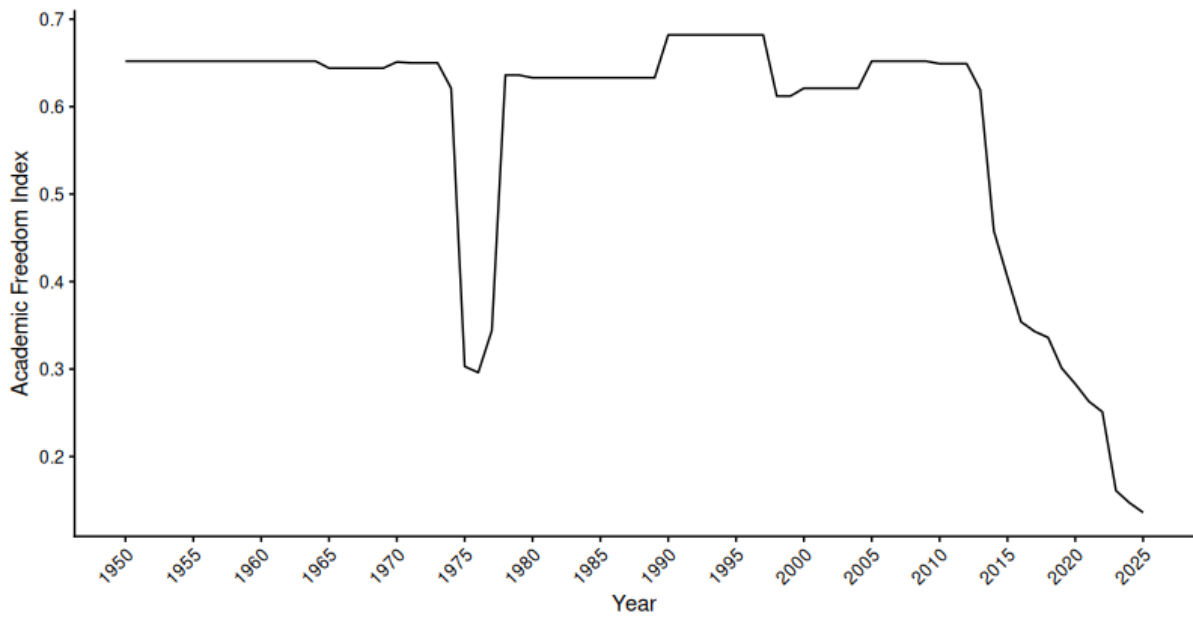


Figure: Trend in Academic Freedom Index for India since Independence

Skilling

The UPA-II government had launched the National Skill Development Policy in 2009 which was revised in 2015 with the launch of Skill India Mission and the setting-up of a separate ministry, Ministry of Skill Development and Entrepreneurship (MSDE). The MSDE operated nine skill development schemes in the fiscal year 2025-26, including the Pradhan Mantri Kaushalya Vikas Yojana (PMKVY), Skills Acquisition and Knowledge Awareness for Livelihood Promotion (SANKALP), the National Apprenticeship Promotion Scheme (NAPS), and ITI Upgradation Scheme.¹⁴ In the FY 2026-26, a record amount of Rs 9885.8 crores have been budgeted for the ministry, but the ministry has had a long history of underspending as shown in Figure below; the actual expenditures have been consistently lower than the Budgeted Expenditures.

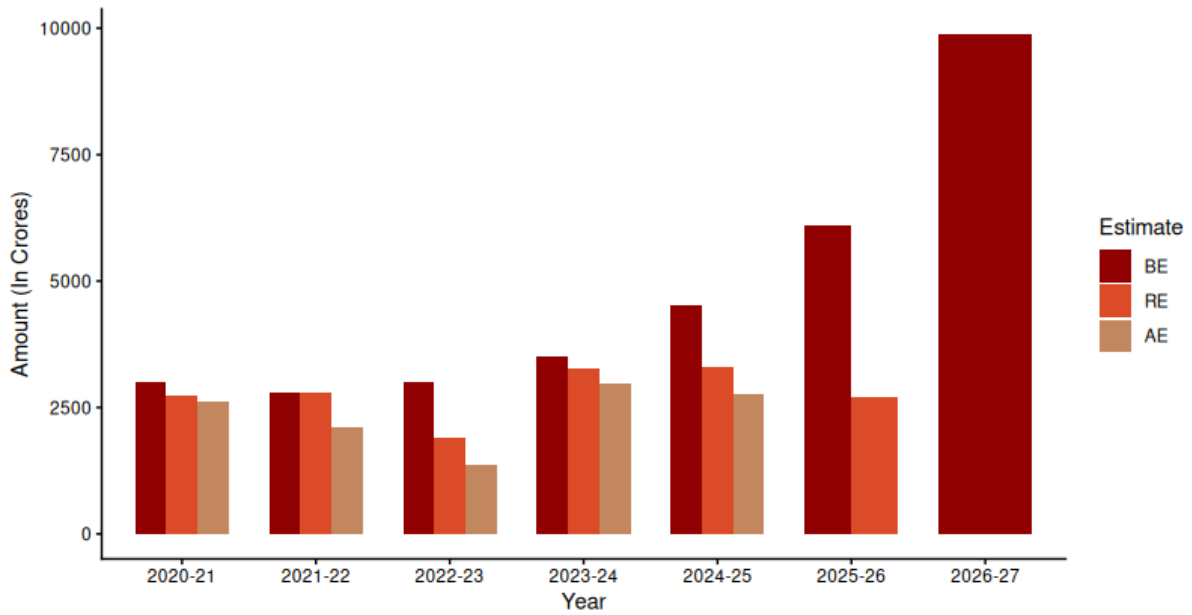


Figure: Budgeted Estimates (BE), Revised Estimates (RE) and Actual Expenditures (AE) of the Ministry of Skill Development and Entrepreneurship over years (*Source:* Budget documents)

In FY 2025-26, the Budgeted expenditure was Rs 6100.1 crores, which was revised down to Rs 2703.54 crores, i.e a scaling back of over 55 per cent. This revised estimate is lower than the actual expenditure of the previous fiscal year, 2024-25 at Rs. 2774.7 crores, and by 1st March 2026, only 49.94 per cent of this much lower revised estimate had been spent.¹⁵

One of the flagship schemes of the ministry is the Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Yojana (PMKVY), under which short term skill courses and recognition of prior learning through upskilling and reskilling is provided for interested candidates from the age group of 15 to 59 years. The latest iteration of this central sector scheme, PMKVY 4.0, is being implemented from FY 2022-23 to 2025-26, but the scheme received cabinet approval only in February 2025! This has affected the progress of the scheme, as shown in Table below. Over four years, just over 27 lakh candidates were provided training, i.e. 6.5 lakh candidates per year! Only 7.2 per cent of those trained were placed, which is better than the figure of 3.5 per cent for PMKVY 3.0, but still quite low. Of the total trained persons, over 55 per cent were women, while 15.35 per cent belonged to Scheduled Castes and 5.8 per cent belonged to Scheduled Tribes, slightly lower than their share in the total population of 16.6 per cent and 8.6 per cent respectively (2011).¹⁶

Table: Persons Provided Training under PMKVY 4.0 (as on 30.12.2025)

Training Type	Enrolled	Trained	Certified	Placed
Short Term Training and Special Projects	28,11,248	22,43,416	15,75,473	NA
Recognition of Prior	5,36,046	4,66,568	3,04,269	NA

Learning				
Total	33,47,294	27,09,984	18,79,742	1,95,000 (7.2%)

Source: Lok Sabha Secretariat (2026), 'Seventeenth Report of the Standing Committee on Labour, Textiles and Skill Development, Demand for Grants (2026-27)', Ministry of Skill Development and Entrepreneurship, Seventeenth Lok Sabha, March 2026, Lok Sabha Secretariat, New Delhi.

Employment

The unemployment rate among the youths (15-29 years) has been showing improvement over the last three years, it is almost thrice of the unemployment rate among all age groups above 15 years as shown in the Table below. But, the unemployment rate among youths is higher for women than for men, and in urban areas than in rural areas.

Table: Unemployment Rate (%) by Sector, Gender and Age Groups (2025)

Sector	All groups (>14 years)			15-29 years		
	male	female	person	male	female	person
rural	2.6	2.1	2.4	8.2	8.6	8.3
urban	4.2	6.4	4.8	11.8	18.9	13.6
rural+urban	3.1	3.1	3.1	9.3	11.3	9.9

Source: Statement 17 and 18, Periodic Labour Force Survey, Annual Report, January-December 2025, MoSPI, Gol.

Further, if we compare the unemployment rate among the youths of Scheduled Caste (SC) and Scheduled Tribes (ST) communities with that among those of other caste groups, the unemployment rate among SCs is much higher than those compared to other groups as shown in the Table below.

Table: Unemployment rate (%) among youths (15-29 years) for various Caste Categories

Sector	SC			ST			Others		
	male	female	person	male	female	person	male	female	person
rural	8.7	9.0	8.8	7.7	8.0	7.6	7.7	8.4	8.0
urban	12.2	19.4	14.0	11.1	18.0	13.0	11.4	18.4	13.2
rural+urban	9.7	11.8	10.4	8.6	10.7	9.1	8.9	11.0	9.4

Source: Based on Periodic Labour Force Survey 2025 Data.

The NYP2025 has very little to offer in terms of creation of jobs, especially for those from marginalized social groups.

Entrepreneurship

The Draft NYP2025 emphasizes entrepreneurship aiming to ‘nurture a generation of resilient job creators who can contribute meaningfully to India’s journey towards self-reliance and Viksit Bharat @ 2047’.¹⁷ Entrepreneurship has come to acquire a range of meanings, ranging from start-ups raising large-scale capital from venture capitalists to street vendors selling *pakodas* (fried fritters). According to Periodic Labour Force Survey 2025, 52 per cent of the workforce across the country was self-employed.¹⁸ One can discern the scale of these enterprises from the fact that the average monthly gross earnings from self-employment in the year 2025 was just Rs 14,861.¹⁹ Thus, most ‘entrepreneurs’ in India are engaged in low capital, low income enterprises, for lack of better alternatives.

The Draft NYP2025 mentions the Start-up India and the Stand-up India schemes for promoting youth-led enterprise in emerging sectors. Start-up India was started in 2016 and currently comprises three flagship schemes: Fund of Funds for Startups (FFS), Startup India Seed Fund Scheme (SISFS), and Credit Guarantee Scheme for Startups (CGSS). The SISFS promotes seed stage enterprises by providing financial assistance to eligible startups through incubators. But the scale of the scheme is very limited. An amount of 945 crores was approved for a four-year period of 2021-22 to 2025-26, and as on 31 January 2026, 219 incubators had been selected for the complete corpus of Rs. 945 crore of which only Rs. 575 crore (60 per cent) had been disbursed. These incubators had selected a total of 3,311 startups for support under the scheme.²⁰

The Stand-up India is a targeted scheme, launched in 2016 for facilitating loans from Scheduled Commercial Banks (SCBs) of value between Rs.10 lakh and Rs.1 Crore to at least one Scheduled Caste (SC) or Scheduled Tribe (ST) borrower and one woman borrower per Bank branch. Category-wise data for the loans sanctioned and disbursed during the almost 10 year period between April 2016 to December 2025, shown in the Table below, indicates that over three-fourth of the beneficiaries under the scheme have been women from general category, and the average amount disbursed for general category women is higher than the average amount disbursed to SC or ST borrowers.

Table: Category-wise details of loans sanctioned and disbursed (Since inception in April, 2016, up to December, 2025)

Category	No. of loan Accounts	Sanctioned Amount (Cr.)	Disbursed Amount (Cr.)
SC (incl. Women)	52901 (19.22)	11168.15 (17.79)	7244.05 (17.55)
ST (incl. Women)	16991 (6.17)	3612.84 (5.75)	2185.09 (5.29)
Women (Excl. SC/ ST)	205399 (74.61)	48009.48 (76.46)	31853.15 (77.16)

Total	275291	62790.47	41282.29
-------	--------	----------	----------

Source: Rajya Sabha Unstarred Question No. 2777, answered on 17 March 2026.

Note: Figures in parentheses are percentage of total.

Apart from these two schemes geared towards formal start-ups, the Pradhan Mantri Mudra Yojana facilitates loans across various size categories - Shishu (upto Rs 50k rupees), Kishore (between 50k to 5L rupees), Tarun (5L to 10L rupees) and Tarun Plus (10L to 20L rupees). The Table below shows the share of various social groups in the total amount disbursed under the scheme for the last three years for which data is available. The share of borrowers from Scheduled Castes (SC), Scheduled Tribes (ST), OBC, minority communities and that of female borrowers in 2024-25 was lesser than the two previous years, which needs to be addressed. Additionally, in the year 2024-25, while the share of loan amount disbursed to SC and ST borrowers to the total loan disbursed in the smallest loan category (Shishu, upto 50k rupees) was 17.87 per cent and 6.1 per cent respectively, their share in the largest category (Tarun plus, 10L to 20L rupees) was only 2.1 per cent and 0.66 per cent respectively, indicating that the scale of borrowing by SC and ST borrowers is much smaller than those of other categories.

Table: Year-wise Share of Various Social Groups in Amount Disbursed under MUDRA Scheme

Year	Total	SC	ST	OBC	General	Women	Minority
2024-25	450.35	38.40 (8.53)	16.04 (3.56)	89.51 (19.88)	306.40 (68.04)	169.43 (37.62)	32.44 (7.20)
2023-24	443.95	46.32 (10.43)	16.38 (3.69)	94.31 (21.24)	286.94 (64.63)	184.85 (41.64)	36.94 (8.32)
2022-23	382.67	37.87 (9.90)	14.07 (3.68)	84.29 (22.03)	246.44 (64.40)	174.07 (45.49)	36.49 (9.54)

Source: Overall Performance Report, Pradhan Mantri MUDRA Yojana, Various Years.

Note: Figures in parentheses are percentage of total.

Volunteerism and Youth Leadership

The NYP2025 links volunteerism to service, and seeks to develop youth leadership through creating opportunities for such service within communities. This is proposed to be done through strengthening platforms like National Service Scheme (NSS) and Mera Yuva Bharat (MY Bharat) [portal](#). Through the portal, youths would be provided opportunities for experiential learning and voluntary engagement based on 'seva bhav (spirit of service) and kartavya bodh (sense of duty)'.²¹ There is no mention of participation of the youths in governance processes or in decision-making concerning them. Youths are projected as not-yet-adults who need to learn before they can make choices. The following Table shows the budgetary allocation for these two schemes - Mera Yuva Bharat and National Service Scheme – over the last three fiscal years. In the first year of its launch in FY2023-24, no funds were spent under Mera Yuva Bharat, while in FY2024-25, just 15.64 crores of the total

budgetary allocation of Rs 200 crores were spent. For FY2025-26, the allocations were revised down from budgeted expenditure of Rs 82.48 crores to 66.78 crores.

The nature of events and activities undertaken under the scheme included sports events, workshops on schemes, youth exchange programmes etc. Activities related to promotion of constitutional values, or promotion of social harmony by addressing social cleavages like caste, gender and religion were conspicuous by their absence. While a record level of funds of Rs 450 crores were budgeted under NSS for FY2025-26, the actual expenditure is likely to be lower than that for the previous two fiscal years, as shown in the Table below.

Table: Trends in Budgetary Expenditures (in Crore Rupees) for relevant schemes under Ministry of Youth and Sports Affairs

Scheme	2023-24			2024-25			2025-26		
	BE	RE	AE	BE	RE	AE	BE	RE	AE*
Mera Yuva Bharat	0.00	150.00	0.00	200.0	74.76	15.64	82.48	66.78	63.11
National Service Scheme	325.00	222.65	185.63	250.0	250.00	203.19	450.00	275.00	175.65

Source: Rajya Sabha Department-Related Parliamentary Standing Committee on Education, Women, Children, Youth and Sports (2026), Demands for Grants 2026-27 of the Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports, 378th Report, March 2026, Rajya Sabha Secretariat.

Note: AE: Actual Expenditure; RE: Revised Estimate; BE: Budgeted Expenditure. *Actual Expenditure for 2025-26 is the expenditure as on 31.01.2026.

While working among communities provides essential and valuable practical experience, in absence of formal avenues where youth can exercise leadership with respect to processes and decisions which affect their lives. Such avenues should be created constitutionally for the youth through a formal role in governance structures from *gram panchayats* and urban local bodies and upwards. This would be the true *jan bhagidari* (people's participation) to lead us to *Viksit Bharat* by 2047.

Recommendations

- The youth should be given a meaningful role in deciding the course of their lives and that of their communities and the country. This requires involving them in governance mechanisms, by creating pathways from local governance institutions like gram panchayats and municipalities to the highest levels of decision-making. This requires going beyond *sewa* (service) and *kartavya* (duties) to include *adhikaar* (rights) and *sahabagita* (partnership), based on the core values enshrined in the Indian Constitution.
- The multifaceted nature of the evolving challenges being faced by the youth require an institutional mechanism for coordination across multiple ministries, agencies and functionaries at various levels of governance. A multi-tier democratic structure

comprising *yuva parishads* (Youth Councils) at block, tehsil, district, state and national level should be created to plan, coordinate and guide the actions of the various entities tasked with youth development in the country.

- Youth is not a homogenous demographic group. Access to education, skilling, and employment, start-up capital as we saw above, is mediated through various social identities. Our Constitution envisions a society based on the principles of equality, liberty, fraternity and justice, and these should inform the measures taken towards ensuring rights and entitlement, by ensuring that access for those marginalized and excluded should be prioritized.
- A legislation for prevention and redressal of caste discrimination in higher educational institutions should be enacted by the Parliament.

Endnotes

1. Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports, '[National Youth Policy 2014](#)', New Delhi, India, pg 10-11.
2. Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports, '[National Youth Policy 2021](#)', April 29, 2022, New Delhi, India.
3. Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports, '[National Youth Policy](#)', July 23, 2023, New Delhi, India.
4. Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports, '[National Youth Policy 2025 \(Draft\)](#)', New Delhi, India.
5. Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports, '[National Youth Policy 2025 \(Draft\)](#)', New Delhi, India, pg 5.
6. Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, 'Population Projections for India and States, 2011-2036,' Report of the Technical Group on Population Projections, National Commission on Population, July 2020, Nirman Bhawan, New Delhi.
7. State of Working India (2026). *Youth in the labour market: Pathways from learning to earning*, Centre for Sustainable Employment, Azim Premji University.
8. All India Survey of Higher Education Report, 2021-22.
9. See also, State of Working India (2026). *Youth in the labour market: Pathways from learning to earning*, Centre for Sustainable Employment, Azim Premji University.
10. *Ibid.*
11. Sukumar, N. (2022). *Caste discrimination and exclusion in Indian universities: A critical reflection*. Routledge India.
12. *Abeda Salim Tadvi & Anr. v. Union of India & Ors., (W.P. (C) No. 1149/2019.*
13. See, Christophe Jaffrelot, '[Why Academic Freedom in India Hangs Between Attacks and Resistance](#),' *The Wire*, April 12, 2025; Nandini Sundar and Gowhar Fazili, '[Academic Freedom In India](#)
14. Lok Sabha Secretariat (2025), 'Sixth Report of the Standing Committee on Labour, Textiles and Skill Development, Demand for Grants (2025-26)', Ministry of Skill Development and Entrepreneurship, Seventeenth Lok Sabha, March 2025, Lok Sabha Secretariat, New Delhi.
15. Lok Sabha Secretariat (2026), 'Seventeenth Report of the Standing Committee on Labour, Textiles and Skill Development, Demand for Grants (2026-27)', Ministry of Skill Development and Entrepreneurship, Seventeenth Lok Sabha, March 2026, Lok Sabha Secretariat, New Delhi.
16. Religion-wise figures were not available.
17. Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports, '[National Youth Policy 2025 \(Draft\)](#)', New Delhi, India, pg 7.
18. Statement 7, Periodic Labour Force Survey, Annual Report, January-December 2025, MoSPI, GoI.
19. Statement 13, Periodic Labour Force Survey, Annual Report, January-December 2025, MoSPI, GoI.
20. Lok Sabha Unstarred Question No. 2908 answered on March 10, 2026.
21. Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports, '[National Youth Policy 2025 \(Draft\)](#)', New Delhi, India, pg 12.

People with Disabilities

Counting Every Disabled Citizen

Intro: With Census 2027 in its first phase, the exercise is an opportunity to recognise and count all legally recognised 21 types of disability in India. Disability has been underrepresented in national data – across population surveys as well as national schemes and legal systems.

India is envisaged as a representative democracy with its Constitution, promising political and social democracy in the Preamble, and the Directive principles of state policy emphasising on the concept of a welfare state. It mandates equal participation in the political system for all, along with representation and inclusion of marginalised communities to address historic socioeconomic injustices faced by them. As the Census 2027 takes place after 15 years, these numbers will directly underpin policy decisions, resource allocation and beneficiaries of welfare schemes for the coming decade. For the people, being counted in the largest population exercise is a marker of their citizenship, and of being seen by the state.

Disability has been counted in the Census since 2001. The question on disability was first included in the 1981 Census but removed in 1991. As of Census 2011, India is estimated to have 2.68 crore persons with disabilities – 2.2 per cent of the total population. The 2011 census counted seven categories of disability, since which the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act (2016) recognizes 21 types of disabilities today. This figure has also become disputed after estimates by the World Health Organisation (WHO) stated that about 16 per cent of the global population currently live with a disability (WHO, 2022).

With disability historically underrepresented in data (The Hindu, 2016), it translates into many individuals with disabilities losing out on state-guaranteed welfare despite needing it the most. The Census 2027 is a significant opportunity to recognise and count 21 types of disabilities in accordance with the law (Parliamentary Standing Committee on Social Justice and Empowerment, 2026).

How has Disability been Counted in India?

The Constitution guarantees Fundamental Rights essential for a free and civilised existence to every citizen. These essential individual rights are guaranteed by the Constitution, subject to the implementation of the Directive Principles and the 'fundamental duties' introduced by the 42nd Amendment, 1976 (Basu, 2021). The landmark case *Rajive Raturi v. Union of India (2017)* has recognised accessibility as a fundamental right for persons with disabilities in the country. The judgement

explicitly talks about non-discrimination and inclusion of persons with disabilities, mandating accessibility across built environment, public transport, information and technology, and products and services. Comprehensive data on disability is hence essential for countries to be able to develop evidenced-based policies, measure progress towards national targets, and work towards making infrastructure and systems inclusive for all citizens.

Special Intensive Revision (SIR)

The past few years have witnessed multiple developments regarding population data, besides the Census. The Special Intensive Revision (SIR) is an extensive process to update voter lists through verification of existing voter information, correction of errors in the list, and removal of ineligible and deceased voters. The exercise has been taking place across states since 2025, and several concerns have been raised regarding wrongful deletion of voters, its effect on poor and marginalised communities, and the idea of citizenship at large (NDTV, n.d.).

Yet, such dialogue did not cover how people with disabilities are being included and counted in the exercise (Governance Now, 2025). In the case of Bihar and Kerala, the number of voters with disabilities has reduced by around 20 thousand in each state. Bihar reported 7,45,937 voters with disabilities in 2024, and the number has reduced to 7,20,709 after SIR. Similarly, Kerala records a similar decrease from 2,64,232 voters with disabilities to 2,44,250 after SIR. This difference is starker in West Bengal, which had 5,07,089 voters with disabilities in 2024, and the figure now stands at 4,16,089 (Election Commission of India, 2026).

These instances of deletion and undercounting risk exclusion of voters with disabilities across the country, directly impacting their political participation. Critical issues for people with disabilities are already not given priority by political parties due to lack of visibility, or voters with disabilities not being perceived as a vote bank. In cases of deletion due to errors, the reverification process needs to be inclusive and less cumbersome for persons with disabilities.

National Family Health Survey (NFHS)

The National Family Health Survey (NFHS) is a nationwide survey started in 1992 by the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, providing state and national information on infant and child mortality, maternal and child health, nutrition, utilization and quality of health and family planning services, providing essential household data for welfare policies. The survey counted disability in NHFS-5 - from 2019-2021 but dropped questions on disability in the ongoing NFHS-6. This was stated to be on technical grounds of being unable to check and verify medical certificates of persons with disabilities, not wanting to risk inaccurate data collection (International Institute for Population Sciences and ICF, 2021).

Since 2011, NFHS-5 had been able to provide more updated data on disability – stating that persons with disabilities constitute 4.5 per cent of the population. The survey was also able to provide disaggregated data on disability and gender, HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis, Hepatitis, and other family and reproductive health indicators that no other survey or scheme has been able to do.

Disaggregated data across sectors

Budgetary allocation for disability, announcement of government schemes or inclusion of disability within existing schemes, are all influenced by population data. This trickles down to accessibility of infrastructure, education, employment, disaster management and more. Largely, availability of comprehensive or updated data about disability relating to education, public health and employment continues to be scarce. People with disabilities constitute less than 1 per cent of employees in private companies, and make up only 36 per cent of the workforce, as per the 76th National Sample Survey conducted in 2018.

The Prison Statistics in India report, published annually by the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) under the Ministry of Home Affairs, covers inmates with mental health conditions, but does not include all types of disabilities. Similarly, some data on offences against persons with physical or mental disabilities is available in the reports on Crime in India, Accidental Deaths and Suicide, and Prison Statistics in India by NCRB. Disability-specific data is rarely maintained in police complaints, registration of FIRs, or civil cases, despite them facing discrimination in education and workplaces, and neglect and abuse by families or communities. Persons with disabilities end up facing inaccessibility and discrimination even in filing complaints and grievances, communicating with authorities, and have their testimonies discredited on account of their disability (Tata Trusts, 2025).

Other Government Efforts

The Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation (MoSPI) and the National Sample Survey Organisation (NSSO) have made efforts to capture a statistical profile of disability through a sample survey in 2018 and 2021 based on initial findings in Census 2011 (National Statistical Office, 2021). It is important to sustain such efforts consistently on a national level after Census 2027, to provide a comprehensive resource for existing data on disability.

The concept of Unique Disability ID was implemented by the Department of Empowerment for Persons with Disabilities (DEPwD) with the objective of having nationwide identification and data of persons with disabilities. Around 1.31 crore UDIDs are reported to be issued as per latest data (Department of Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities, n.d.). This number is not yet proportional to current estimates of persons with disabilities across 21 types of disabilities. As the UDID is a certificate that will ensure access to disability-specific schemes and reservations,

available data only reflects those who have applied for and received the certification till date.

Non-Government Efforts

Civil society organisations and international bodies alike have recognised comprehensive data collection around disability as a challenge, especially for invisible disabilities and mental health conditions. WHO and the United Nations have proposed updated standards for comprehensive data collection, along with the provisions of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) (WHO, n.d.).

The Washington Short Set on Functioning – a standardised group of six questions on functional difficulties and disabilities, is cited frequently in this discourse by Civil Society Organisations as a best practice (The Washington Group on Disability Statistics, n.d.). While it is a tried and tested model across multiple countries, its questions on functionality would not currently align with Indian data counting disability from a medical model, possibly leading to discrepancies with existing data.

Reflections and Conclusion

The sustained motto of the disability movement has been ‘nothing about us without us’, meaning that persons with disabilities should play a role in decisions taken about the community, and that disability should not remain an afterthought when designing policies, curricula, buildings, digital platforms and public spaces.

Being counted is the starting point for the recognition and inclusion the disability rights movement continues to work for. Larger policy changes towards inclusion, such as implementation of universal design and accessibility, in line with *Rajive Raturi v. Union of India* and other basic rights, will also be prioritised when this necessity is highlighted in large numbers.

India’s policy orientation is gradually shifting from a welfare-centric approach to one of self-reliance. To ensure that no citizen is left behind in this trajectory, the State must look at Directive Principles of State Policy to improve universal living standards for its citizens. Adoption of accurate data collection means, aligned with the international standards of the UNCRPD and WHO, will serve as a starting point to ensure that each person with disability in the country will access their rights and entitlements in the future.

Endnotes

1. World Health Organization. (2022). *Global report on health equity for persons with disabilities*. World Health Organization. <https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789240060456>
2. *Enumerating the disabled*. (2016, October 12). The Hindu. <https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/interview/Enumerating-the-disabled/article12060924.ece>

3. Parliamentary Standing Committee on Social Justice & Empowerment. (2026, March 11). Eighteenth report on Demands for Grants for the year 2026–27: Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment (Department of Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities). https://sansad.in/getFile/app/lssccommittee/Social%20Justice%20&%20Empowerment/18_Social_Justice_And_Empowerment_18.pdf?source=app
4. Basu, D. D. (2021). *Introduction to the Constitution of India* (25th ed.). LexisNexis.
5. *Rajive Raturi v. Union of India*, W.P. (C) No. 243/2005 (Supreme Court of India December 15, 2017)
6. *MSN, NDTV*. (n.d.). <https://www.msn.com/en-in/news/world/sir-controversy-opposition-s-vote-theft-claims-question-ed-amid-warnings-of-dangerous-rhetoric/vi-AA1OpsSL?ocid=socialshare>
7. *Bihar SIR: Disability inclusion should not be an afterthought*. (2025, September 19). Governance Now. <https://www.governancenow.com/views/columns/bihar-sir-disability-inclusion-should-not-be-an-afterthought>
8. Election Commission of India. (2025, November 11). *Successful conduct of Bihar Elections 2025: 66.91% voter turnout overall; Highest since 1st Bihar elections in 1951* (Press Note No. ECI/PN/351/2025). <https://www.eci.gov.in>
- 9.
10. International Institute for Population Sciences (IIPS) & ICF. (2021). *National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5), India, 2019-21: India Report*. IIPS.
11. Tata Trusts. (2025). *India Justice Report 2025: Ranking states on police, judiciary, prisons & legal aid*. Tata Trusts.
12. National Statistical Office. (2021). *Persons with disabilities (Divyangjan) in India — A statistical profile (2021)*. Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, Government of India. <https://mospi.gov.in>
13. Department of Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities. (n.d.). *Unique Disability ID: Portal for person with disabilities*. Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment, Government of India. <https://www.swavlambancard.gov.in/>
14. World Health Organization. (n.d.). *Collection of data on disability*. <https://www.who.int/activities/collection-of-data-on-disability>
15. The Washington Group on Disability Statistics. (n.d.). *WG Short Set on Functioning (WG-SS) - the Washington Group on Disability Statistics*. <https://www.washingtongroup-disability.com/question-sets/wg-short-set-on-functioning-wg-s/>

LGBTQIA+

Fragmented Approach, Legal Backsliding and a Continued Reluctance to Recognise Rights and Identities

***Intro:** For constitutional guarantees of equality, dignity, and non-discrimination to become meaningful in practice, India's response must move beyond piecemeal welfare interventions toward a rights-based framework that addresses the diverse and intersecting realities of all LGBTQIA+ persons.*

While LGBTQIA+ identities have existed in South Asian societies for a long time, social stigma against the community continues to exist. In India, the dual imposition of external colonial puritanical morality (which led to introduction of discriminatory laws such as the Criminal Tribes Act, 1871, under which communities identified as 'eunuchs', amongst others, were criminalised and Section 377 which criminalised 'unnatural' sexual acts including homosexual relations) along with an internal collectivistic socio-cultural setup carefully constructed upon heteropatriarchal family structure has long created an environment where diverse gender expressions and sexual orientations beyond the binary are often viewed as a threat to the functioning of society and are treated with a lens of suspicion, control, discrimination and even aggression.

In postcolonial India, whilst the Constitution guarantees equality before the law and protection against discrimination, these protections were not interpreted to include gender identity or sexual orientation for decades, rendering LGBTQIA+ identities largely invisible within statutory law and public policy.

Persons discriminated against on the basis of gender and sexuality in India have historically experienced social exclusion and unequal access in different parts of their lives, like legal recognition, education, healthcare, housing, employment, and family support systems. The Government has made some advancements in regard to securing rights for the LGBTQIA+ communities, but the journey has been fraught with repeated backsliding and inconsistencies in the government's stance.

LGBTQIA+ communities and civil society groups have continuously raised demands for dignity, recognition, and equal rights. Important shifts include, but are not limited to, i) the legal case of *NALSA v. Union of India* of 2014, where the Supreme Court officially recognised transgender people as a 'third gender', gave citizens the right to self identify their gender, and recognised the community's fundamental rights¹; ii) *Navej Singh Johar v. Union of India* case of 2018, in which the Supreme Court decriminalised consensual same sex relations and strengthened constitutional principles of dignity, privacy, equality, and individual autonomy for persons from the LGBTQIA+ communities²; iii) the *Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act 2019* which legally recognised transgender identity, prohibited discrimination, and mandated welfare measures.³ Whilst these developments in recent years point to a trend where the LGBTQIA+ communities' issues have received more visibility in policy discussions and welfare programming with targeted support for individuals from said

communities, it is crucial to note that removing criminal penalties does not automatically guarantee acceptance or equality in areas like marriage, family recognition, housing, healthcare, or employment.⁴

Social Attitudes towards the LGBTQIA+ community

In February 2025, the Union government informed the Lok Sabha that it had issued directions to ensure that LGBTQIA+ persons and queer couples could access rights such as being recognised as a family for ration cards, opening joint bank accounts, and claiming a partner's body after death⁵. However, these measures stand in tension with discriminatory statements by members of the Government, including claims that same-sex marriage would undermine the social structure⁶ and objections to the use of the acronym "GAY" in the IATA code for Gaya airport in Bihar⁷. This contradiction underscores the historical gap between formal policy commitments and the continued influence of discriminatory social attitudes within state machinery.

Though legislative and legal changes intend to empower individuals from the LGBTQIA+ communities, researchers have observed that the unresolved nature of legal and social discourses anchored within judgments such as *Navtej Singh Johar v. Union of India* often has a negative effect on the LGBTQ+ rights movement on the ground (Sharma and Kaur, 2025).⁸ In their paper analysing constitutional morality and LGBTQ+ rights post the *Navtej Singh Johar* case, Sharma and Kaur (2025) note that the judiciary's verdict in the *Marriage Equality Case of 2023* points to their reluctance to legally recognise same-sex marriages. The courts imply that such changes should come from the Parliament rather than the judiciary. This is evident in the Supreme Court dismissing pleas for legalising same-sex marriages for the second time, in January 2025, by deeming them 'devoid of merit'⁹.

Another instance of social morality and discriminatory thinking against the LGBTQIA+ community overruling a constitutional approach is in March 2026, when the Union Government informed the Supreme Court that, after due consideration and review, it decided to maintain the prohibition on blood donations by transgender persons, men who have sex with men, and sex workers. The court stated, "*Why should poor people relying on free blood risk infection, even if the chance is 1%?*"¹⁰ However, given the advancements in HIV research, the window of opportunity for HIV detection, and international blood donation guidelines, this prohibition is not only unsupported by science but also violates Article 14 (Right to equality), Article 21 (Right to life and personal liberty), and Article 15 (Prohibition of discrimination based on gender identity and sexuality).¹¹

These developments suggest that while constitutional morality might have enabled the decriminalisation of same-sex relations, social morality continues to exert a significant influence on lawmakers and institutions, thereby constraining broader struggles for substantive equality.

Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Amendment Act, 2026

The period of 2025- 2026 marked a profound negative shift in the legal landscape for India's transgender and gender diverse community. This shift was triggered by the introduction and subsequent passage of the *Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Amendment Act*,

2026, which received Presidential assent on March 30, 2026. This legislative intervention has precipitated a major constitutional tussle between the state's regulatory objectives and the fundamental rights of gender-diverse citizens. In May 2026, the Supreme Court issued notices to the Union Government regarding the Act's constitutional validity and referred the matter to a three-judge bench. While the Court refused to stay the passing of the Amendment Act, High Courts in Delhi, Kerala, and Rajasthan have raised 'red flags' regarding the dilution of constitutional guarantees and the disruption of ongoing healthcare for transitioning individuals.¹²

Key concerns with the Bill as noted by Civil Society-

1. Removal of the Right to Self-Identification

The Bill transfers the authority to recognise a person's gender identity from the individual to a government-appointed medical board. Mandatory medical certification and disclosure violate the rights to dignity, bodily autonomy, and privacy affirmed by the Supreme Court in the Justice K.S. Puttaswamy v. Union of India.

2. Narrow and Arbitrary Definition of "Transgender"

The Bill restricts the definition of transgender persons to a limited set of four socio-cultural identities and persons with intersex variations, and '*anyone coerced into adopting a transgender identity through medical procedures or mutilation*'¹³, excluding many trans, non-binary, and gender-diverse people. It also wrongly conflates intersex variations with gender identity, obscuring the distinct human rights concerns of intersex persons.

3. Risk of Criminalisation

The Bill introduces a new offence penalising anyone who "forces" or "allures" another person to become transgender, despite no evidence of such a social pattern in India. This vague provision could be misused to target transgender communities, families, and organisations, echoing colonial laws such as the Criminal Tribes Act that criminalised gender-diverse communities.

4. Biomedical Model- Official statements from Mental Healthcare Professionals¹⁴ and the Clinical Psychology Society of India¹⁵ assert that the new amendment act misunderstands gender-affirming care as purely biomedical, ignoring its integral link to mental health and self-identity. Additionally, they note that the Amendment Act violates Sections 18, 20, 23, 2(j) & 2(i) of the Mental Healthcare Act of 2017, which grant every person the right to confidentiality in their mental and physical healthcare and prohibit disclosure of medical information without informed consent.

It is important to note that the Amendment Act was ironically passed six months after a Supreme Court judgement in the *Jane Kaushik v. Union of India* legal case 2025, which highlighted '*systemic failure of state machinery to translate the constitutional promise of equality into lived reality for transgender persons*' (CLPR, 2025)¹⁶. The Apex Court noted that the rights guaranteed in the NALSA judgement and the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act, 2019 remain "empty formalities." The decision also reiterated that the government must frame policies for transgender persons in consultation with the National Council for Transgender Persons – a consideration completely ignored by the Government in the process of proposing the Amendment Act.

These new developments undermine the dignity, autonomy, and constitutional protections guaranteed to transgender persons and represent a major step backwards.

Current Year's Budget Outlay

The Annual Action Plan FY: 2025-26 of the National Institute of Social Defence allocated ₹966.99 lakh for transgender welfare programmes targeting 36,975 beneficiaries¹⁷. The programmes cover aspects such as awareness and sensitization programs, capacity building and training of trainers, digitalization of capacity development modules, skill development training and online courses, consultations, outreach programs like health camps and counselling centres, and research. The plan includes, but is not limited to, 20 skill development programmes for 500 transgender persons, 10 health camps and 10 Trans ID camps for 1000 transgender persons and 5 employment *melas* for 1,250 persons across India, which remains inadequate considering the scale of exclusion faced by the community. A 2018 study by NHRC study highlighted that nearly 92% of transgender persons were excluded from formal economic participation¹⁸. The Action Plan further lacks clear monitoring systems, district-level transparency, and measurable outcome indicators, making implementation assessment difficult.¹⁹

The Comprehensive Rehabilitation for Welfare of Transgender Persons project received a 12.3 per cent increase in funding to Rs 76.87 crore for the financial year 2025–2026. Scholarships, skill development, Garima Greh (shelter homes), a health package (which includes gender-affirming operations and AB-PMJAY), the National Portal for Transgender Persons, and Transgender Protection Cells are all funded by the program. However, even with the 2011 Census estimate of approximately 488,000 transgender people, the annual allotment is only Rs 1,575 per transgender person. A large portion of the funds intended for transgender assistance is still unutilised despite modest appropriations.²⁰ We see the same trend in the previous years, where only Rs 5.02 Cr out of the allocated Rs 67.46 Cr was utilised in the fiscal year 2024-2025, and Rs 3.40 Cr out of the allocated Rs 63.22 Cr was utilised in the fiscal year 2023-2024.²¹

Recommendations

Based on the legal, policy, and budgetary developments outlined above, the following recommendations are made:

1. **Repeal the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Amendment Act, 2026** and restore the inclusive definition of 'transgender person' under the 2019 Act, consistent with the Supreme Court's judgment in *NALSA v. Union of India*.
2. **Reinstate the principle of self-identification** by eliminating all requirements for medical board certification, surgery, or biological verification for legal gender recognition.
3. **Ensure legal recognition of all gender identities**, including trans men, trans women, non-binary, genderqueer, and culturally specific identities beyond those explicitly listed in the amendment law.
4. **Introduce horizontal reservations** for transgender persons in education and public employment, as directed by the Supreme Court in *NALSA*.

5. **Legally recognise diverse family forms**, including queer partnerships, chosen families, and caregiving relationships, across laws governing marriage, inheritance, adoption, pensions, and next-of-kin rights.
6. **Withdraw policies which discriminate on the basis of gender**, such as the ban on transgender persons, men who have sex with men, and sex workers from donating blood, and replace them with science-based screening protocols.
7. **Expand access to gender-affirming healthcare**, including hormone therapy, surgeries, mental health services, and follow-up care, through public hospitals and health insurance schemes such as Ayushman Bharat.
8. **Increase budgetary allocations for long-term support**, particularly in housing, livelihood development, education, and healthcare, rather than concentrating resources primarily on short-term awareness activities.
9. **Establish transparent monitoring and accountability mechanisms** for all transgender welfare schemes, including disaggregated data, independent audits, and public reporting on outcomes.
10. **Simplify documentation requirements** for accessing welfare schemes and identity certificates, and create community-based facilitation mechanisms to reduce bureaucratic barriers.
11. **Strengthen anti-discrimination protections** by enacting comprehensive equality legislation covering employment, housing, education, healthcare, and access to public spaces.
12. **Institutionalise sensitisation programmes for government officials, police, the judiciary, healthcare workers, educators, and financial institutions** to address systemic discrimination.
13. **Support community-led shelter and livelihood initiatives**, including expansion of schemes such as Garima Greh, with sustainable funding and independent oversight.
14. **Ensure meaningful participation of transgender-led organisations** in drafting laws, designing welfare programmes, and monitoring implementation at national and state levels.
15. **Align all laws and policies with international human rights standards**, including the World Health Organisation's ICD-11 and the United Nations' principles on bodily autonomy, privacy, and non-discrimination.

Conclusion

Taken together, developments in 2025- 26 reveal a deeply uneven landscape for LGBTQIA+ rights in India. On one hand, there have been important advances in state-level welfare initiatives and a modest expansion of targeted social protection measures for transgender persons, including mobility support, livelihood assistance, and family-based benefits. On the other hand, the enactment of the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Amendment Act, 2026, marks a significant regression by undermining the principles of self-identification, bodily autonomy, privacy, and informed consent that were affirmed in the NALSA judgement and subsequent constitutional jurisprudence. This contradiction reflects a broader pattern in which transgender persons remain the primary point of engagement for government policy on gender and sexuality.

While such targeted interventions are necessary in light of the specific and longstanding exclusion faced by transgender communities, they also highlight the absence of a comprehensive policy framework addressing the rights of LGBTQIA+ persons more broadly. Issues affecting lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer, intersex, and asexual persons, including family recognition, anti-discrimination protections, access to affirmative healthcare, housing, and employment, continue to receive limited legislative and administrative attention. The result is a fragmented approach in which select welfare measures coexist with legal backsliding and a continued reluctance to recognise the full spectrum of rights and identities encompassed within the LGBTQIA+ community. For constitutional guarantees of equality, dignity, and non-discrimination to become meaningful in practice, India's response must move beyond piecemeal welfare interventions toward a rights-based framework that addresses the diverse and intersecting realities of all LGBTQIA+ persons.

Endnotes

1. AIR 2014 SC 1863
2. AIR 2018 SC 4321
3. REGISTERED NO. DL—(N)04/0007/2003—19 [No. 64]
4. Sharma, D., & Kaur, R. (2025). Constitutional morality and LGBTQ+ rights in India: Post-Navtej Singh Johar developments. *International Journal for Multidisciplinary Research*, 7(6).
<https://www.ijfmr.com/papers/2025/6/59401.pdf>
5. The Hindu Bureau. (2025, February 5). *LGBTQIA+ Rights in India: Govt issues advisories issued to ensure rights of people in queer relationships in Lok Sabha*. The Hindu.
<https://www.thehindu.com/news/cities/Delhi/advisories-issued-to-ensure-rights-of-people-in-queer-relationships-govt-to-lok-sabha/article69180089.ece>
6. The Times of India. (2024, December 19). Live-ins, same-sex marriages will destroy society: Nitin Gadkari. *The Times of India*.
<https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/live-ins-same-sex-marriages-will-destroy-society-nitin-gadkari/articleshow/116482982.cms>
7. The Federal. (2025, August 6). *The federal*.
<https://thefederal.com/category/news/gay-gaya-airport-bjp-mp-bhim-singh-200420>
8. Ibid
9. Mahapatra, D. & The Times Of India. (2025, January 9). Supreme Court refuses to review “no” to same-sex marriage. *The Times of India*.
<https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/supreme-court-refuses-to-review-no-to-same-sex-marriage/articleshow/117096296.cms>
10. Suchitra Kalyan Mohanty & The New Indian Express. (2026, March 12). Blood donation ban on LGBTQ+ persons retained after review: Centre tells SC. *The New Indian Express*.
<https://www.newindianexpress.com/nation/2026/Mar/12/blood-donation-ban-on-lgbtq-persons-retained-after-review-centre-tells-sc>
11. Upadhyay, N. K., Taak, S., Soares, A. A., & Chatterjee, P. (2025). Challenging the blood donation ban on LGBTQ+ individuals in India. *Revista Eletrônica Direito E Sociedade - REDES*, 13(1).
<https://doi.org/10.18316/redes.v13i1.11934>
12. *The Indian Express*, “Supreme Court refuses stay on Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Amendment Act, 2026; issues notice to Centre,” May 2026, available at: [The Indian Express](https://www.thehindu.com/news/cities/Delhi/advisories-issued-to-ensure-rights-of-people-in-queer-relationships-govt-to-lok-sabha/article69180089.ece)
13. As Passed by Lok Sabha. (2026, March 24). *The Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Amendment Bill, 2026: A Bill (Bill No. 79-C of 2026)*. Sansad.
<https://sansad.in/getFile/BillsTexts/LSBillTexts/PassedLoksabha/As%20Passed%20by%20Lok%20Sabha325202621623PM.pdf?source=legislatio>

14. Mental Health Professionals. (2026). *Mental Health Professionals Condemn the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Amendment Bill, 2026*.
https://orinam.net/wp-content/uploads/2026/03/MHPs_Statement_2026_final.pdf
15. Clinical Psychology Society of India (CPSI). (2026). *CPSI Response to the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Amendment Bill, 2026* (Reg. No. DRBI/SOR/96 2022-2023).
https://orinam.net/wp-content/uploads/2026/04/CPSI_Position-Statement.pdf
16. “BLOG | Jane Kaushik v. Union of India – A Watershed Moment for Transgender Rights in India.” Centre for Law and Policy Research, 30 Oct. 2025, . Accessed 15 May 2026.
17. National Institute of Social Defence Annual Action Plan FY 2025–26, Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment, Government of India, 2025,
[https://www.nisd.gov.in/announcement/AAP2025_26_\(Transgender_&_Beggary\).pdf](https://www.nisd.gov.in/announcement/AAP2025_26_(Transgender_&_Beggary).pdf). Accessed 15 May 2026.
18. National Human Rights Commission (NHRC), Study on Human Rights of Transgender Persons in India, 2018
19. National Institute of Social Defence (NISD), Action Budget Plan 2025–26; Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment, Government of India.
20. Ali, S. & HealthCheck. (2025, April 24). *Ayushman Bharat’s broken promise to India’s transgender community*. HealthCheck.
<https://www.health-check.in/health/ayushman-bharats-broken-promise-to-indias-transgender-community-950562>
21. Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment. *Rajya Sabha Starred Question No. 119: Welfare of Transgender Persons*. Government of India, 30 July 2025, sansad.in.

De-notified, Semi-Nomadic, and Nomadic Tribes

Address Historical Stigma and Social Exclusion of DNT/NT/SNT

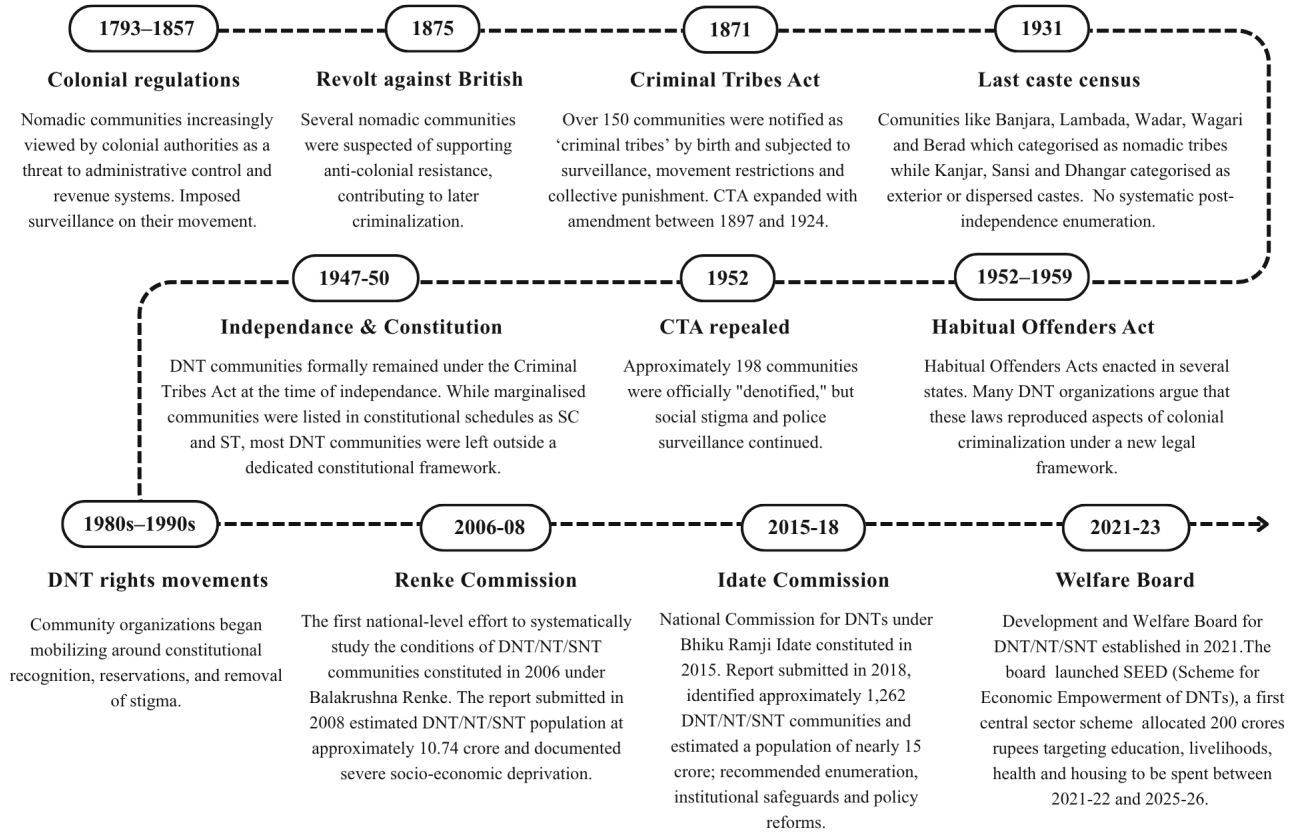
Intro: With an estimated population of nearly 16.5 crore, Denotified, Nomadic and Semi-Nomadic Tribes could constitute the second largest Indian state. Yet, despite their demographic significance, they remain among the least visible communities.

Denotified, Nomadic and Semi-Nomadic Tribes (DNT/NT/SNT) constitute one of India's most historically marginalized populations. Their exclusion is rooted in colonial policies, which fundamentally disrupted the traditional livelihoods of nomadic, pastoralist, hunter-gatherer, and transport communities. The expansion of railways displaced traditional transporter communities like Banjara, while forest laws restricted hunting, gathering, and grazing. Communities that had historically provided logistics, livestock products, forest resources, and artisanal services became increasingly vulnerable. As their livelihoods came under threat, many resisted colonial authority and participated in anti-British uprisings, including the Revolt of 1857. To control these mobile and resistant populations, the British enacted the Criminal Tribes Act, 1871, laying the foundation for the long-term marginalization of many Denotified and Nomadic Tribes.

While India gained independence in 1947 and adopted a Constitution founded on liberty, equality, and justice in 1950, many of these communities continued to live under the shadow of the Criminal Tribes Act until its repeal in 1952. Communities remain deprived of constitutional recognition, rights, entitlements and safeguards as available to Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs). Unlike Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, DNT communities were not recognized as a distinct constitutional category despite sharing a history of extreme social exclusion, economic deprivation, and state-sponsored discrimination. Consequently, many post-independence social justice policies—including reservation frameworks, political representation mechanisms, tribal development programmes, and protective legislation—either excluded DNT communities entirely or extended benefits to them only partially through state-specific arrangements. Take a look at the chart below which traces the timeline of historical marginalisation of DNTs and important events.

The timeline of historical marginalisation of DNTs and important events.

Timeline of DNT's Marginalisation and Important Events



Enumeration and Classification Challenges

One of the most significant barriers to justice for DNT communities is the absence of reliable and comprehensive demographic data. Since the colonial era, India has lacked a systematic national enumeration of Denotified, Nomadic and Semi-Nomadic Tribes. Communities sharing common histories, cultural characteristics, and patterns of exclusion are often placed in different constitutional categories across states. For example, Banjaras are recognized as Scheduled Tribes in Telangana and Andhra Pradesh, but are classified as **Vimukta Jati (denotified) and Nomadic Tribes (VJNT)** in Maharashtra and OBC in Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, and Gujarat. Similarly, Pardhis are classified as VJNT or Scheduled Tribe in Maharashtra, Scheduled Caste in Madhya Pradesh, and OBC in several other states. Kaikadis are Scheduled Castes in Maharashtra and Telangana but are categorized as OBC in Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, and Gujarat. The table below highlights how DNT communities are classified differently across the Indian states.

DNT communities are classified differently across the Indian states.

Community	Maharashtra	Karnataka	Telangana / Andhra	Rajasthan	Madhya Pradesh	Gujarat
Banjara / Lambada /Sugali	VJNT	SC	ST	OBC	OBC	OBC
Pardhi/Phase Pardhi	VJNT/ST	SC/OBC	OBC	OBC	SC	OBC
Kaikadi	SC	SC/OBC	SC	OBC	OBC	OBC
Kanjar/Kanjarbhat	NT/VJNT	OBC	OBC	SC	SC	OBC
Wadar	VJNT	OBC	OBC	OBC	OBC	OBC
Ghisadi/Gadia Lohar	VJNT	OBC	OBC	OBC	OBC	OBC

Constitutional Framework for DNT Justice

The persistence of inherited stigma associated with communities historically labelled as "criminal tribes" raises important concerns under Article 21 of the Constitution, which guarantees the right to life, dignity, and equal citizenship. Although the Constitution does not currently recognize DNTs as a separate category, several constitutional provisions provide a strong normative and legal foundation for addressing their historical exclusion. Article 15(4) empowers the State to make special provisions for the advancement of socially and educationally backward classes or for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. This provision provides constitutional legitimacy for targeted interventions addressing the historical disadvantages faced by DNT communities. Many DNT communities continue to experience low literacy levels, insecure livelihoods, landlessness, poor access to healthcare and education, housing insecurity, and continued social stigma. Article 16(4) enables states to extend reservation and other affirmative measures in public employment to ensure adequate representation of underrepresented communities.

Under Article 340 of the Constitution, the Government of India constituted the National Commission to examine the conditions of DNT/NT/SNT communities. The Renke Commission in 2008 and Idate Commission in 2018 report recommended a nationwide caste-based enumeration of DNT/NT/SNT communities, dedicated institutional mechanisms, targeted welfare measures, enhanced political representation, and a review of classification policies to ensure equitable access to social justice and affirmative action. But the recommendations of the commission are yet to be implemented.

With an estimated population of nearly 16.5 crore, Denotified, Nomadic and Semi-Nomadic Tribes (DNT/NT/SNT) could constitute the second largest Indian state. Yet, despite their demographic significance, they remain among the least visible communities. This section examines three nationally significant developments concerning DNT communities during

2025–26: the performance of the first Central Sector Scheme (SEED), the debate over the inclusion of DNTs in the forthcoming socio-economic caste census, and emerging reservation movements across multiple states.

Did the SEED Germinate?

The Government of India established the Development and Welfare Board for DNT/NT/SNT Communities under the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment (MoSJE) on 21 February 2019. Subsequently, the ministry launched the Scheme for Economic Empowerment of DNTs (SEED) in 2021¹. The scheme was allocated Rs. 200 crore for the period 2021–22 to 2025–26, aimed to support four key areas: education, livelihood generation, health insurance, and housing. Education and livelihood schemes directly implemented directly by the board by appointing implementing agencies. While health and housing schemes implemented through existing PM Ayushman Bharat and PM Awas Yojana. Despite its significance as the first central sector scheme for DNT communities, administration intention and implementation of the scheme has remained limited.

Underspensing: According to information provided by the MoSJE Minister, in Parliament, only Rs. 15 crore was released in FY 2023–24, Rs. 35.16 crore in FY 2024–25, and Rs. 15 crore in FY 2025–26, benefiting 61,419 individuals under the livelihood component, 3,665 students under the free coaching component, and 50,287 beneficiaries under health insurance support.² These figures indicate that a substantial portion of the allocated budget remains unspent even in the final year of the scheme cycle.

Delhi to Gully challenge: Unlike welfare programmes for SC and ST that are implemented through dedicated departments, corporations and district-level administrative structures, SEED lacks an equivalent implementation ecosystem. District or taluka level administration are not well informed about the SEED scheme for DNT. Evidence from parliamentary records raises concern of state apathy and indicates coordination gap between the Union and state governments. For example, beneficiary lists for housing and health-related interventions were sought from state governments, yet only Madhya Pradesh submitted a list of beneficiaries.³ The challenge of taking a programme “Delhi to Gully” becomes particularly challenging in the case of DNT communities, many of whom remain geographically dispersed, mobile, and administratively invisible.

Lack of transparency and awareness: Interactions with community members, grassroots activists, and local leaders across DNT settlements in Maharashtra suggest that awareness regarding SEED remains low despite the scheme having completed nearly five years. This raises questions regarding outreach, information dissemination, and the ability of intended beneficiaries to access programme components. The experience of the free coaching

component raises concern. As the scheme provided stipend and reimbursement as DBT to attend coaching and expected students to submit the proof of coaching attendance. Here, how can we assure that there is no leakage in this method? There are chances of generating fake proof of attendance from private coaching institutes. The effective mechanism to prevent such leakage is lacking. Eventually, efforts were made to engage government agencies such as the Dr. Ambedkar Centre of Excellence at the Central University of Tamil Nadu⁴, but such arrangements remained limited and not materialized in other states. In 2025, a private platform was engaged to process applications and publish a list of 501 selected candidates, indicating continued experimentation with implementation mechanisms even in the final phase of the scheme⁵.

Inadequate staff and funding to the board is another serious concern. The existing members of board wrote to the PM demanding more members, staff, financial power, statutory backing and permanent commission status. A five-year allocation of Rs. 200 crore represents a relatively small public investment for one of India's most marginalized populations. The inability to fully utilize even this allocation underscores deeper issues relating to identification of beneficiaries, inter-governmental coordination, outreach, monitoring, and political prioritization.⁶ The question that emerges at the end of the scheme cycle is not whether the policy was well intentioned, but whether the SEED truly germinated among the communities it was meant to serve.

Uncounted and Invisible

More than seven decades after Independence and denotification, India still lacks an official population count of Denotified, Nomadic and Semi-Nomadic Tribes. The issue came into sharp focus during discussions surrounding the forthcoming Census. In 2025, Dakxin Chhara, a social activist from a Denotified Tribe community, approached the Supreme Court seeking the inclusion of a distinct category for DNT/NT/SNT communities in the Census. But the Supreme Court dismissed the plea, holding that matters relating to census design fall within the domain of the executive.⁷ While the judgment did not address the substantive question of DNT enumeration, it drew attention to a long-standing governance challenge: communities acknowledged as historically marginalized continue to remain absent from the statistical framework that guides welfare planning and resource allocation.

Scholar and activist Ganesh N. Devy has repeatedly argued that DNT communities must have a separate entry in the Census.⁸ According to him, the issue is not merely one of counting people but of acknowledging a historical category that has remained outside the mainstream social justice framework. Political scientist Yogendra Yadav similarly described the forthcoming Census as an opportunity to correct a long-standing injustice by recognizing communities that have experienced both colonial criminalization and post-independence neglect.⁹

The consequences of this data deficit are visible across sectors. Welfare schemes struggle to identify beneficiaries. Budget allocations remain arbitrary. Educational interventions

cannot be properly targeted. Most importantly, the State continues to formulate policy for millions of people whose demographic profile remains unknown.

This invisibility is not merely a technical issue. The Renke Commission (2008) estimated the DNT/NT/SNT population at approximately 10.74 crore, while the Update Commission (2018) estimated nearly 15 crore people belonging to 1,262 communities. Yet these remain estimates rather than official counts. In the absence of reliable data, policymakers struggle to determine the scale of deprivation, estimate budgetary requirements, or assess the adequacy of welfare interventions.

Struggle for Representation

The demand for representation emerged as one of the most visible expressions of DNT politics during 2025–26. Across several states, communities mobilized around questions of reservation, constitutional recognition, and affirmative action. While these movements appeared to focus on quotas, they reflected deeper concerns regarding identity, representation, and unequal access to constitutional safeguards.

In Maharashtra, the Banjara community intensified its demand for inclusion in the Scheduled Tribe category.¹⁰ Large demonstrations, public meetings, and hunger strikes were organized across Marathwada and other regions¹¹. Community organizations drew upon historical records, particularly the Hyderabad Gazette and the classification of Banjaras as Scheduled Tribes in neighbouring states such as Telangana and Andhra Pradesh, to argue that their exclusion from the ST category in Maharashtra represented a historical anomaly. Protest leaders emphasized that the demand was not merely for reservation but also for constitutional recognition, political representation, and access to welfare programmes available to Scheduled Tribes.

In August 2025, thousands of members of Denotified, Nomadic and Pastoralist communities gathered in Bhilwara and demanded a 10 per cent quota in education, employment, and political representation. Community leaders argued that DNTs constitute nearly 15 per cent of the state's population yet remain significantly underrepresented in administration, higher education, and elected institutions. Their demands also included model residential schools, scholarships, and targeted development measures. Subsequent demonstrations and highway blockades reflected growing frustration over the absence of substantive policy responses.¹²

These mobilizations reveal a broader structural issue. Unlike Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, DNT communities do not constitute a separate constitutional category. Instead, they are distributed across SC, ST, OBC, NT, VJNT, Special Backward Class, and state-specific categories. Consequently, access to reservations, scholarships, political representation, and welfare schemes often depends on administrative classification rather than comparable levels of deprivation.

The persistence of such movements demonstrates that the questions of enumeration, classification, and representation remain unresolved. Until these foundational issues are

addressed, the quest of DNT communities for dignity, visibility, and equal citizenship will continue to shape public policy and political discourse across India.

Conclusion

The experience of Denotified, Nomadic and Semi-Nomadic Tribes (DNT/NT/SNT) reflects one of the most enduring gaps in India's social justice project. While the Constitution sought to dismantle historical hierarchies and create pathways for inclusion, communities formerly stigmatized under the Criminal Tribes Act continue to face exclusion from the full range of constitutional safeguards available to other marginalized groups. More than seven decades after denotification, DNT communities remain inadequately counted, inconsistently classified, and underrepresented in public institutions.

The developments during 2025–26 reveal three interrelated challenges. First, the implementation of the SEED scheme demonstrates that policy recognition alone is insufficient without dedicated institutions, administrative accountability, and effective outreach mechanisms. Second, the continuing absence of reliable enumeration has left one of India's largest marginalized populations statistically invisible, limiting evidence-based policymaking and resource allocation. Third, recurring reservation and recognition movements across states underscore the unresolved nature of classification and representation within India's affirmative action framework.

Recommendations

1. Undertake Comprehensive Enumeration of DNT Communities and Include a separate category for Denotified, Nomadic and Semi-Nomadic Tribes in the forthcoming Census and all major socio-economic surveys.
2. The Anthropological Survey of India's pending report on unclassified communities should be released.
3. States must streamline DNT certification to prevent exclusion from welfare schemes by developing uniform certification mechanism
4. Create a permanent National Commission for DNT/NT/SNT communities with powers comparable to commissions for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes.
5. Constitute an expert committee to examine anomalies in the classification of DNT communities across states and ensure affirmative action such as reservation which is a long standing demand.
6. Expand the financial allocation of SEED, establish dedicated implementation units at state and district levels and ensure proactive awareness campaigns, transparent beneficiary selection, and public disclosure of scheme-wise progress.
7. Establish residential schools, hostels, scholarships, create targeted pathways for higher education, professional courses, overseas scholarships, and skill development.
8. Examine mechanisms to enhance the representation of DNT communities in local governance institutions, legislatures, and public bodies.

9. Make legal safeguard to address distinct discrimination against DNT communities unlike atrocity acts for SC/ST to address historical stigma and social exclusion
10. Integrate welfare, education, livelihood, housing, health, enumeration, and representation into a comprehensive National Policy for DNT/NT/SNT communities.
11. Importantly, include DNTs population in the constitutional schedule to ensure address historical injustice and provide welfare entitlements as right

Community	Maharashtra	Karnataka	Telangana / Andhra	Rajasthan	Madhya Pradesh	Gujarat
Banjara / Lambada /Sugali	VJNT	SC	ST	OBC	OBC	OBC
Pardhi/Phase Pardhi	VJNT/ST	SC/OBC	OBC	OBC	SC	OBC
Kaikadi	SC	SC/OBC	SC	OBC	OBC	OBC
Kanjar/Kanjarbhat	NT/VJNT	OBC	OBC	SC	SC	OBC
Wadar	VJNT	OBC	OBC	OBC	OBC	OBC
Ghisadi/Gadia Lohar	VJNT	OBC	OBC	OBC	OBC	OBC

Endnotes

1. Development and Welfare Board for De-notified, Nomadic and Semi-Nomadic Communities. (n.d.). *Official notification/document*. Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment, Government of India. <https://dwbdnc.dosje.gov.in/public/uploads/news/67381742882523.pdf>
2. Lok Sabha Secretariat. (2025). *Starred/Unstarred question no. AS225*. Sansad Digital Library. https://sansad.in/getFile/loksabhaquestions/annex/186/AS225_ZlpXT0.pdf?source=pqals
3. Lok Sabha Secretariat. (2025). *Starred/Unstarred question no. AS125*. Sansad Digital Library. https://sansad.in/getFile/loksabhaquestions/annex/186/AS125_ym4GPH.pdf?source=pqals
4. Central University of Tamil Nadu. (n.d.). *Scheme for Economic Empowerment of DNTs (SEED)*. <https://cutn.ac.in/seed/#tab-235864>
5. Buddy4Study. (n.d.). *Free coaching for DNT students under SEED: Scholarship result*. <https://www.buddy4study.com/scholarship-result/free-coaching-for-dnt-students-under-seed>
6. The Hindu. (2015, April 19). *Welfare board for nomadic, de-notified groups tells PM it needs funds, staff, permanent commission status*. <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/welfare-board-for-nomadic-denotified-groups-tells-pm-it-needs-funds-staff-permanent-commission-status/article70061318.ece>
7. The Hindu. (2026, May 22). *Supreme court denotified nomadic semi-nomadic tribe DNT enumeration 2027 census*. <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/supreme-court-denotified-nomadic-semi-nomadic-tribe-dnt-enumeration-2027-census/article70778721.ece>
8. Down To Earth. (2025, December 5). *De-notified, nomadic and semi-nomadic tribes must have their own separate entry in forthcoming census: Ganesh Devy*.

- <https://www.downtoearth.org.in/amp/story/governance/de-notified-nomadic-and-semi-nomadic-tribes-must-have-their-own-separate-entry-in-forthcoming-census-ganesh-devy>
9. Yadav, Y. (2026, May 15). Census is opportunity to correct injustice towards denotified nomadic tribes. *The Indian Express*.
<https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/yogendra-yadav-writes-census-is-opportunity-to-correct-injustice-towards-denotified-nomadic-tribes-10610272/>
 10. The Indian Express. (2025, November 12). *Banjaras, Hyderabad gazette, Marathas ST status*.
<https://indianexpress.com/article/cities/mumbai/banjaras-hyderabad-gazette-marathas-st-status-10251877/>
 11. The Times of India. (2025, March 14). *Banjara community demands recognition under ST category*.
<https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/aurangabad/banjara-community-demands-recognition-under-st-category/articleshow/123857559.cms>
 12. The Times of India. (2025, February 20). *Denotified communities threaten highway blockade over demands*.
<https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/jaipur/denotified-communities-threaten-highway-blockade-over-demands/articleshow/123051022.cms>

Economy and Inequality

Weakening of the Fundamentals of the Economy can be Halted by Strict Adherence to the Basic Principles of the Constitution

Intro: The central issue is the trade-off between growth and development – the well-being of citizens thus being not only diminished but also increasingly perceived in a reductionist manner, in utter contradiction to the rights guaranteed by the Constitution.

India's economy has been lurching from crisis to crisis over the past several years, each resulting in increased inequalities at multiple levels, each policy leading to intensification of exclusion in myriad ways. The four-hour deadline of demonetisation in a predominately informal production structure; an unplanned and rather chaotic implementation of GST where the scale of production is primarily micro in the form of self-employment; a less than empathetic pandemic policy response with yet again a four-hour deadline for a national lockdown in a country where at least one-third workers are migrants; the on-going energy crisis which is primarily the result of a subservient foreign policy; the collapse of the rupee which is now the worst performing currency in Asia. The central issue consequently is the trade-off between growth and development, the well-being of citizens thus being not only diminished but also increasingly perceived in a reductionist manner, in utter contradiction to the rights guaranteed by the Constitution of India.

Wealth, Income and Consumption Inequality:

Even as the country is on a high growth trajectory and touted as being among the fastest growing economies, India's rank by GDP size has fallen to sixth globally in 2026, and to a low of 172 among 218 nations at \$2,813 when calculated in terms of nominal per capita income. In fact, if the top few billionaires are removed from calculations, India stands below Sub-Saharan Africa.

The World Inequality Report 2026 underlines the prevalence of extreme income and wealth inequality, with India witnessing severe concentration. The top 10 per cent of income earners accounted for 58 per cent of the national income, the bottom half a mere 15 per cent; the top one per cent controls nearly 40 per cent of wealth; the richest 10 per cent

control nearly two-thirds; the bottom half of India's citizens less than 6 per cent. Growing concentration extends to India's corporate sector with the total share of assets of the "Big 5" increasing by 8 percentage points from 10 per cent to 18 per cent during 1991 to 2021. In FY25, the average Herfindahl-Hirschman Index (HHI) for eight major Indian sectors stood at 2532, putting it in the highly concentrated category for the first time in over a decade. A record 229 Indians feature on Forbes's 2026 World's Billionaires list, with 30 newcomers and total wealth surpassing \$1 trillion, the top 10 accounting for over a third of the cumulative net worth (May 21, 2026).

At the other end of the spectrum, as if mocking the non-rich citizens who constitute the overwhelming majority, is the acute disparity in consumption expenditure. The average Monthly Per Capita Expenditure is driven primarily by a relatively small group: the average of the top 5 per cent urban is a little above Rs 20,000, that of the rural half at about Rs. 10,000. The top 20 per cent of urban India spends nearly five times every month as those in the bottom 20 per cent. The bottom 5 per cent of the rural population consumes merely 1607 Kcal per day as compared to 3116 Kcal for the top 5 per cent. (Urban comparative figures are 1623 Kcal and 3478 Kcal.) Our calculations using the Gini co-efficient based on consumption expenditure inequality using HCES 2023-24 shows deep structural inequality, additionally reflecting a fall in the Compound Annual Growth Rate.

The Gini coefficient at 0.34 is the highest among Scheduled Tribes, while for OBCs and 'Others' it is 0.31 and 0.32 respectively. It is important to note that although the co-efficient is 0.28 for Schedule Castes, their average monthly per capita expenditure is a mere Rs. 4780, significantly lower than the Rs. 6936 reported by the 'Others' category. Consumption inequality on the basis of religion is stark: the lowest for Muslims at Rs. 5105, the highest at Rs. 9171 for Jains.

Labour and Livelihoods:

Latest PLFS (2025) data points to the deep gender divide in the labour market. For every two men working only one woman participates in the labour force: Male Labour Force Participation Rate (MLFPR) is 79.1 per cent while the Female Labour Force Participation Rate (FLFPR) is 40 per cent. This is also reflected in the Worker Population Ratios for men (76.6 per cent) and women (38.8 per cent). While the unemployment rate is 3.1 per cent for

both, it is imperative to note that it translates to higher unemployment among women as the FLFPR is half that of MLFPR (17.7 crore women and 34.1 crore men). Gender disparity is also evident in the status of employment, 26 per cent men as against 18 per cent women are in regular employment.

The recent rise in women's employment is primarily in the category of Unpaid Family Workers (UFW). 57.3 per cent of rural self-employed women are UFW, as are 20.6 per cent of men. The urban figures are 32.2 per cent and 11.6 per cent respectively. The accurate picture of India's workers earning a livelihood would emerge if we delete these workers and re-calculate employment data. Accompanying this process are two important factors that have intensified the fragility of labour structures – rising informality and reverse migration. Both the number of unincorporated non-agricultural sector enterprises as well as its workers have risen sharply over the last year: 16.69 per cent for the former and 15.51 per cent for the latter. The emergence of rural areas as the primary driver at 20.46 per cent is the direct consequence of the process of reverse migration that began a decade ago in the aftermath of demonetisation. Further, the creation of new jobs has been reduced, as worker-proprietors increased to nearly 61 per cent of the total workforce, while the share of regularly hired workers in these establishments dropped from 26.9 per cent to 24.8 per cent.

A major supply-side issue that constrains women's and increasingly men's participation in the workforce is the rise in Unpaid Work over the last five years. The participation rate between the TUS 2019 and the TUS 2024 has risen from 53.2 per cent to 54.1 per cent for Unpaid Domestic Services, and from 20.7 per cent to 25.9 per cent for Unpaid Caregiving Services for all Household Members. Participation in Care Labour too has increased: for women from 28 per cent to 34 per cent, and for men from 14 per cent to 18 per cent. The primary solution is not merely an intra-household balance, but a macroeconomic solution that reduces the total unpaid time burden. What is termed as a 'double burden' is thus in fact a triple burden, with women (and also men) attempting additionally to fill in the vacuum created by macroeconomic investment and policies that are occlusive of gender sensitivity.

Gender:

The on-going process of gender de-equalisation manifests itself in multiple ways that underlie the increasingly reductionist status of women.

- **Wage Differentials:** Gender-based wage differentials have been rising for all categories of women workers over the last five years. Women today receive barely two-third of the already low wages of their male counterparts across the three categories of Rural Regular/Salaried Employment, Rural Casual and Urban Casual. Self-employed women in both rural and urban sectors earn barely one-third of the consistently declining real earnings.
- **Health & Wellbeing:** The current Sex Ratio is the lowest ever in India's history at 933: in fact, 2022 marked the third consecutive year of decline. The Child Sex Ratio is now at a dismal 919, and would have been much worse if it wasn't upheld by the Schedule Tribes. As of today, India ranks 214 out of 236 countries in Sex Ratio. Life Expectancy in India rose from 50 years in 1975 to 69 years in 2015, before actually falling by two years in 2023. Women and children appear to have been the worst affected by the current pattern of growth. While the Maternal Mortality Rate fell to 93 per lakh live births in 2019-21 from 362 in 2000, it rose again in 2023 to 116. Today India has the second highest MMR in the world, accounting for over 10 per cent of all global maternal deaths. Child Wasting is stagnant at 20 per cent, while Child Stunting is at a high of 36 per cent.
- **Education:** In 2022 India had near universalisation in Elementary Education enrolment. However, overall enrolment has fallen in the last two years, the worst affected being government schools which showed a sharp decline from 73 per cent to 66 per cent. The primary reason is the closure of government schools in the name of 'rationalisation', even though Article 21A of the Constitution of India mandates free and compulsory education for children aged 6–14. The number of government schools fell by 89,441, down from 11,07,101 in 2014-15 to 10,17,660 in 2023-24. The decline in educational attainment indicators includes a relatively high Gender Literacy Gap of 12.6 percentage points.

State Response to Economic and Societal Inequalities

Sustainable living and livelihoods was visualized in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2015 of which India is a signatory. However, progress has slowed for SDG 2 (Zero Hunger), SDG 9 (Industry, Innovation, & Infrastructure), and SDG 13 (Environmental Concerns). Of special concern is the down-sliding of the country's global rankings. India ranks 102 among 125 countries in the Global Hunger Index; 131 out of 148 in World

Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Report 2025; 144/148 in the sub-index of Women's Economic Participation & Opportunity; 145/148 in Health & Survival. With a gender parity score of a mere 64.1 per cent, India is among the lowest-ranked countries in South Asia; 127 of 164 countries in the Oxfam Commitment to Reducing Inequality Index 2024; 110 out of 169 countries in the Social Progress Index which evaluates social and environmental performance. In 2025, India recorded a high average intensity of deprivation at 42 per cent in the Multidimensional Poverty Index.

The State's financial response is not only disquieting but in fact has resulted in intensification of inequalities. Budget 2026-27 is replete with illustrations of reduced financial commitment to improve the welfare of citizens. Share of social sector expenditure to GDP is merely 2.3 per cent; social welfare allocations have declined by 17 per cent; urban development by 41 per cent; rural development by 20 per cent; the demand-based MGNREGA allocations have been cut by 65.11 per cent. Two schemes that constitute the major part of unpaid work are that relating to clean cooking energy and to water. The former has witnessed a mark-down of -27.76 per cent over Budget 2025-26; the latter under the Ministry of Jal Shakti a fall of 5 per cent, and this when India ranks at 120 of 122 nations in the Water Quality Index. On the other hand, total allocation to the Ministry of Defence accounts for 14.7 per cent of Budget 2026-27, given that India is now the second largest arms importer in the world.

Conclusion:

The current growth and policy paradigm goes against the very fundamentals of the moral code of a welfare state, and undermines the essentials of the concept of a republic. What is undeniably degraded are the rights guaranteed in the Constitution of India. Some of these dealt with in this chapter are

- Article 15: no discrimination on basis of religion, race, caste, sex or place; that nothing shall prevent the State from making special provision for women and children.
- Article 38(2): minimizing inequalities in income, status, and opportunities.
- Article 39: right to adequate means of livelihood; distribution of community resources to subserve common good; the economic system should not result in concentration of wealth; equal pay for equal work.

- Articles 41 & 43: secure the right to work and a living wage/decent standard of life for workers.

The on-going process of the weakening of the macro, meso as well as micro fundamentals of the economy can be halted by strict adherence to the basic principles of the Constitution of India that lay out the path to attainment of a true democracy.

References

1. Feminist Policy India. (2024). *India gender report 2024*.
<https://www.feministpolicyindia.org/documents/resources/India-Gender-Report-2024.pdf>
2. EPWD-ICRIER (2026): Gender Gap in India's Labour Market: What Does the Latest PLFS Say about Women in the World of Work?
https://epwd-icrier.in/data-insights/labour-and-employment-policy/gender-gap-in-indias-labour-market?utm_source=sendpulse&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=gender-gaps-from-plfs-2025-and
3. Forbes India. (2026, April 3). World's billionaires: A record 229 Indians make the cut.
<https://www.forbesindia.com/article/billionaires/worlds-billionaires-a-record-229-indians-make-the-cut/2994130/1>
4. IMF (2026): World Economic Outlook, April.
5. Lancet (2026):
<https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/india-accounts-for-1-in-10-global-maternal-deaths-lancet-report/articleshow/129887051.cms>
6. Mukherjee, V. (2025): India Inc's profit boom has a name: It's called the Herfindahl Index, Business Standard.
https://www.business-standard.com/industry/news/india-inc-profit-boom-hides-consolidation-herfindahl-hirschman-index-explained-125071700945_1.html
7. Press Information Bureau. (2026, May 21). Unincorporated establishments surge beyond 9 crore, powering economic growth [Press release]. Ministry of Statistics & Programme Implementation, Government of India. <https://www.pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=2263720®=3&lang=2>
8. United Nations (2023): What is Sustainable Development?
<https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/blog/2023/08/what-is-sustainable-development/>
9. Acharya, V. (2023): India at 75: Replete with Contradictions, Brimming with Opportunities, Saddled with Challenges, Brookings Papers on Economic Activity.
10. <https://www.dataforindia.com/consumption-expenditure/>
11. Dewan, Ritu & Swati Raju (2026): Macro-reframing the Gender Budget: Paid and Unpaid Domestic Labour. In *Economic & Political Weekly*. Vol. 61, Issue No. 14.
12. Dewan, Ritu with Swati Raju (2024): The India Gender Report 2024. Feminist Policy Collective.
<https://www.feministpolicyindia.org/documents/resources/India-Gender-Report-20>

Credit and Banking

Financial Inclusion has Remained only a Buzzword in Banking

Intro: Financial inclusion cannot be measured by the number of loans disbursed; it cannot be measured only by opening bank accounts or simply through digitisation; it cannot be served with the idea of “efficiency”; it cannot be brought about through shrinking branches and rising correspondents replacing employees.

One of the primary claims in the recent years have been the supposed milestones that India has crossed when it comes to financial inclusion. The National Strategy for Financial Inclusion (NSFI) 2025–30 by the Reserve Bank of India in fact projects a celebratory narrative of progress, citing improvements in the Financial Inclusion Index and greater usage of financial services in recent years. But whether the banks have been truly serving the people or has their conduct in recent years actually yielded true inclusion are questions that need interrogation. The claims ought to be tested on a ground that seems to be simmering with dissent, an ominous cost of living crisis, youth frustration and a policy prescription that is apathetic towards the perils and precarity of the lives of ordinary Indians. Have banks aided the people in these uncertain times? Or, have they abetted their adversities?

Who will care about the depositor’s interest?

The latest Basic Statistical Return data released by the Reserve Bank of India points to a significant shift in the nature of bank deposits. Between March 2022 and March 2026, the share of low-cost savings deposits fell from 34.6 per cent to 28.7 per cent, while the share of higher-interest term deposits rose from 55.2 per cent to 61.6 per cent. This trend is concerning because savings accounts have traditionally provided banks with a stable and inexpensive source of funds while allowing depositors easy access to their money. But as banks kept squeezing the interest rate of depositors after deregulation bringing it down to as low as 2.5 per cent today. In the last 10 years, the Consumer Price inflation averaged 5.5 per cent. Hence, the net return for most of the depositors could be just 1 per cent or less. What this has translated into is a massive loss for the ordinary depositors which in more ways than one in fact disincentivises particularly low and middle income families from entering the formal banking channels.

Without depositor's funds, banks will cease to exist. More than 60 per cent of the deposits in the banks are from the household sector and 95 per cent of the depositors are Individuals. Hence, the banks have a primary responsibility towards the depositors. They should not only keep the deposit safe but also provide a reasonable return through interest. As the controller of the monetary system, the Reserve Bank of India has the responsibility to ensure a reasonable return to the depositors; as it is their money that powers economic growth through loans given to different sectors.

In this instance depositors have eventually started shifting more and more towards term deposits which are more expensive for banks to service or to mutual funds which is taking a toll on the savings deposit available in banks. The shift also comes against the backdrop of a persistent gap between credit growth and deposit growth that former RBI Governor Shaktikanta Das had flagged. With loans growing faster than deposits, banks are already facing funding pressures. This can have a detrimental effect on the health of the banking system.

Is credit going where it is due?

The government's idea of financial inclusion has increasingly relied on shrinking bank branches and the expansion of precarious Banking Correspondents (BCs), even as rural credit has declined. The Financial Inclusion Strategy document itself acknowledges serious flaws in the Banking Correspondent model. It underlines concerns around non-dedicated outlets, limited services, poor oversight, weak remuneration, low participation of women, and high inactivity. On the demand side, irregular incomes, lack of nearby branches, and absence of collateral exclude many borrowers. Yet the proposed path forward merely doubles down on BCs, instead of recognising the necessity of expanding well-staffed public sector bank branches for genuine financial inclusion.

This vacuum has been filled by Non Banking Financial Companies, Micro Finance Institutions, and fintech loan apps that function as modern moneylenders, charging high interest rates and employing harsh recovery practices. Strikingly, nearly 85 per cent of loans below ₹50,000 are now provided by NBFCs. The RBI's February 2026 draft amendments on conduct in recovery of loans and engagement of recovery agents by banks and NBFCs comes amid persistent concerns about aggressive and coercive recovery practices, particularly in the NBFC and digital-lending ecosystem. However, considering the scale of operation of NBFCs, their proliferation and over-reliance on outsourcing, effective regulation will be

difficult. More so, considering the fact that the RBI relies on the industry themselves (the Self Regulatory Organization) to monitor the NBFC landscape and direct oversight is missing.

The Economic Survey observes that in terms of sectoral deployment of non-food credit, among the categories of agriculture and allied activities, industry, services and personal loans, the highest year on year growth has been observed in personal loans, with an increase of 12.8 per cent in November 2025. This is in line with the Financial Stability Report household debt in India stood at 41.3 per cent of GDP as of end-March 2025, marking a sustained rise compared to its five-year average of 38.3 per cent. While this is alarming enough, the nature of credits is cause for further concern. Among the major categories of household borrowings, non-housing retail loans, largely taken for consumption purposes, continue to dominate. These loans accounted for 55.3 per cent of total household borrowing from financial institutions as of September 2025, surpassing housing loans as well as agricultural and business-related borrowings.

It is rather disturbing that loans are available at a far more affordable range to corporates today than to ordinary citizens. Loans with less than 8 per cent interest rate are much more accessible to the private corporate sector than the household sector today. Again, loans with interest rates above 11 per cent are disproportionately high among the household sector while low for the corporate sector. This shows a full reversal of the idea of social banking wherein it is the ordinary Indians whose deposits are leading to cheaper loans for the big corporates while neither does the depositor get fair rates for their deposits nor can they access affordable loans.

So, what we are looking at is a credit landscape where people suffering from stagnating wages, increasing fuel prices, higher cost of living, precarious employment and privatised essential services are being pushed towards more and more predatory lending by NBFCs, loan apps and MFIs and are largely taking loans for meeting their day to day expenses, medical emergencies, or to pay back earlier loans.

Microfinance has not yielded inclusion

The Economic Survey this year admitted to something that has so far been ignored in official discourse. It was an admission that was not in its main text, but was tucked away in a box. As such it was more like a confession box about the state of microfinance in India. Government policies and the overtures of the RBI's have been in favour of a discourse around "financial inclusion" when it comes to the NBFCs and MFIs. But, the message was

unmistakable in the Economic Survey this time: the sector is showing signs of deep stress, particularly in the form of over-indebtedness and distress borrowing among the rural poor. This concern in fact echoes warnings long raised by civil society organisations about the transformation of microfinance into a profit and target driven industry, where private NBFCs often charge usurious interest rates and deploy harsh recovery practices.

Microfinance caters overwhelmingly to the most vulnerable sections of society. As of March 2025, 95 per cent of microfinance borrowers were women and 80 per cent were from rural areas. The sector's institutional structure is diverse: NBFC-MFIs hold the largest share of outstanding loans at 39 per cent, followed by banks (32 per cent), small finance banks (16 per cent), NBFCs (12 per cent) and others (1 per cent). Far from the celebratory pitch around the sector, the Survey this time underlined a reversal in growth in FY25, with loan outstanding declining by 14 per cent year-on-year, driven largely by credit overexposure.

This slowdown is not an isolated event but part of a recurring cycle of stress marked by excessive lending, multiple borrowing and rising non-performing assets.

Microfinance was originally conceived as a tool to help low-income households manage risk, stabilise incomes and gradually build assets. The emphasis was on steady improvement in household security rather than rapid expansion. Over time, however, the sector became increasingly linked to capital markets and commercial investors. As investor expectations grew, the priorities of many institutions shifted toward expanding loan portfolios and delivering higher returns.

One of the most telling consequences of this shift is the reliance on misleading "impact" indicators. Metrics such as the number of borrowers, the size of loan portfolios, the proportion of women borrowers or geographic outreach are often presented as evidence of success. While these numbers demonstrate scale, they reveal little about whether borrowers are actually better off. Worse, they can incentivise repeated lending, loan top-ups and deeper indebtedness even when households lack repayment capacity. Rapid credit expansion without careful assessment can weaken household finances and push families into stress. In fact, even NABARD had in recent times have shared its concern that the removal interest rates caps by the RBI for NBFCs, has led to pockets of indebtedness.

AI: The new frontier in the battle for inclusion

There is an AI headrush today in the name of "efficiency" that needs to be analysed from the prism of inclusion. The RBI has already come forth with a "Framework for Responsible and

Ethical Enablement of Artificial Intelligence” which has been questioned by the trade unions for its opacity and top down approach without deliberation with the workers.

Rupam Roy of the All India Bank Officer’s Confederation in fact says: In an era where AI implementation is often driven by competitive pressures and efficiency mandates, we underline that technology should serve human needs rather than the reverse. The debate over AI in banking extends far beyond technical specifications or regulatory frameworks. It encompasses questions of economic justice, democratic participation in technological decision-making, and the kind of society we wish to create through our technological choices. Our call for "dialogue first, deployment next" may slow the pace of AI adoption, but it offers the promise of more sustainable, equitable, and ultimately successful technological transformation.

What is deeply disconcerting is AI's potential to exacerbate existing inequalities in banking access. AI systems, if improperly designed or implemented, could systematically exclude vulnerable populations including rural communities, linguistic minorities, and economically disadvantaged groups. In a country like India, where multiple layers of inequality and social vulnerability already shape access to finance, AI-driven decisions could exacerbate exclusion if left unchecked. The risks are not just technical such as data breaches from sharing sensitive loan portfolios with AI systems but also ethical, where corrupted datasets or hidden algorithmic biases produce discriminatory outcomes. Without strong guardrails, banks could hide behind the “invisible hand” of AI to justify lending practices that ignore fairness or social responsibility, shifting the blame to machines while deepening structural inequities. This concern is particularly relevant in the Indian context, where banking inclusion has been a cornerstone of financial policy for decades.

Financial inclusion cannot be measured by the number of loans disbursed; it cannot be measured only by opening bank accounts or simply through digitisation; it cannot be served with the idea of “efficiency”; it cannot be brought about through shrinking branches and rising correspondents replacing employees.

Labour Rights/Social Protection

Labour Rights in India: A Test of Constitutional Promises

Intro: Reports from National Crime Records Bureau reveal that the number of suicides by daily wage workers increased from 43 per day in 2014 to 129 suicides per day in 2023. 66.2 per cent of these suicides were reported from families in 2023 with annual income less than Rs one lakh. This indicates the widespread hopelessness among workers.

India's growth story has been dependent on its working class, both, in organised and unorganised sectors. However, the working class is hardly getting any proper share in the fruits of development and GDP growth. The Constitution promised justice, equality and fundamental rights of expression and association. But these rights are specially trampled upon in the case of workers. The economic surveys say that the corporations are earning good profits (20-30 per cent) but the increase in real wage/ incomes of the wage earners is negligible. The Periodic Labour Survey stated that the wages of rural daily wage workers decreased in 2025 as compared to 2024.

Following are some of the highlights related to developments on labour rights and welfare during last one year:

Four Labour Codes come into force: little benefits, more reversal of labour rights

Deliberations over the four new labour codes have been continuing for more than a decade. Though these codes offer some positive measures for the social security benefits of the workers, their right to collective bargaining, justice and safe and fair working conditions and wages have been weakened. The Government of India announced the implementation of the four Labour Codes - **the Code on Wages, 2019, the Industrial Relations Code, 2020, the Code on Social Security, 2020 and the Occupational Safety, Health and Working Conditions Code, 2020 with effect from 21st November 2025** (PIB release 21st November 2025.) This announcement was made despite the non- finalisation of the related rules. In over 30 gazette notifications issued on Friday (May 8, 2026) and Saturday (May 9, 2026), the Union government fully operationalised the four Labour Codes with publication of final rules on these codes. Officials maintained that the rules had been published with "minor amendments" to the draft rules pre-published in December 2025, (The Hindu May 10, 2026). Along with the final rules, the Gol also notified several operational aspects relating to implementation of the four Labour Codes.

Many central trade unions and labour activists have been expressing opposition to these codes and demanding repeal. The proposed rules will make it difficult for the registration of new trade unions and calling a strike will be nearly impossible. 60 days of prior notice and 14 days of cooling off period is made necessary. Industrial tribunals replacing labour courts are expected to mediate between the powerful companies and weak workers instead of punishing the companies for violations. If any case is pending in tribunals, the workers can't go on strike. After the decision of the tribunals, workers can't go on strike for 60 days. Labour inspectors will act as facilitators and not as labour welfare officers holding the companies accountable for violations of laws. They cannot inspect without prior notice.

While the codes mandate the e-Shram digital registry, they do not guarantee funding or automatic execution of welfare benefits. Establishments with up to 300 workers can now lay off staff or close down without seeking prior government approval (up from the previous threshold of 100). The codes formally legalize short-term contracts for core, permanent jobs under the concept of fixed term employment. Trade unions argue that it disincentivises companies from hiring permanent staff, encouraging an endless cycle of casual contract labour without long-term benefits like gratuity or job security. The *Occupational Safety, Health and Working Conditions (OSHWC) Code* only applies to establishments with 10 or more workers. Because the vast majority of India's unorganized sector—including domestic helps, street vendors, and micro-enterprises—operates in units smaller than 10 people, millions remain entirely excluded from statutory workplace safety and health protections. ESI and PF (applicable only to units with 20 or more employees) also have impractical threshold regarding salary because of which many workers will fall outside the scope of the related provisions. The social security code promises a welfare board for the unorganised sector workers. But there is no clarity on the funds required and their sources. A separate entity is envisaged for gig and platform workers where aggregator companies will contribute 1-2 per cent of their turnover.

The codes are ambiguous on wage fixation methodology. Critics highlight that the Wage Code lacks a clear, legally binding methodology or mathematical formula to calculate an adequate living minimum wage. Trade unions complain that the rules do not strictly enforce the historic recommendations of the Indian Labour Conference (such as factoring in specific caloric intake, clothing, housing, and education costs for a family). The framework leaves the determination of critical benchmarks to independent "expert committees" and bureaucratic "rule-making," bypassing rigorous legislative debate.

Because of many deficiencies, the labour codes and their rules are expected to provide only nominal relief but a lot of challenges to the workers. The issues related to wages, contract labour, working hours/ over time and occupational safety have been unresolved for a very long time and challenging the workers' life on daily basis. It is giving rise to serious discontent among workers which gets reflected through the various workers' outbursts and movements in early 2026.

Workers protest in 2026

Since January 2026, workers have been protesting in different industrial areas of the country. Big companies in construction, garments, petroleum and other sectors have been affected by such protests. Workers' protests were noted in Adani Enterprises, Reliance Industries, Tata Power, Jindal Steel, L & T, NTPC, Indian Oil, Western Coalfields, BHEL etc. during February and March, (The Wire, 30th March 2026). The workers' protests were observed in Haryana, UP, Gujrat, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Andhra Pradesh, Rajasthan etc. These protests were strong in the Industrial area of NOIDA (UP) and Gurgaon/ Manesar (Haryana) in April.

The workers have been angry over neglect of their overall working conditions. But their primary concern is their wage which is far below the required level and is not increasing at par with the cost increase in basic life needs. Due to protests in Haryana last year, the Haryana government constituted a committee on wage increase. The committee recommended Rs 23, 196 as minimum monthly wage. However, the Haryana government

announced Rs 15,220 only as minimum monthly wage in early April 2026. This was far below the expectation of the workers.

In UP, the situation was even worse. When the news of this minimal increase in wages in Haryana reached the nearby industrial areas of UP, they also demanded that the minimum wage in UP be also increased. In the meantime, the hike in the cost of gas cylinders for cooking, an impact of the US-Iran war, added fuel to the fire. Workers felt that they cannot meet their ends in the prevalent wages.

Protests started in NOIDA from 9th April. On 13th April, the protests were strongest and an estimated 80,000 workers demonstrated in many places in the district. Their demands were justified but they were met with heavy repression by the government. Hundreds were arrested. After the demonstrations, the UP government also announced an increase in the minimum monthly wage to Rs 13,690. This approximately 20 per cent increase was a direct outcome of the workers' movement. Workers are still concerned about its implementation.

It should be noted that the role of unions was negligible in such a large protest. These were largely a spontaneous outburst of workers' anger against their deteriorating living and working conditions. Social media also played a role. Some unions and worker organisations were involved in providing legal help to the workers after arrests.

The extreme exploitation, humiliation and voicelessness faced by the workers convinces them of being a second-grade citizen in the country. The system needs to understand that a satisfied work force is an asset to the growth of the nation's economy.

Let us look at the developments with some other sectors of workers.

Sanitation Workers

Sanitation workers in India continue to face deaths and accidents due to negligence by the system. In a written response to a question by a parliamentarian, the Minister of State, Mr Ramnath Athavale informed the Lok Sabha on 3rd February 2026 that 859 sanitation workers died during the dangerous work of sewer and septic tank cleaning between 2014 to 2025. Of these, 46 families could not receive compensation. According to the data given by the minister, 54 and 43 sanitation workers died in 2024 and 2025 respectively. But a social organisation, DASAM claimed that these death figures are 116 and 158 respectively. A year ago, the Supreme Court had ordered for the abolition of manual scavenging in six metropolitan cities and had expressed its unhappiness over lack of clarity in government on this.

In a press conference at the Press Club of India, DASAM also informed that at least 36 sanitation workers died between March and May 2026 while cleaning sewers, septic tanks, drains and sewage chambers under unsafe conditions in different parts of the country. In nearly all the reported cases, workers were forced to enter toxic confined spaces without basic safety equipment such as oxygen cylinders, breathing apparatus, gas detectors, safety harnesses, protective clothing or emergency rescue mechanisms.

It is tragic that this section of workers is still engaged in inhuman work which can be mechanized and there is no accountability for authorities responsible for the deaths and accidents of sanitation workers. Justice and dignity promised by the Constitution remain a dream for the sanitation workers.

MGNREGA and VB-GRAMG Act

Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) was replaced with the Viksit Bharat-Guarantee for Rozgar and Ajeevika Mission (Gramin) (VB-GRAMG) Act, 2025. This was a major policy assault last year on the rights of 26 crore rural informal workers registered under MGNREGA where they could demand 100 days of work as a right every year. MGNREGA had also helped in raising the wage upper limits in rural areas.

The VB-GRAMG Act was introduced, tabled, discussed and voted into a Statute, within a span of 72 hours, is another example of the non-consultative and hurried manner in which the Union Government legislates on decisions.

With the existing budget, the Union Government is not even able to provide 50 days of work per household per year. Now by capping budgets and putting the burden on states to raise funds the government's headline narrative of 125 days of employment is an unrealistic dream. Following are the anti-worker and anti-federal measures in the new law:

- **From demand-based right to command-driven scheme** → by repealing MGNREGA, employment guarantee is no more a right, but a mere scheme that runs on the discretion of the government.
- **Right to work restricted to select rural areas notified by the Union Government** → No guarantee of employment for rural workers in non-notified areas.
- **Capping of workdays through State-wise normative allocations determined by the Centre** → Any demand beyond this budgetary cap to be borne by State Governments; such selective allocations would benefit NDA alliance states at the cost of others.
- **Assault on Federalism:** The new 60:40 cost-sharing ratio ends the Centre's responsibility for full payment of wages and puts states under severe financial strain. Such unilateral imposition on the states is a gross overreach of the Union Government, and is constitutionally untenable.
- **60-day blackout period in peak agricultural seasons:** The current Act pits workers against farmers. Denial of work for two months in a year during peak agricultural season will impact the bargaining power of women, landless and other marginalised communities.
- **Weakening Gram Sabhas and Empowering Contractors:** The new Act dismantles local democracy. Under MGNREGA, Gram Sabhas and Panchayats planned local works; under VB-GRAMG, "Delhi decides" funds and assets, turning Panchayats into mere "labour suppliers for central contractors". Rural works to be planned through "Viksit Gram Panchayat Plans" aligned with the PM Gati Shakti Plan, subordinating the 73rd Constitutional Amendment.
- **Violates Supreme Court Orders:** By absolving the Union Government of its liability to pay compensation for wage delays, it violates the 2018 Supreme Court orders in the Swaraj Abhiyan case.
- **Nothing new to curb corruption:** Increased technocratic control through biometric authentication of workers despite documented evidence of large-scale exclusions with

no curtailing of corruption arising from initiatives like digital attendance (NMMS) and Aadhaar-based payments (ABPS). Corruption can be curtailed through decentralised monitoring, and acting upon the findings of the Gram Sabha-led social audits conducted under MGNREGA.

Thus, this new Act takes away the right to work of the rural workers and puts them into more vulnerable situation. State fails to uphold its constitutional promises of equality and democracy. The revised budget estimate of MGNREGA for 2025-26 was Rs 88,000 Crores. The Initial budget estimate for VB GRAMG in 2026-27 is Rs 95,692 Crores. To ensure payment for 125 days of work at current worker level, Rs 2.3 lakh crore should have been allocated.

Domestic Workers

Over the last two years, the legal landscape surrounding the rights of domestic workers in India has shifted significantly through Supreme Court interventions and legislative reviews. In January 2025, the Supreme Court recognized domestic help as a **vulnerable, highly unprotected segment**, directing the Union Government to establish an expert committee to explore a comprehensive national law for their welfare. However, by July 2025, the government committee concluded that a separate act was unnecessary, asserting that domestic workers are already covered under India's newly enforced **four Labour Codes**.

The discourse took a sharp turn in January 2026 during *Penn Thozhilalargal Sangam v. Union of India*, when a bench led by Chief Justice of India (CJI) Surya Kant **refused to mandate a minimum wage framework** disappointing crores of domestic workers in the country. The injustice to domestic workers was further deepened by the following comments by the CJI:

- The CJI cautioned that fixing high minimum wages could cause households to stop hiring entirely, triggering **mass unemployment**.
- He noted that hyper-regulation might dissolve the traditional **"human bond"** where families treat domestic workers as extended kin.
- **Exploitation by Third Parties:** CJI Kant revealed that when the Supreme Court contracted an outside agency for ₹40,000 per worker, the agency pocketed the profit and paid the women **only ₹19,000**. (Hence, the increase in wages will benefit the contracting agencies !!!).

Ultimately, the Court maintained that labour welfare regulations fall under **executive and state policy**, leaving workers to rely on state-level mechanisms rather than central judicial mandates.

This is a classic case of injustice by the institutions responsible for justice to the poor and workers. In spirit, it violates Article 23 of the Constitution (against forced labour), Minimum Wages Act and code on Wages 2019.

Domestic workers remain trapped in a paradox—essential to the functioning of countless Indian households yet excluded from the core protections of labour law. The Supreme

Court's refusal to even hear their plea is a missed constitutional moment. In turning away the petition at the threshold, the Court may have allowed prevailing social hierarchies—steeped in patriarchy and class privilege—to shape the boundaries of enforceable rights.

Supreme Court taking anti-labour view

While responding to a plea by the domestic workers, the Chief Justice of India made disappointing remarks against the trade unions blaming them for the closure of industries.

“How many industries in this country have been successfully closed, thanks to these trade unions... Know the realities also. All traditional industries in this country have been affected by trade unions. As children, we used to see these industries being closed because of these jhanda unions... They [trade union leaders] do not want to work. They are largely responsible for stopping the industrial growth in this country,” Chief Justice Kant remarked.

This indicates the general view point of some sections of the judiciary about workers and their organisations.

Street Vendors and Hawkers

Even after twelve years of the enactment of the Street Vendors (Protection of livelihood and regulation of vending) act of 2014, street vendors are far from benefiting the mandated rights. The Act mandates for the constitution of Town Vending Committees (TVCs). Progress has been made in the formation of the TVCs but the big catch is that almost all these TVCs have been formed contrary to the Act. Section 22(2)(d) read with Section 36 requires TVCs to be formed by elections among the street vendors and not by nomination which has been done almost universally. There are two main deficiencies in the formation of TVCs. Section 22(2)(d) requires that at least 40 per cent of the TVC members should be elected by and from the street vendors. In hardly 10 per cent of the TVCs in the country this statutory requirement is complied with. Section 23 of the Act requires the TVCs to meet at least four times a year. The data on this reveals that on an average, in the country, the TVCs meet once a year. This indicates that they are non-functional.

The TVCs' role begins with conducting a survey of all existing street vendors, within the area under its jurisdiction, and subsequent survey to be carried out at least once in every five years. The Act, on the basis of previous government reports, estimated that a minimum of 2.5 per cent of the urban population consists of the Street vendors and made that figure the statutory minimum for providing entitlements under the Act in Section 3.

The government states that 53,67,895 street vendors have been surveyed (of a total of 94,23,697 street vendors). Needless to say that survey was not done properly. The schemes which were introduced by the state governments excluded large numbers of street vendors from their purview as they introduced criteria such as making domicile certificate as essential document for survey, requirement for essential voter Id cards, bank accounts details, ration cards, Aadhar card linked mobile number, details of family members and receipts/fines among others. Further, wrong process was followed during the survey as the application forms were not there and surveys were being done only through app-based system. In some

cases, the survey was done in local language which resulted in the exclusion of the street vendors who were migrants from other states.

Further, no prior information was given to the vendors regarding the date/timings of the survey which resulted in vendors not knowing which documents would be required on the spot as vendors were not prepared for any such survey. In addition, in most states the companies/NGOs which were hired by the government for conducting surveys were not prepared and had no knowledge regarding the vendors' location and timings. These companies were hired by the governments by bypassing the Town Vending Committees which were mandated to conduct the surveys. Also, the mobile vendors, weekly markets, night markets and hidden vendors were left out in the survey process even though the Act mandates survey of all kinds of vendors. The vendors who have temporary structures such as waterman, milkmen, cobblers, newspaper sellers, and puncture-wala have been excluded from the survey.

One way of addressing the shortcoming in immediate terms is that existing data of the street vendors which is already in possession of the government collected through its various schemes for the benefit of the street vendors such as PMSVANidhi, Letter of Recommendation issued by ULBs for availing credit under the PMSVANidhi, FSSAI registration, FSSAI training, e-shram etc. be categorized as identified vendors for the purpose of the Act. The database of the existing vendors can then be distributed to their respective Town Vending Committees which would grant them the Certificates of Vending and identity cards. If in any case the TVC has strong apprehension against a vendor, then the TVC can disapprove such cases giving a reason in writing.

Street vendors are continuously being evicted from their livelihood stations in different cities of the country and their right to livelihood is continuously under threat.

Gig and Platform Workers: Recognition begins, challenges remain

NITI Aayog projects the gig workforce expanding significantly (toward 23.5 million by 2029-30), driven by delivery, mobility, and services. There have been some notable positive developments with regard to the gig and platform workers in the recent past. The Social Security Code recognises them as workers and promises the formation of a welfare board for them. They are also distinctly categorized and registered on the e-shram portal and will have access to schemes such as PMJAY. Some states (Rajasthan, Karnataka, Jharkhand, Telangana) have also taken initiatives to develop a legal framework (laws and welfare boards) to protect Gig and Platform workers. Aggregator companies will contribute 1-2 per cent of their turnover for the social security of these workers. However, practical implementation of these measures is yet to be seen on ground.

A success story has been the launch of Bharat Taxi, as a cooperative of drivers which is already challenging Ola, Uber etc. The National Campaign for Cooperatives in Platform Economy has contributed positively in the creation and operationalization of this cooperative.

- Major gaps include implementation lag as Codes and rules are recent and full schemes, notifications, and enforcement are still rolling out. Many workers remain unregistered or unaware. There are issues related to the eligibility thresholds. Rules require 90 days engagement with one aggregator (or 120 across platforms) annually,

excluding highly flexible or multi-platform workers. Thus, benefits are not automatic. Only the Social Security Code covers gig workers meaningfully. Other codes (wages, industrial relations, OSH) largely exclude them — no guaranteed minimum wages, collective bargaining, or strong occupational safety; and, no automatic "employee" status or strong protections against algorithmic control, deactivation, or harassment (especially for women). Additionally, there are issues related to enforcement and funding, Contribution mechanisms, fund management, and portability need clearer rules. State-central divergence creates compliance complexity which needs to be resolved soon. Low registration rates in some areas (e.g., food delivery) requires urgent attention.

Broader Issues such as income volatility, algorithmic bias/management, lack of skill mobility, gender gaps, and weak grievance mechanisms persist. This is the reason; gig work is viewed as precarious despite flexibility. Balancing platform growth/business viability with worker protections remains the key task of all stakeholders. Without addressing wage floors, job security, and full rights transposition, risks of inequality and informality remain high.

Conclusion

Reports from National Crime Records Bureau reveal that the number of suicides by daily wage workers increased from 43 per day in 2014 to 129 suicides per day in 2023. 66.2 per cent of these suicides were reported from families in 2023 with annual income less than Rs one lakh. This indicates the wide spread hopelessness among workers. The government is doing too little and too slow to protect them and enable a dignified life for the workers. This growing hopelessness may cause unwanted tensions in the society. The constitutional values and promises of equality, dignity, liberty and justice to all Indians need to be seen in reality more than ever before.

References

- Citizens for Justice and Peace. (2025). *Critical examination of India's new labour codes*. <https://cjp.org.in/critical-examination-of-indias-new-labour-codes/>
- Das, S. (2025, November 14). Viksit Bharat Act: Unmaking rural job guarantee. *Frontline*. <https://frontline.thehindu.com/politics/viksit-bharat-act-unmaking-rural-job-guarantee/article70436268.ece>
- Dhillon, A. (2026, May 23). 36 sanitation workers died in three months, says DASAM; demands accountability for manual scavenging deaths. *India Tomorrow*. <https://indiatomorrow.net/2026/05/23/36-sanitation-workers-died-in-three-months-says-dasam-demands-accountability-for-manual-scavenging-deaths/>
- India Water Portal. (2025). Rising heatwaves and falling incomes challenge the survival of informal workers in urban India. <https://www.indiawaterportal.org/climate-change/rising-heatwaves-and-falling-incomes-challenge-the-survival-of-informal-workers-in-urban-india>
- Joseph, M. (2026, April 12). 4 states have gig worker laws, but have they really helped? *The Indian Express*. <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/4-states-have-gig-worker-laws-but-have-they-really-helped-10466642/>

- Kulkarni, A. (2026). Caste, contract labour, and the crisis facing India's sanitation workers. *IDR Online*.
<https://idronline.org/article/water-sanitation/caste-contract-labour-and-the-crisis-facing-indias-sanitation-workers/>
- Kumar, A. (2025, October 28). Gig workers' strike in India. *Frontline*.
<https://frontline.thehindu.com/the-nation/gig-workers-strike-india/article70524966.ece>
- Mishra, R. (2026, January 15). A rural jobs law without a guarantee. *Mongabay India*.
<https://india.mongabay.com/2026/01/a-rural-jobs-law-without-a-guarantee/>
- Nair, S. (2026, February 22). VB-G RAM-G Bill annihilates MGNREGA right to work. *The Indian Express*.
<https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/vb-g-ram-g-bill-annihilates-mgnrega-right-to-work-10421788/>
- Observer Research Foundation. (2025). Beyond evictions: Integrating street vendors into walkable urbanism. *ORF Expert Speak*.
<https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/beyond-evictions-integrating-street-vendors-into-walkable-urbanism>
- Roy, P. (2025). Twenty rupees, twenty minutes: What I learned working India's gig economy. *The India Forum*.
<https://www.theindiaforum.in/tiffin/twenty-rupees-twenty-minutes-what-i-learned-working-indias-gig-economy>
- Sharma, K. (2026, March 05). Govt mulls social security schemes for gig workers as their number could reach 2.5 crore by decade-end. *The Hindu*.
<https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/govt-mulls-social-security-schemes-for-gig-workers-as-their-number-could-reach-25-crore-by-decade-end/article71036770.ece>
- Sinha, A. (2025, September 12). Labour codes: Worker rights and protections. *Frontline*.
<https://frontline.thehindu.com/economy/labour-codes-worker-rights-protections/article70383307.ece>
- Tiwari, S. (2026). Invisible deaths: How India's climate crisis abandons its sanitation workers. *Down To Earth*.
<https://www.downtoearth.org.in/climate-change/invisible-deaths-how-indias-climate-crisis-abandons-its-sanitation-workers>

Urban Poor and Migrant Workers

The Urban Deprived Deserve Access to Basic Necessities to Live a Life of Dignity

Intro: Census 2011 classified 449.9 million persons as internal migrants. Of these, 41.4 million persons had migrated out, for the purpose of work, and among these over 74 per cent were residing in urban areas at the time of enumeration.

Article 21 of the Constitution of India guarantees to every individual, the right to life and personal liberty. This right has been interpreted by the Supreme Court expansively, to encompass the right to life with dignity, which includes fulfilment of basic necessities like nutrition, clothing, shelter, etc.¹ The dichotomy presented by urban India presses against this constitutional promise on a daily basis. Indian cities are both lands of opportunities and sites of exclusion and deprivation. Cities attract people, and, yet, keep them away. The boundaries that divide a citizen and an encroacher gets redefined with the changing nature of the Indian state.

This chapter examines the adequacy and appropriateness of the policies and programmes of the union government for urban India against the touchstone of the right to a dignified life promised by Article 21. For this purpose, we examine the extent and trend in urban poverty levels, the policy changes to address urban poverty in India, and, the performance of schemes for adequate housing and nutrition for the urban deprived, especially the migrant workers.

As per the census enumeration in the year 2011, 31.17 per cent of the total population of India was living in urban areas, accounting for a total of 377.2 million people. The National Commission on Population estimates that the population living in urban areas in 2026 to be 513 million (36 per cent) and is going to rise to 555 million (37.5 per cent) by 2031.² The actual figures on the pace of urbanization in India could be much higher on three counts. The estimated figures mentioned above, account for changes in birth rates, death rates and migration rates only, and leave out the expansion in geographical areas classified as urban. Firstly, since the 2011 Census, many areas previously classified as rural have become *statutory towns*, i.e. they have been brought under existing or new urban local bodies (municipalities/municipal corporations).³ Secondly, apart from these statutory towns, villages with (1) a minimum population of 5,000 persons; (2) a minimum population density of 400 persons per sq. km. and (3) 75 per cent of the male working population engaged in non-agricultural occupation, are classified as census towns, and included as urban areas, which would also contribute to increase in urban population in Census 2026.⁴ Finally, satellite imagery suggests that several villages, not classified as urban under either the statutory or the census definition currently, have attained urban features.⁵

Urban Poverty

The estimation of urban poverty varies based on where the poverty line is drawn. Based on household consumption expenditure surveys, the urban poverty rate for the period 2011-12 was estimated to be 9 per cent based on the Tendulkar Committee methodology and 26.4 per cent based on the Rangarajan Committee methodology. The data from the 2017-18 consumption expenditure survey was never released officially, but leaked estimates hinted towards worsening of urban poverty.⁶ The latest available estimates are from consumption expenditure surveys conducted in 2022-23 and 2023-24, i.e. after a gap of a decade since the last official estimates in 2011-12. The data from the 2022-23 survey shows that extreme poverty in urban India has declined radically from 9 per cent in 2011-12 to 3 per cent according to the Tendulkar Committee Poverty Line, and from 26.4 per cent in 2011-12 to 10 per cent as per the Rangarajan Committee Poverty Line.

If one uses the national minimum wage as the poverty line, urban poverty has come down from 50 per cent in 2011-12 to 27.5 per cent in 2022-23.⁷ Doubts have been expressed about the veracity of this data and/or incomparability of these surveys.⁸ One of the reasons for such suspicions has been the persistence of high levels of undernutrition in the urban population. For example, nutritional intake data from the same surveys show that the proportion of urban households with calorie intake lower than the prescribed norm (i.e. 2325 kcal) was 37.9 per cent in 2022-23 and 36.8 per cent in 2023-24.⁹ Higher incidence of extreme urban poverty is also confirmed by the recently released data from National Family Health Survey VI (2022-23). As shown in the table below, the percentage of persons with Body Mass Index (BMI) lower than the normal (18.5 kg/m²) has actually increased when compared to NFHS V (2019-22). Hence, alternative indicators indicate that even if urban poverty has come down, it remains at a significant level, and needs to be addressed urgently.

Table: Percentage of Women and Men in Urban Areas with Body Mass Index (BMI) below Normal

NFHS VI (2022-23)		NFHS V (2019-20)	
Women	Men	Women	Men
13.2	14.9	13.2	13.0

Source: Data from National Family Health Survey 2019-20 and 2022-23.

National Urban Livelihoods Mission (NULM)

One of the flagship programmes of the Union government to tackle urban poverty has been the Deendayal Antyodaya Yojana-National Urban Livelihoods Mission (DAY-NULM). The scheme began in April 2014 and was concluded in September 2024. Two sub-components of the scheme, namely, the Employment through Skills Training and Placement (EST&P) scheme and Self-Employment Programme (SEP), were geared towards alleviating urban poverty. The table below shows the achievement under the two components during the period of their operation. The achievements under the EST&P component were modest, with less than 60 per cent of the target number of persons provided skill training and just over 50 per cent of the targeted number of persons placed after training. The placement rate was a modest 55 per cent.

Table: Implementation of EST&P and SEP components under DAY-NULM

Component of DAY-NULM	Target	Achievement	%age achieved
Number of beneficiaries provided skill training & certification	26,03,400	15,42,952	59.3
Number of beneficiaries placed after skill training	16,62,380	8,43,299	50.7
Number of SHGs formed	6,60,650	10,02,545	151.8
No. of SHGs provided Revolving Fund support	4,71,000	6,79,705	144.3

Source: Lok Sabha Unstarred Question No. 6273, answered on 02.04.2026.

The achievement under the SEP sub-component was higher than the target, but self-employment tends to be a precarious, risk-prone and low-income livelihood option when compared to skill-based salaried-employment. Thus, there are bound to be business failures under the SEP component.

The DAY-NULM was replaced by Deendayal Jan Ajeevika Yojana (Shehari) (DJAY-S) which is a targeted mission covering only those households which hold AAY (Antyodaya Anna Yojana) ration cards and those engaged in six identified vulnerable occupations – gig workers, construction workers, transport workers, waste pickers/workers, domestic workers and care workers. In general, targeted schemes suffer from exclusion because of lack of a precise identification mechanism. A pilot has been started under DJAY-S in 25 cities across 13 states, and the guidelines for the pilot only state that enumeration and profiling of the workers would be done through data sharing by various databases/platforms/aggregators and self-registration of workers on the portal.¹⁰ The table below shows the budgetary allocations for the scheme since 2024-25 when it was made operational. The pilot was launched in October 2024.

In the first year of the pilot (FY2024-25), only 29.03 crores of the allocated 180 crores were utilized. A revised expenditure of Rs 200 crores was budgeted for FY 2025-26. The pilot ended in December 2025, and till then just over 45 per cent of the revised expenditure was utilized. Based on the learnings from the pilot, a cabinet note was submitted in December 2025, which hasn't received approval yet.¹¹ No information about the outcome of this pilot has been published to assess the efficacy of the identification mechanisms, or the overall strategy of shifting to a targeted approach. Under the recently notified labour codes, apart from the existing welfare boards for construction workers, enabling provisions have been added for welfare boards for only gig workers. There are no provisions for registration of other categories of workers, which would make implementation of a targeted approach under DJAY-S difficult and prone to exclusion.

Table: Budgetary Allocations for DJAY-S (In Crore Rs.)

2024-25 (RE)	2024-25 (AE)	2025-26 (RE)	2026-27 (BE)
--------------	--------------	--------------	--------------

180.00	29.03	200.00	536.51
--------	-------	--------	--------

Source: Budget Documents, various years.

Scheme of Shelter for Urban Homeless

The Scheme of Shelter for Urban Homeless (SUH), a component under erstwhile DAY-NULM, was initiated in 2013 in pursuance of the directions of the Hon'ble Supreme Court in *People's Union for Civil Liberties vs Union of India*.¹² Under the SUH, a shelter home (with a capacity of 50-100 occupants) was to be built for every one lakh population, with a provision for separate shelter homes for men, women, children, people with disability, etc. According to census 2011, India had over 17 lakh homeless persons of which 9.38 lakh resided in urban areas. By this yardstick, over 3,700 shelter homes should have been established across the country. When the SUH was wound up in September 2024 along with DAY-NULM, only 1,995 shelter homes had been made operational.¹³ The maintenance of these shelters is now the sole responsibility of the state governments. The provisioning for the housing needs of the urban homeless has now been clubbed into a general Affordable Rental Housing sub-component under Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana-Urban (PMAY(U)), discussed below.

Affordable Rental Housing

The Affordable Rental Housing Complex (ARHC) sub-component was added to PMAY(U) in July 2020 in the backdrop of the migrant worker crises induced by the COVID-19 pandemic. The sub-component proved to be a non-starter.¹⁴ Thus, it relaunched as a separate vertical in 2024 under PMAY(U) 2.0 to cater to urban migrants, homeless and destitute persons, industrial workers, working women, construction workers and the urban poor. It is being implemented through two models. Under Model 1, existing vacant houses constructed under previous government-funded housing schemes are to be converted to ARHCs for 25 years under Public Private Partnership (PPP) or by public agencies; and under Model 2, new ARHCs are to be constructed by public or private entities on their own available vacant land. The table below shows the progress made under Model 1 of the vertical during the two year period from April 2024 to March 2026. Out of the estimated 83,534 vacant houses constructed under previous public housing schemes, only 5,783 dwelling units have been made available for occupation and another 7,413 are in process of conversion to rental housing, i.e. just 16 per cent of the vacant houses have been brought under Model 1 of the vertical. Delhi with 29,112 vacant houses and Maharashtra with 32,345 vacant houses have not reported any progress on converting these vacant houses to rental accommodation. Only 4,605 have been occupied by beneficiaries in the last two years, i.e. only 6 per cent of the total potential under Model 1, which is already very limited, has been realized in the last two years.

Table: Status of Implementation of Model 1 under ARHC vertical of PMAY(U) 2.0

Number of Vacant Houses	Vacant houses Converted into ARHCs	Houses under process for conversion	No. of houses occupied by beneficiaries
83,534	5,783	7,413	4,605

Source: Standing Committee on Housing and Urban Affairs, 'Demands for Grants (2026-27), Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs,' Ninth Report, Lok Sabha Secretariat, New Delhi, pg 30-31.

As shown in the table below, under Model 2 of the vertical, while construction of 83,298 housing units have been approved in the last two years (2024-26), only 44 per cent have been completed and occupied. In fact, in these two years, entities from only seven states have submitted proposals, of which Tamil Nadu alone accounts for 51 per cent of housing units approved and all of the housing units completed and occupied till now are in Tamil Nadu. A majority of these projects have been initiated by companies for their workers under the Scheme for Industrial Workers which was announced in Budget 2025-26 with an allocation of Rs 2,500 crores to provide viability gap funding for such projects.

Table: Status of Implementation of Model 2 under ARHC vertical of PMAY U) 2.0

Approved for Construction	Construction Started	Completed and Occupied
83,298	53,318	36,450

Source: Standing Committee on Housing and Urban Affairs, 'Demands for Grants (2026-27), Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs,' Ninth Report, Lok Sabha Secretariat, New Delhi, pg 31-32.

Just to have an idea of how insufficient these numbers are, Census 2011 classified 449.9 million persons (37.16 per cent of total population) as internal migrants. Of these, 41.4 million (9.09 per cent of all internal migrants) persons had migrated out, for the purpose of work, and among these over 74 per cent (30.6 million) were residing in urban areas at the time of enumeration. Interstate migrants comprised 11.91 per cent (54.26 million) of all internal migrants but 23.23 per cent (12.55 million) of all economic migrants and over 34 per cent (10.48 million) of all economic migrants residing in urban areas. Thus, the demand for affordable rental housing, just from the migrant population in urban areas would be in millions, not to mention the demand from other categories of persons made eligible under the vertical (homeless, working women, construction worker, etc.). This suggests that the current pace at which rental housing is being created under ARHC vertical is utterly inadequate.

Pradhan Mantri Street Vendor's Atmanirbhar Nidhi (PM-SVANidhi)

The Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs had initiated the Pradhan Mantri Street Vendor's Atmanirbhar Nidhi (PM-SVANidhi) scheme in 2020, with the aim of providing collateral-free working capital loans to street vendors to rebuild their businesses affected by the pandemic. Initially loans of Rs 10,000 were being provided, and later provisions were made for a second loan of Rs 20,000 and a third loan of Rs 50,000, on the repayment of previous loans. Initially, the scheme was sanctioned till March 2022, but was later extended to December 2024, with liabilities to be discharged till 2028.

In August 2025, the scheme was restructured and approved till 2030. Under the restructured scheme, the first and the second tranche of the loans has been increased to Rs 15,000 and

Rs 25,000 respectively. The Table below shows that over 73 lakh vendors have benefitted from at least the first tranche of collateral free loans, which speaks to the success of the scheme. The repayment rates for the first tranche of loans is on a lower end, at 61 per cent though. The uptake of the second tranche has also improved, with 65 per cent of those repaying their first tranche of loans availing the second tranche of loan. The repayment rates for the second and the third tranche of loans are on the far lower end, which is a cause of concern, and needs to be addressed.

Table: Details of Loans Disbursed under PM-SVANidhi Scheme (as on March 2026)

Tranche	Loans Sanctioned	Loans Disbursed	Loans Repaid	Loans outstanding	Repayment Rate
1st Tranche	7463225	7333240	4529643	2803597	61.77
2nd Tranche	2954748	2832767	1190249	1642518	42.02
3rd Tranche	756135	711531	9097	702434	1.28

Source: Standing Committee on Housing and Urban Affairs, 'Demands for Grants (2026-27), Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs,' Ninth Report, Lok Sabha Secretariat, New Delhi, pg 57-58.

One Nation One Ration Card (ONORC)

The ONORC scheme was initiated in 2019 but it got a push after the directions issued in this regard by the Supreme Court in the context of the migrant worker exodus witnessed during the pandemic. Since then, the scheme has been implemented across all 36 states and UTs. While the number of intra-state transactions has increased, the uptake of the scheme remains uneven. To illustrate, in January 2026, 9.45 lakh intrastate transactions were recorded of which 61 per cent were in Delhi, followed by Maharashtra (10.66 per cent) and Haryana (9.46 per cent). Significant in-migration states like Karnataka (0.07 per cent), Kerala (0.47 per cent) and Tamil Nadu (0.005 per cent) registered only a small number of intrastate transactions, indicating lack of implementation in such states.

Recommendations

The following recommendations address the issues and challenges identified above and ensure that the urban deprived have access to basic necessities required to live a life of dignity, promised under Article 21 of the Indian Constitution:-

- Tackling Urban Poverty:** The incidence of urban poverty may have declined but it still remains significant. One-fifth of the urban population are undernourished. Instead of taking a holistic approach, a sudden, *ad hoc* policy decision has been taken to bring DAY-NULM to a close, without a thorough review and public consultation. Worse, it has been replaced with a piecemeal programme. The rationale behind shifting to a targeted approach is not clear. The assumption appears to be that urban poverty now exists only in pockets, but this is not borne out by facts. Urban deprivation is characterised by multi-dimensional poverty, and hence it needs to be

addressed through **a comprehensive, universal, life-cycle approach-based, shock-responsive social protection system.**

- **Food Security for All:** The coverage under the Public Distribution System has not been revised since the enactment of the National Food Security Act (NFSA), 2013, for the purported reason that fresh census figures are not available. This has led to persistence of unacceptably high levels of undernutrition in urban areas, where the exclusion from the food safety net is higher. Hence, the coverage of NFSA in urban areas should be extended immediately, based on projected population figures. In the long-term, there is a need to move towards universalization of the PDS. In the interim, the ONORC should be made completely operational across the country by giving greater publicity to the scheme and providing awareness to the ration dealers about the scheme, especially in large in-migration states.
- **Provision of Public Lands for Urban Rental Housing Scheme:** The pace at which affordable rental housing is being implemented under the ARHC vertical of PMAY(U) 2.0 is utterly insufficient. The biggest bottleneck in speedy creation of affordable rental housing is the availability of land, and to address this impediment public lands should be allocated towards the scheme.
- **Effective implementation of protections for migrant workers under the Occupational Safety, Health and Working Conditions Code, 2020:** The rules and regulations under these provisions must be implemented with cooperation of representative bodies of migrant workers, labour unions and civil society.

Endnotes

1. Francis Coralie Mullin v. Administrator, Union Territory of Delhi (1981) 1 SCC 608; Olga Tellis v. Bombay Municipal Corporation (1985) (1985) 3 SCC 545; Shantistar Builders v. Narayan Khimalal Totame and Others (1990) (1990) 1 SCC 520; Chameli Singh v. State of UP, (1996) 2 SCC 549; CESC Ltd. v. Subhash Chandra Bose, (1992) 1 SCC 441.
2. Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, 'Population Projections for India and States, 2011-2036,' Report of the Technical Group on Population Projections, National Commission on Population, July 2020, Nirman Bhawan, New Delhi, pg. 57.
3. For Census 2026, all areas designated as statutory towns as on January 1, 2026 would be listed as urban.
4. The Hindu, 'Census 2027 to retain 2011 Census definition of an urban area,' Aug 23, 2025.
5. Shamika Ravi, Manuj Joshi and Apurv Kumar Mishra (2026), 'India's Hidden Urbanisation & Its Policy Implications,' EAC-PM/WP/44/2026, EAC-PM Working Paper Series, Economic Advisory Council to the Prime Minister, New Delhi.
6. The Wire, 'Results of Consumer Expenditure Surveys 2022-23, 2023-24 Only After 2024 Elections: Report,' 20 April 2023, retrieved from: Results of Consumer Expenditure Surveys 2022-23, 2023-24 Only After 2024 Elections: Report
7. S Subramanian, 'The Household Consumption Expenditure Survey 2022-23,' The India Forum, April 05, 2024.
8. Ibid. See also, Dipa Sinha, 'Tracking What India Eats Shows How Unequal it Is,' The Wire, July 18, 2025.
9. National Statistical Office (2025), 'Nutritional Intake in India (2022-23 and 2023-24),' Report no. 594 (HCES: 2022-23 & 2023-24), Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, Government of India, New Delhi, pg. 5.
10. Ministry of Housing and Poverty Alleviation, 'New Poverty Alleviation Mission - Pilot Implementation, Mission Document,' Government of India.

11. Standing Committee on Housing and Urban Affairs, 'Demands for Grants (2026-27), Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs,' Ninth Report, Lok Sabha Secretariat, New Delhi, pg 15.
12. Writ Petition (Civil) 196/2001.
13. Lok Sabha Unstarred Question 3049, answered on 18.12.2025.
14. See Promise Vs Reality Report, 2024

Farmers

Indian Farmers Are Facing Multiple Crises

Intro: Agricultural is a state subject and its challenges are largely linked to the local agro-climatic and socio-economic conditions. Therefore, the principles of federalism and co-operative autonomy should not be undermined for any policy change.

In India about 46 per cent of the labour force is directly connected to agriculture, which contributes about a fifth of the country's national income (at current prices)¹. However, overtime it has become a sector hit by multiple crises. Increasing input prices, volatile output prices due to market uncertainties, losses due to changing climate conditions, rising indebtedness, unequal trade treaties and inadequate government support have made the lives of Indian farmers increasingly difficult. These challenges affect not only farmers but also the country's social and economic stability.

The issues in agriculture are not merely short-term but also have long-term implications. Over the past three decades, neoliberal policies have accelerated this crisis. Interestingly, this process is taking place under the garb of modernisation, expanding markets, self-reliance (atamnirbharata), sustainability and many other catchy phrases. The reality is that India's agricultural policies have evolved from state-led land reforms and food security measures, to market-oriented and technology-driven reforms, mainly to fulfil the broader agenda of the corporate sector.

The year 2025 became a significant turning point in Indian agricultural policy. The Union government intensified reforms aimed at modernising agriculture, increasing private investment, integrating digital technologies, liberalising markets and improving productivity. At the same time, farmers' organisations, civil society groups and opposition parties argued that these reforms threaten the livelihoods of small farmers and expand corporate control over agriculture.

Recent efforts by the government to bring the VB-GRAMG Act, the Seed Bill 2025 and the Electricity Bill 2025 – represents a clear departure from rights-based governance toward corporate-led management. The way these bills/reforms were brought or passed in the Parliament, was a clear violation of fundamental constitutional principles. Critics argue that these reforms undermine federalism, weaken livelihood protections, centralise governance, and prioritise corporate-led agricultural development over welfare constitutionalism.

Too many fronts, single enemy

Indian agriculture faces a deep structural crisis characterised by low incomes, fragmented landholdings, indebtedness, climate vulnerability and ecological degradation. The state increasingly views the agrarian question and other issues through a narrow lens of market liberalisation, reframing democratic dissent as a problem of governance rather than justice². Recent reforms related to seed policy, agricultural markets, electricity pricing and unequal trade treaties provide ample evidence of this view. Yet these reforms have generated strong resistance due to fears of corporate domination, weakening of MSP systems and inadequate farmer protection. While the promise of doubling farmers' income remains unfulfilled,

corporate profits and assets soared. Some of the recent reforms and the programs/schemes announced by the government in the last year, are discussed below:

1. **The Seed Bill 2025:** The Seed Bill, 2025 or the 2026 Seed Act is scheduled for full implementation this year. It has introduced mandatory registration and QR-code traceability for all commercial seeds. The government claims that the Act will protect farmers' rights to share 'traditional' seeds, and this Act is meant only to protect them from spurious and sub-standard seeds through advances in technology. While tightening the rules for the commercial players, a three tier penalty system has been introduced. Further, it will have a structured regulatory framework led by a Central Seed Committee which will set national standards for germination, genetic purity and seed health while maintaining a National Register of Seed Varieties. Only registered varieties, except exempted ones, can be sold commercially to ensure quality control and traceability. However, Samyukt Kisan Morcha (SKM) has objected to the bill and said that it would surrender Indian agriculture and the people's right to seed sovereignty to giant global corporations.

In a press release, the Morcha asked 10 questions to the union agricultural minister³, pointing out why they are hell bent to cater the interests of the multi-national corporations instead of protecting the interests of the farmers by selling them quality seeds at affordable prices through the co-operatives and why the farmers are not compensated when they face the crop loss due to spurious seeds and why the culprit is never punished? They asked why the government is not investing enough in public research institutions rather than depending upon global corporations for quality seeds? They blame that the central government is frequently barging into state's federal rights. As agriculture is a state subject how the union government could enact the Seed Bill without consulting the states? Moreover, the Central Seed Committee will control all aspects of seeds from production to testing without representation from all the states.

2. **The Electricity Bill 2025:** The proposed electricity reforms aim to reduce fiscal burdens on state governments and improve efficiency in power distribution by metering agricultural electricity consumption, rationalising subsidies and through direct benefit transfer (DBT) mechanisms. To empower private DISCOMs (distribution companies), this bill introduces a new entity called the 'Electric Line Authority' which will allow them to use the existing infrastructure of public sector DISCOMs for a fee.

Thus, without erecting even a new pole, the private DISCOMs will be able to provide connections to the selected consumers to maximise their profits. The farmers' unions strongly opposed these measures, arguing that it will increase the cultivation expenses through the increase in electricity costs which will hurt the marginal and small farmers who are already struggling with low income from agriculture. Electricity subsidies are central to Indian agriculture. Farmers in many states receive free or subsidised electricity for irrigation pumps, especially when the canal water does not reach the fields due to inadequate public investment in irrigation canal systems. After the draft was published and circulated for comments, the farmers' unions, left parties and trade unions have organised district-level demonstrations, and protests in various parts of the country, expressing resistance to the bill's proposed restructuring of power distribution and its implications for small and marginal cultivators.

- 3. US-trade deal:** On February 2, US president announced that a trade deal with India, had been reached, and US would reduce its “reciprocal tariff” on Indian goods from 50 per cent to 18 per cent, subject to the condition that India won’t buy oil from Russia⁴. In return, India would move to cut tariffs and non-tariff barriers on US products to zero. It clearly shows how India’s foreign policy is becoming a prisoner to overriding demands of the US.

The government of India claims that its agriculture will not suffer largely because some important grains, like rice and wheat, have been protected, but some other crops such as apple, cotton, tree nuts, fresh and processed fruit, soybean oil, and wine and spirits, animal feeds like dried distillers’ grains (DDGs) and red sorghum have been opened up. It is being argued that it will be beneficial for animal rearing as we face a shortage of good quality animal feed in the country. Similarly, it is being claimed that the dairy products are kept out of this agreement. But the farmers’ unions say that this deal will not only allow the American companies establish monopolies in Indian market but it will also slash down the prices of many Indian crops, leading to detrimental effects, e.g. in case of cotton, All-India Kisan Sabha (AIKS) raised its fears that “Import of U.S. raw cotton will further reduce the already low domestic price, and the crisis-ridden cotton fields will witness intensifying indebtedness and increasing peasant suicides.”⁵

To add to the woes of the farmers, the prices of the fertilisers are increasing due to US-Israel war in Iran. India is the world’s second-largest fertiliser importer⁶. The blockage of Hormuz Strait, which handles major energy and fertilizer feedstock flows, has destabilised global fuel, fertilizers and food markets. As Indian agriculture depends heavily on imported fertilizers and energy-linked inputs, this blockage has exposed it to serious vulnerabilities. Even if Iran provides uninterrupted supplies to India on this route, the cost of fertilisers or its inputs increases due to rerouting of vessels, reduced ship availability, rising freight rates, and shutdown of gas terminals⁷.

However, we can not blame only the war for this crisis. Its roots also lie in the neo-liberal policy of preferring import dependence to domestic resource utilisation and long-term self-reliance, which was being built through public sector units in the pre-liberalisation phase. Many of these PSUs or other public institutions established for research in agricultural techniques have been facing policy neglect since liberalisation. Ironically, now public research institutions like ICAR are signing MoUs with global corporations⁸ and directing their research to the latter’s interests rather than common good.

Budgetary allocations show the real intentions

It is not surprising that the budget failed to address any of the key issues that the agricultural sector is currently facing. As the largest employer, it needed a boost due to the looming crisis. However, it has seen only a 2.5 per cent rise from last year’s allocations of Rs. 1.59 lakh crore to Rs. 1.63 lakh crore. Adjusting to inflation, it is hardly any increase in real terms. Moreover, in the previous year also, the actual expenditure was cut down to Rs. 1.52 lakh crores in the revised estimates. On rural development, the expenditure has increased merely by 3 per cent from Rs. 2.66 lakh crore to Rs. 2.73 lakh crore⁹.

The government’s intentions regarding the agricultural sector become clear when we see the allocations in the budget, forget about their actual spending. While huge claims are being

made regarding the efforts to improve the soil health and protecting the farmers from spurious seeds, the crop insurance allocations have come down from Rs 14,473 crore to Rs 12,200 crore in two years. This is happening when the SKM alleges that, on an average, 31 farmers are dying by suicide daily due to mounting debt¹⁰. More generally, the cause is either crop loss¹¹ or inadequate price for their crops. Similarly, the allocations for PM-KISAN are down from Rs 66,121 crore to Rs 63,500 crore, in two years, though they are unchanged in monetary terms from the previous year, it's definitely a decline in the real terms.

Yet, allocations to PM-AASHA¹² and Krishionnati Yojana (for providing extension services, seeds, soil health, mechanisation, plant protection etc.) have increased. But critics say that expenditure on only those programs or schemes in the budget have increased which are targeted and hence this increase is relatively small as compared to the big cuts on the items which are meant for overall growth of the sector, e.g. the expenditure on agricultural research and education has come down from Rs. 9700 crore to Rs. 9300 crore.

Many premier research institutions like ICAR have faced the cuts in their fundings while the newly introduced Bharat-VISTAAR, a multilingual artificial intelligence (AI) tool, has received Rs. 150 crore to start with. There is a strong indication that money is being moved around within the sector rather than being added and this reallocation (e.g. from research to digitisation) itself speaks a lot.

Violation of constitutional rights

The debate over agricultural reforms or policies adopted by the government is not merely about policy efficiency or economic growth, it concerns the deeper question of protecting constitutional rights. The constitutional framework places agriculture mainly under State jurisdiction, but the Centre influences policy through concurrent powers and national economic planning. The Directive Principles of State Policy, assign the States the responsibility to organise agriculture and animal husbandry on modern and scientific lines while protecting the livelihoods of the people.

The farmers' unions and other critics have argued that the union government often violates constitutional rights. For instance, opening the markets to US dairy and agricultural/horticultural products would decimate our cooperative dairy sector and endanger the livelihoods of apple growers, cotton growers etc. To surrender our food security and livelihoods under the pressure of the global corporations is to violate the fundamental right to life enshrined in Article 21 of India's Constitution.

Besides, the way different bills are being presented and passed in the Parliament are evidence of violation of federal rights of the states in general. Though the government is claiming that it has been increasing MSP from time to time but farmers' unions blame that due to flawed calculations of MSP and inadequate support, actually the farmers are being implicitly taxed. Referring to an OECD study¹³, they claim that the farmers have a negative producer support (PSE) indicating that the farmers are less subsidised than the income loss they have to suffer because of depressed market prices due to unfavourable trade policies as well as selling of their product below MSP. AIKS claims that this causes an annual loss of Rs. 3 lakh crore of income to the Indian farmers¹⁴. This is sheer violation of Article 21 and since, such policies unduly favour the big business, it also violates the article 38, 39, 41 and 43 of Directive Principles of State Policy which collectively require the State to reduce inequality, secure adequate means of livelihood, provide opportunities for work, and ensure decent living conditions.

Recently, the controversy regarding the violation of constitutional rights intensified in the case of National Cooperation Policy which was introduced in 2025. Cooperative societies are protected under Entry 32 of the State List and are also connected to Article 19(1)(c), which guarantees citizens the right to form associations and cooperative societies. The Supreme Court, in 2021 in case of Union of India v. Rajendra N Shah, had struck down portions of the 97th Constitutional Amendment relating to State cooperatives. The Court held that Parliament does not have the capacity to unilaterally regulate State cooperative societies without ratification by at least half the States under Article 368(2).

Farmer organisations alleged that the National Cooperation Policy is an attempt to reintroduce centralised control over cooperatives by weakening state authority and undermining the democratic functioning of local cooperative institutions despite this judgment. They allege that since the government was not able to achieve it through an amendment, therefore they have tried to pursue indirectly through executive policy. This is being viewed as a violation of cooperative federalism and democratic decentralisation.

Critics argue that recent reforms violate Article 48 which directs the state to ensure that agricultural development should remain welfare-oriented, sustainable, and scientifically grounded. As the recent reforms prioritise market liberalisation and corporate participation rather than public investment in irrigation, soil conservation, extension services, and ecological sustainability, Article 48 is being undermined. Due to domination of global corporations resulting in unfair competition in market, the right to freedom to practice any profession or carry on any occupation, trade, or business under article 19 (1)(g) is also undermined, especially in case of small and marginal farmers. If they protest, their voices are being suppressed through various coercive measures which is violation of the citizens' right to form associations, unions, and cooperative societies under article 19(1)(c).

Thus, we can say that recent agricultural policies/reforms have tried to weaken federalism by centralising authority and undermining cooperative autonomy. In this process, the government that is custodian of citizens' rights is itself responsible for violating various constitutional rights by adopting such policies that dilute livelihood protections, and deprive the citizens of a decent living.

The way forward

Keeping in view the vulnerabilities of the farmers to the external shocks, it is being felt that there is need to reduce excessive dependence on imported chemical fertilisers and hence balanced use of organic and chemical fertilisers should be promoted. But it needs adequate investment in public sector research institutions and extension services which are facing extreme neglect during last few years. In addition, concrete measures should be taken to promote organic farming and agroecology which includes the use of bio-inputs, agroforestry, and sustainable soil management, which create biodiverse environments that are resilient to climate change.

Instead of pushing the direct benefits schemes, it is better to ensure the remunerative prices for the crops. A rational determination of MSP along with a sure procurement is the only thing that farmers would prefer over all the techno euphemisms like digitisation, atamnirbharta, etc.

There is a need to strengthen the multilateralism, instead of bowing down before unfair bilateral trade treaties of the imperialist countries. An egalitarian and rule-based multilateral trading system in association with other developing countries is urgently needed. Otherwise,

opening up the market for agricultural goods with such unfavourable conditions would harm the farmers' interests.

Privatisation of production and distribution of electricity should be stopped with immediate effect.

Any pro-farmer seed bill is expected to focus on availability, accessibility and affordability of good quality seeds to the farmers and it can be done only through the government regulated markets or co-operatives.

Finally, as agriculture is a state subject and its challenges are largely linked to the local agro-climatic and socio-economic conditions, therefore, for any policy change, the principles of federalism and co-operative autonomy should not be undermined.

Endnotes

15. PLFS, 2024-25 and Economic Survey, 2025-26
16. Indian Farmers Against the Global Agri-Cartel: Chronicling Resistance to Corporate Enclosures
17. SKM poses 10 questions on seed bill to Union min Chouhan | Chandigarh News - The Times of India
18. Modifying Duties to Address Threats to the United States by the Government of the Russian Federation – The White House
19. AIKS Calls for Protest Against Govt. Betrayal in US Deal | Peoples Democracy
20. FAOSTAT also see the news item on Forever dependent on fertiliser | Dailyhunt
21. <https://www.thehindubusinessline.com/opinion/indian-fertilizers-hormuz-choke/article70736136.ece>
22. Search | ICAR also see Bilateral MoU's | ICAR and Mou: कृषि, पशुपालन और मत्स्य पालन को वैश्विक स्तर पर मिलेगी मजबूती, Icar और गेट्स फाउंडेशन के बीच समझौता - Agriculture Animal Husbandry Fisheries Boost Globally Agreement Between Icar Gates Foundation - Gaon-junction
23. allsbe.pdf
24. SKM Rejects Govt's Claim of Doubling Farm Incomes; Cites Over Five Lakh Agrarian Suicides in 12 Years
25. India Farm Suicides 2024: One Death Every Hour Despite Marginal Dip, NCRB Data Reveals
26. Pradhan Mantri Annadata Aay Sanrakshan Abhiyan (PM-AASHA) is a scheme having the components of Price Support Scheme (PSS), Price Stabilization Fund (PSF), Price Deficit Payment Scheme (PDPS) and Market Intervention Scheme (MIS). It aims to provide remunerative prices to farmers and to control price volatility of essential commodities for consumers. sbe1.pdf
27. *Agricultural Policy Monitoring and Evaluation 2025 (EN)
28. Bihar Polls: Punish Nitish Govt For Farm Income Losses of Rs 72,00Cr, Says AIKS | NewsClick

Food Security/Nutrition

Food Security in India: Recent Trends and Challenges

***Intro:** Significant challenges remain in the form of malnutrition, poverty, food inflation, climate change, and unequal access to nutritious food. India must therefore move beyond food sufficiency toward comprehensive nutritional security.*

India has made remarkable progress in food production since the Green Revolution, transforming itself from a food-deficit nation into one of the world's largest producers of rice, wheat, milk, fruits, and vegetables. However, despite these achievements, food insecurity and malnutrition continue to affect millions of Indians due to poverty, inequality, inflation, climate change, and unequal food distribution.

In recent years, India has focused not only on food availability but also on nutritional security through schemes such as the National Food Security Act (NFSA), Public Distribution System (PDS), Poshan Abhiyaan, Mid-Day Meal Scheme, and the PM Garib Kalyan Anna Yojana. According to recent FAO reports, India has shown improvements in reducing undernourishment, yet challenges related to child stunting, anaemia, and access to healthy diets remain significant ([FAO, 2025](#)).

Concept of Food Security

Food security has four major dimensions:

1. **Availability of Food** - Adequate food production and supply.
2. **Accessibility** - Economic and physical access to food.
3. **Utilization** - Proper nutrition, sanitation, and healthcare.
4. **Stability** - Continuous access to food during crises or disasters.

India's food security policies aim to strengthen all these dimensions by ensuring affordable food grains and improving nutritional outcomes among vulnerable populations.

Current Status of Food Security in India

India has significantly increased agricultural production over the decades. The country is among the top producers of cereals, pulses, milk, and vegetables. Government procurement and buffer stock policies have helped maintain food grain availability even during emergencies such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

Recent global reports indicate that India has reduced the prevalence of undernourishment over time. FAO's State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World (SOFI) 2025 highlights improvements in South Asia, particularly driven by India's progress in food access and affordability ([FAO, 2025](#)). However, India still faces serious nutritional challenges. Child stunting, wasting, and anemia among women continue to remain high compared to many developing nations.

In the 2025 Global Hunger Index, India ranks **102nd** out of [123 countries with sufficient data to calculate 2025 GHI scores](#). This reflects persistent concerns regarding hunger and malnutrition despite increased food production. The problem is therefore not only insufficient food production but also unequal distribution and lack of nutritious diets.

Issues and Budget Outlay

During the 2025–26 fiscal year, India’s central government actively pivoted its food security policy from simple caloric sufficiency to nutrient density and long-term climate adaptation. In a vital institutional step, NITI Aayog convened a mid-term review session to propose revisions to Outcome Group 2 (Nutrition and Food Security) under the Government of India-UN Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework 2023–2027. This review accelerated efforts to meet the 2027 Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) targets by deploying evidence-based interventions and cross-ministerial coordination via digital public platforms like the Poshan Tracker. Structuring nutrition explicitly as an economic infrastructure rather than a welfare cost, the policy targets an ongoing domestic crisis where malnutrition costs the country between 0.8 per cent and 4 per cent of its Gross Domestic Product (GDP) annually in lost workforce productivity and healthcare expenditure. This framework is reinforced by the massive scale of the PM POSHAN (mid-day meal) scheme, which holds a central and state budget allocation of INR 8.57 billion over five years.

Budget allocation for Major schemes (in Rs. Crores)

Scheme Name	2025-26 BE	2025-26 RE	2026-27 BE
Saksham Anganwadi and POSHAN 2.0	21960.00	21960.00	23100.00
Scholarships for Higher Education for Young Achievers Scheme (SHREYAS) for SCs	472.00	449.00	495.00
Scholarships for Higher Education for Young Achievers Scheme (SHREYAS) for OBCs and EBCs	250.13	105.48	181.25
VB GRAMG	–	–	95692.31

MGNREGA	86000.00	88000.00	30000.00
Deendayal Antyodaya Yojana-National Rural Livelihoods Mission (DAY- NRLM)	19005.00	16000.00	19200.00
Pradhan Mantri Awaas Yojana-Gramin (PMAY-G)	54832.00	32500.01	54916.70
Rural Employment	85851.06	117637.91	44151.94
Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Anna Yojana (PMGKAY)	203000.00	227753.65	227429.00
Strengthening of PDS Operations	0.50	0.40	0.50
PDS-Evaluation, Monitoring & Research	0.10	0.20	0.10
Pradhan Mantri Poshan Shakti Nirman (PM POSHAN)	12500.00	10600.00	12750.00
Pradhan Mantri Fasal Bima Yojna	12242.27	12267.00	12200.00
Pradhan Mantri Annadata Aay Sanrakshan Yojna (PM- AASHA)	6941.36	6941.36	7200.00

Pradhan Mantri Kisan Samman Nidhi (PM- Kisan)	63500.00	63500.00	63500.00
Pradhan Mantri Swasthya Suraksha Yojana	2200.00	1500.00	2005.00
Pradhan Mantri Ayushman Bharat Health Infrastructure Mission (PMABHIM) (Health	558.45	402.50	570.00
Family Welfare Scheme	620.48	645.48	643.46
<i>National Social Assistance Programme</i>	<i>9652.00</i>	<i>9197.10</i>	<i>9671.00</i>

Food Security Policy over the Past Year

In its food security policy over the past year, the central government has integrated gender equity, localized value chains, and water-climate resilience as foundational pillars of its agrifood transformation policy. Acknowledging that climate shocks and erratic monsoons have historically inflated domestic food prices—driving food inflation up to an average of 6.3 per cent in the 2020s—the government has expanded climate-smart agriculture and decentralized resource management. Although farmer unions have protested against centralising systems of seed management and agricultural markets, the government has carried forward with the plans for inclusion of the private sector in the agricultural sector, which includes substantial, multi-billion-dollar investments alongside bodies like the World Bank to address critical groundwater depletion and sub-surface irrigation infrastructure across vulnerable agricultural belts.

Nationally, the strategy relies heavily on leveraging women's self-help groups (SHGs) to bypass rigid social barriers and land-ownership limitations that often block individual women from receiving state benefits. This approach models successful state-level integration frameworks, such as in Odisha, where 45 per cent of the state budget contains gender-responsive components across 420 distinct initiatives. Landmark central programmes executed via these local SHG networks include the 'Drone Didi' scheme to digitize crop monitoring, alongside targeted infrastructure support for the Odisha Integrated

Irrigation Project for Climate Resilient Agriculture (OIIPCRRA) and traditional millet value chains. By shifting state procurement toward climate-hardy crops like millets and integrating them directly into the Public Distribution System (PDS), the central government's 2025–26 policy aims to shield vulnerable rural households from the biophysical stressors of a warming world.

Challenges to Food Security in India

a. Food Security: Spending Big, Governing Small

Food subsidy outlays under PMGKAY ₹2.27 lakh crore allocated for 2026–27 which is just 0.63 per cent of the total GDP. The decreasing share of PMGKAY in the overall GDP is a concerning issue and it has yet again failed to ensure budget provisions to implement Supreme Court orders in the migrant workers' case in which the order came to give ration cards to all those E-shram card registrants who lack ration cards.

The declining trend in the allocation has once again signalled no initiatives towards diversifying the food basket in the PMGKAY. The long demand to include pulses and edible oils has been ignored with this budgetary allocation and has shown contradictory approach towards nutritional security of India.

b. ICDS and Child Nutrition: Persistent Underspensing, Cosmetic Increases

The maternity entitlements provided under SAMARTHYA including Pradhan Mantri Matru Vandana Yojana (PMMVY) and allied schemes as well as Saksham Anganwadi and POSHAN 2.0 (which subsumes Anganwadi Services under ICDS, POSHAN Abhiyaan, and the Scheme for Adolescent Girls) have witnessed a marginal increase in budgetary allocations this year. However, this increase masks a worrying and persistent trend of under-utilisation of funds across both umbrella programmes.

For instance, the Budget Estimate (BE) for Saksham Anganwadi and POSHAN 2.0 in 2025–26 stood at ₹21,960 crore, but actual expenditure by year-end was ₹20,949 crore. Similarly, under SAMARTHYA, while the BE for 2025–26 was ₹2,521 crore, the revised estimates and actual spending were restricted to ₹1,677 crore. This under-utilisation points to serious implementation failures in key schemes, including Anganwadi services and PMMVY.

Over the past year, verification drives conducted within Anganwadi programmes, ostensibly to promote transparency, have in fact intensified the exclusion of eligible families. PMMVY, in particular, has long suffered from weak implementation due to limited coverage, excessive and unnecessary conditionalities, and an inadequate entitlement of ₹5,000, which also contravenes provisions of the National Food Security Act (NFSA).

This cycle reveals a troubling reality: under-nutrition is acknowledged rhetorically, but not addressed institutionally. Renaming schemes and marginally increasing allocations cannot compensate for weak implementation and deliberate fiscal restraint.

c. Poverty and Inequality

Although India has experienced rapid economic growth, income inequality continues to affect food accessibility. Millions of low-income households cannot afford nutritious food due to rising prices and unemployment. Food inflation particularly affects poor households, reducing their ability to maintain balanced diets.

FAO's SOFI 2025 report notes that high food price inflation has undermined access to healthy diets among vulnerable populations globally.

d. Malnutrition and Hidden Hunger

India continues to face severe malnutrition, especially among children and women. Hidden hunger refers to deficiencies of essential vitamins and minerals despite sufficient calorie intake. Anaemia among women and children remains a major public health issue.

A staggering 57 per cent of women and 67 per cent of children in India are classified as anaemic in the most recent National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5). This is not just a health statistic; it translates to diminished energy for daily work, affects maternal health, and limits the economic aspirations of millions of families. Anaemia also reduces physical work capacity and cognitive performance, reducing productivity not only in the present but also in the future. In India, malnutrition remains the leading risk factor for the disease burden, particularly among children and young women.

Recent analyses suggest that while calorie access has improved, nutritional quality still requires urgent attention ([United Nations, 2025](#)). Despite being the world's largest producer of milk, pulses, and the second-largest producer of rice and wheat, India ranks very poorly on nutrition-related metrics. The gap between agricultural abundance and nutritional well-being indicates structural deficiencies in policy design. Food policy continues to prioritise calorie sufficiency over nutrient density, resulting in diets that are often void of iron, protein, and micronutrients.

e. Obesity and Health Issues

Conversely, according to the National Family Health Survey (NFHS) data, India is also witnessing a rapid surge in overweight and obesity among under-five children under five, with prevalence rising by 127 per cent (from 1.5 per cent to 3.4 per cent between NFHS 3 (2005-06) and NFHS 5 (2019-21)). Similarly, adolescent girls and boys have seen an increase in overweight and obesity of 125 per cent (from 2.4 per cent to 5.4 per cent) and 288 per cent (from 1.7 per cent to 6.6 per cent) respectively.

In adults, the prevalence increased by 91 per cent among women (from 12.6 per cent to 24.0 per cent) and 146 per cent among men (from 9.3 per cent to 22.9 per cent), indicating a nationwide health crisis (NFHS 5 2019-2021). India is expected to be home to over 27 million children and adolescents (5 to 19 years) living with obesity by 2030, and will account

for 11 per cent of the global burden (CNNS 2016-18). As quoted in the Indian Economic Survey 2024-25, Ultra Processed Food (UPF) consumption in India surged from USD 900 million (2006) to USD 37.9 billion (2019), growing at over 33 per cent annually. Between 2011 and 2021, retail sales of UPFs grew at a Compound Annual Growth Rate (CAGR) of 13.7 per cent.

f. Climate Change

Climate change has emerged as a major threat to food security. Rising temperatures, irregular rainfall, floods, droughts, and heatwaves negatively affect agricultural productivity. Recent FAO-WMO reports warn that extreme heat may reduce crop yields, increase water scarcity, and disrupt farm livelihoods ([The Times of India, 2026c](#)).

Indian agriculture remains highly dependent on monsoons, making farmers vulnerable to climatic uncertainties. Small and marginal farmers are especially at risk.

g. Food Wastage

India wastes substantial amounts of food due to poor storage, transportation losses, and inefficient supply chains. Lack of cold storage facilities particularly affects fruits, vegetables, and dairy products.

Reducing post-harvest losses through better infrastructure and technology is essential for improving food security.

h. Population Growth

India's large population creates immense pressure on food systems, natural resources, and agricultural land. Urbanization and changing consumption patterns are increasing the demand for diversified and nutritious food products.

i. Workforce Nutrition and the Policy Gap

Workforce nutrition is another blind spot. Corporate wellness programmes generally focus on fitness or mental health, and rarely on nutrition. Dietary practices among industrial and gig-economy workers (both of which are fast-growing) are often devoid of organised, nutrition-oriented support, which stunts productivity. The International Labour Organization (ILO) has warned that neglecting workforce nutrition can reduce efficiency and earnings across developing economies. Nutrition remains sequestered as welfare and is not considered as an economic infrastructure which crosses sectors.

j. Crisis in Gulf and Blockage of Strait of Hormuz

The escalating geopolitical crisis in the Persian Gulf and the subsequent near-total blockade of the Strait of Hormuz following the February 28, 2026 attacks have dealt a severe, multi-dimensional shock to India's domestic agricultural policy and food security architecture. As a critical maritime chokepoint handling roughly 20 per cent of global oil and one-third of seaborne fertilizer trade, the closure of the Strait has directly destabilized India's agrarian economy by cutting off vital upstream agricultural inputs. Most notably, India relies heavily on this volatile region for approximately 40 per cent of its total urea supply. The sudden supply shock has forced premier regional manufacturing assets, including Qatar Energy's

world-largest single-site urea plant, to abruptly halt operations due to acute shortages of natural gas feedstock. Because natural gas constitutes 60 to 80 per cent of the production cost of nitrogen fertilizers, its scarcity has catalysed an immediate 30 per cent surge in global benchmark urea prices within a single month. This input crisis is further compounded by a freeze in the regional sulphur trade, which commands 45 per cent of the global market share and is indispensable for manufacturing soluble phosphate fertilizers. Consequently, Indian farmers preparing for vital crop cycles are confronting severe nutrient deficits, threatening to severely compress domestic crop yields and recreate the turbulent domestic farmer protests and production dampening observed late last year.

Beyond direct fertilizer supply shortages, the physical disruption of shipping lanes through the Strait of Hormuz has triggered complex domestic transmission loops that directly fuel food hyperinflation and destabilize rural livelihoods across India. The threat of regional drone and missile strikes has compelled maritime freight carriers to either bypass the Persian Gulf entirely or implement lengthy, expensive rerouting around the Cape of Good Hope, adding weeks to transit times and driving up war-risk insurance premiums. This logistics bottleneck has led to a major geometry of delay at domestic ports, leaving critical Indian agricultural exports—ranging from high-value Basmati rice to tea, fruits, and vegetables bound for the Arabian Peninsula—stagnated and rotting at shipping docks. This export freeze is further aggravated by soaring crude oil and diesel prices, which are rapidly climbing toward the \$110–\$120 per barrel mark. Because modern Indian industrial farming relies heavily on diesel to power everything from irrigation pumps and tractors to cross-country transport trucks, these surging energy costs have exponentially inflated the expense of every stage of the food supply chain. The resultant inflationary pressures are hitting everyday essentials like vegetables, milk, and grains, severely stressing lower- and middle-income household budgets. This squeeze forces a contraction in discretionary rural spending, drives localized job losses within the informal hospitality and vending sectors, and undermines India's wider food security and sovereign safety nets during the pivotal 2025–26 agricultural policy year.

Emerging Trends in Food Security

- **Shift Toward Nutritional Security:** India's contemporary policy matrix is pivotally transitioning from basic calorie sufficiency to comprehensive nutritional outcomes. This evolution prioritises the large-scale production, procurement, and promotion of nutrient-dense millets, pulses, and biofortified foods to directly combat widespread micronutrient deficiencies and lower-income dietary poverty.
- **Digitalisation of Food Distribution:** The structural integrity of the Public Distribution System (PDS) has been heavily reinforced through automated technology. The systemic rollout of biometric verification, digitalised ration cards, and real-time online supply chain monitoring has significantly optimised operational efficiency while lowering leakages and corruption at local fair price shops.
- **Promotion of Sustainable Agriculture:** To secure long-term food output against compounding environmental degradation, India is increasingly subsidising and integrating climate-resilient farming techniques. Key strategic focus areas include water conservation infrastructure, organic farming, precision agriculture, and the

deployment of stress-tolerant, climate-hardy crop strains to protect vital natural resources.

- **International Recognition:** India's comprehensive domestic food safety nets and adaptive agrarian strategies have garnered significant global validation. Notably, the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) formally acknowledged the country's progressive contributions to stabilizing global food security frameworks and pioneering scalable, climate-smart agricultural development models.

Conclusion

Food security in India has improved considerably due to increased agricultural production, government welfare schemes, and technological advancements in food distribution systems. Policies such as the National Food Security Act and welfare initiatives during the pandemic helped protect millions from hunger.

However, significant challenges remain in the form of malnutrition, poverty, food inflation, climate change, and unequal access to nutritious food. India must therefore move beyond food sufficiency toward comprehensive nutritional security. Investments in sustainable agriculture, women's health, child nutrition, rural infrastructure, and climate adaptation are essential for ensuring long-term food security.

Achieving Sustainable Development Goal 2 (Zero Hunger) will require coordinated efforts from the government, private sector, civil society, and local communities. India's future food security strategy must focus not only on feeding its population but also on ensuring healthy, safe, and nutritious diets for all citizens.

Recommendations

Based on the demands raised by civil society networks especially the Right to Food Campaign, the central and state governments should adopt the following policy measures to enhance India's food and nutritional security framework:

- **Strengthen Social Security Nets via MGNREGA:** Reinstate and robustly fund the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA). Fiscal allocations should be realistically estimated using updated demographic projections and real-time demand for work, ensuring streamlined, timely wage payments to fortify rural livelihoods and purchasing power.
- **De-link Social Sector Budgeting from Arbitrary Caps:** Transition away from rigid fiscal ceilings in social welfare budgeting. Financial allocations for essential human capital programs must dynamically adapt to evolving demographic realities rather than artificial budgetary limits.
- **Expand the PDS Food Basket for Nutrition and Farmer Viability:** Diversify the commodities distributed through the Public Distribution System (PDS) by integrating millets, pulses, and edible oils alongside staple grains. These items should be systematically procured through the Minimum Support Price (MSP) mechanism to

simultaneously guarantee fair remuneration for farmers and address widespread nutritional deficiencies.

- **Universalise the Public Distribution System:** Shift from targeted rationing to a universal PDS framework, transforming access to subsidised food into a legally binding entitlement for any individual requiring food assistance.
- **Rebalance Fiscal Priorities Toward Public Welfare:** Reorient macroeconomic budgetary policies away from corporate-centric stimulus frameworks toward equitable economic development. Fiscal strategy should explicitly prioritise sustainable livelihood generation, accountability in governance, and robust safety nets for vulnerable populations.

References

1. Ahmad, H. (2025, October 4). Nutrition as economic policy: Investing in diets is investing in development. *Observer Research Foundation*.
<https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/nutrition-as-economic-policy-investing-in-diets-is-investing-in-development>
2. British Broadcasting Corporation. (2026). [Title of BBC News Article]. BBC News.
<https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/crk1066npvzo> (Note: Please insert the specific headline of the article in place of the bracketed placeholder text).
3. Chandra, A. (2026, April 6). Chokepoints and chain reactions: How the Iran crisis could disrupt India's supply lines. *Down To Earth*.
<https://www.downtoearth.org.in/economy/chokepoints-and-chain-reactions-how-the-iran-crisis-could-disrupt-indias-supply-lines>
4. Countercurrents. (2026, February). Budget 2026-27: Under-utilisation as policy/under-allocation as outcome. *Countercurrents*.
<https://countercurrents.org/2026/02/budget-2026-27-under-utilisation-as-policyunder-allocation-as-outcome/>
5. Gordon, N., & Corthell, L. (2026, March 12). The other global crisis stemming from the Strait of Hormuz's blockage. *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*.
<https://carnegieendowment.org/emissary/2026/03/fertilizer-iran-hormuz-food-crisis>
6. Frontline. (2026). India faces economic shocks from Iran-Hormuz war. *Frontline*.
<https://frontline.thehindu.com/economy/india-faces-economic-shocks-from-iran-hormuz-war/article70893262.ece>
7. Food and Agriculture Organization. (2025). *The state of food security and nutrition in the world 2025: Addressing high food price inflation for food security and nutrition*. FAO.
<https://www.fao.org/publications/fao-flagship-publications/the-state-of-food-security-and-nutrition-in-the-world/en>
8. KPMG. (2025). *Food and nutritional security in India*. KPMG India.
<https://kpmg.com/in/en/insights/2025/02/food-and-nutritional-security-in-india.html>
9. Mishra, B., Vidhani, V., Roy, D., & Pradhan, M. (2026, March 16). Putting women at the center of agrifood transformation: Lessons from Odisha, India. *International Food Policy Research Institute*.
<https://www.ifpri.org/blog/putting-women-at-the-center-of-agrifood-transformation-lessons-from-odisha-india/>
10. Times of India. (2026a, February 26). *Food security alone not enough, focus must shift to nutrition, says agri expert Prabhu Pingali*.
<https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/hyderabad/food-security-alone-not-enough-focus-must-shift-to-nutrition-says-agri-expert-prabhu-pingali/articleshow/128126905.cms>

11. Times of India. (2026b, May 20). *PM Modi conferred Food and Agricultural Organisation's highest honour for contribution to global food security.*
<https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/pm-modi-conferred-food-and-agricultural-organisations-highest-honour-agricola-medal-for-contribution-to-global-food-security/articleshow/131230844.cms>
12. Times of India. (2026c, April 24). *Extreme heat puts food systems and farm livelihoods at risk: FAO-WMO report.*
<https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/chandigarh/extreme-heat-puts-food-systems-farm-livelihoods-at-risk-fao-wmo-report/articleshow/130448540.cms>
13. UNICEF India. (2025, 23 Oktober). *Overweight and obesity rising across all ages in India, new data shows.* UNICEF.
<https://www.unicef.org/india/press-releases/india-overweight-and-obesity-rising-across-all-ages>
14. United Nations. (2025). *Food security improves slightly in 2024, but multiple crises threaten a reversal.* <https://www.un.org/en/global-issues/food>
15. Singh, I. S. (2026, March 7). *Here is how US-Israel war on Iran impacts agrarian production in India and beyond.* *ETV Bharat.*
<https://www.etvbharat.com/en/opinion/here-is-how-us-isreal-war-on-iran-impacts-agrarian-production-in-india-and-beyond-enn26030703157>

JUSTICE

Access to Justice and Judiciary Processes

Undertrial Detention, Social Inequality, and Judicial Delay

***Intro:** The predominance of undertrial prisoners remains the defining feature of incarceration in India. Of the total prison population, 72.6 per cent were undertrials while convicted prisoners accounted for 26.6 per cent.*

The Indian Constitution places justice at the centre of democratic governance. The Preamble commits the Republic to securing justice in its social, economic, and political dimensions, while Articles 14, 21, and 39A establish principles of equality before law, protection of life and personal liberty, and equal access to justice through legal aid. Judicial interpretation has further recognised procedural fairness and the right to a speedy trial as important dimensions of liberty. These constitutional commitments provide the broader framework through which access to justice may be understood in India.

Access to justice extends beyond the formal existence of courts and legal rights. It involves the practical ability of individuals to approach institutions, secure representation, and navigate legal processes within reasonable timeframes and without disproportionate barriers. Prisons provide an important lens through which these institutional processes may be examined because patterns of incarceration frequently reflect developments within policing, adjudication, and legal aid systems.

Recent prison and judicial data offer important insight into these relationships. Patterns of prison occupancy, undertrial detention, and judicial pendency reveal that incarceration is closely connected with institutional capacity and procedural timelines. Equally significant is the social profile of prison populations, which highlights how legal processes intersect with religion, caste, and socio-economic disadvantage. Examining these trends together allows for a more grounded understanding of access to justice in contemporary India.

Prison Occupancy and the Centrality of Undertrial Detention

India's prison system consists of central jails, district jails, sub-jails, open prisons, women's prisons, and special jails distributed across states and union territories. Recent prison statistics recorded 1,333 prisons with an authorised capacity of 4,53,769 inmates and an actual prison population of 5,11,542, producing a national occupancy rate of 112.7 per cent (NCRB, 2026). Although occupancy levels showed some improvement from the previous year, several states and union territories continued to operate beyond sanctioned capacity.

The uneven geography of overcrowding is particularly notable. Delhi reported an occupancy rate of 194.6 per cent, while Meghalaya and Jammu and Kashmir recorded 163.5 per cent and 148.3 per cent respectively (NCRB, 2026). District and central jails, which accommodate large numbers of undertrial prisoners, continue to experience substantial pressure on infrastructure and administrative resources.

The predominance of undertrial prisoners remains the defining feature of incarceration in India. Of the total prison population, 72.6 per cent were undertrials while convicted prisoners accounted for 26.6 per cent (NCRB, 2026). In effect, a majority of those incarcerated are awaiting investigation or trial rather than serving sentences following conviction. This pattern is visible across several states, particularly Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, and Maharashtra, which continue to report large undertrial populations.

Duration of detention provides additional insight into this pattern. While most undertrials remained in prison for less than one year, a significant proportion experienced longer periods of detention, and a smaller but notable number remained incarcerated for more than five years without conviction (NCRB, 2026). These figures indicate that prison occupancy is influenced not only by crime or conviction rates but also by the pace and progression of criminal proceedings.

The persistence of high undertrial populations raises broader questions regarding the use of detention within the criminal justice process. Pre-trial detention serves legitimate legal purposes in particular circumstances, including ensuring investigation and court appearance. However, when detention becomes prolonged or widespread, it also draws attention to how procedural timelines and institutional capacity shape incarceration patterns.

Judicial Pendency and Delayed Adjudication

The relationship between incarceration and court functioning becomes clearer when viewed alongside judicial pendency. District courts across India recorded more than 4.9 crore pending cases as of 29 May 2026, including nearly 3.8 crore criminal matters, with over 3.3 crore cases pending for more than one year (NJDG, 2026).

These figures are significant because district courts constitute the primary forum for criminal proceedings. Case backlog does not automatically result in detention, and not all criminal proceedings involve custody. Nonetheless, extended timelines in criminal adjudication can influence the duration of undertrial incarceration, particularly where individuals face procedural delays, repeated adjournments, or limited access to timely legal assistance.

The growing workload of courts reflects broader structural pressures within justice administration. Case accumulation across judicial levels has crossed five crore matters, shaped by continuing inflow of cases, vacancy concerns, and procedural complexity (India Justice Report, 2025). Subordinate courts, which handle the bulk of criminal litigation, often function under significant workload pressures.

At the same time, important institutional reforms have been introduced. Digitisation, e-filing systems, online case-tracking, and video conferencing have expanded substantially and improved transparency and monitoring of court processes (India Justice Report, 2025). These reforms indicate sustained efforts to strengthen judicial administration. Yet the coexistence of technological reform and continuing pendency suggests that efficiency gains alone may not fully address deeper institutional pressures relating to staffing, infrastructure, and procedural practices.

Understanding pendency therefore requires moving beyond numerical backlog and examining how court capacity, legal representation, and procedural timelines interact within the justice process.

Religion, Caste, and the Social Profile of Undertrials

Recent prison data provide an important opportunity to examine incarceration through a social lens. Religion-wise and caste-wise disaggregation of undertrial prisoners allows closer examination of who enters and remains within the prison system.

Religion-wise data indicate that Hindus constituted 64.7 per cent of undertrial prisoners, compared with 79.8 per cent of the national population according to Census 2011 estimates. Muslims accounted for 18.8 per cent of undertrials while representing 14.2 per cent of the population. Sikh prisoners similarly constituted a larger proportion of undertrial inmates than their national population share (NCRB, 2026).

These figures should be interpreted carefully. Prison statistics alone do not establish discrimination, causation, or direct relationships between identity and incarceration. However, they do raise important questions concerning differential experiences within legal and institutional processes. Regional patterns further demonstrate that incarceration reflects local demographic and administrative contexts. Assam, for example, reported more Muslim than Hindu undertrial prisoners, while Punjab significantly shaped Sikh representation within prisons (NCRB, 2026).

Caste-wise data reveal similarly important patterns. Scheduled Castes constituted 16.6 per cent of undertrial prisoners, Scheduled Tribes 9.2 per cent, and Other Backward Classes 29.7 per cent (NCRB, 2026). Together, these communities form a substantial share of India's undertrial population. States such as Uttar Pradesh and Bihar recorded comparatively high SC and OBC undertrial populations, while Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, and Jharkhand reflected stronger ST representation.

These patterns are significant because incarceration rarely exists independently of wider socio-economic conditions. Prison data indicate that many inmates possess limited formal education and belong to economically vulnerable households (NCRB, 2026). Poverty, unstable livelihoods, and limited access to legal information can shape how individuals engage with legal institutions and respond to procedural requirements.

The overrepresentation of certain communities within prison populations should therefore be situated within broader discussions concerning social inequality and institutional accessibility. Religion and caste do not operate as isolated explanatory categories. Rather, they intersect with education, income, regional disadvantage, and legal awareness in ways that influence encounters with the justice system.

Towards a Broader Access-to-Justice Framework

The patterns emerging from prison populations and judicial pendency suggest that access to justice cannot be viewed solely as a matter of courts or prison administration. Undertrial detention, prison overcrowding, and the social composition of incarceration are shaped by multiple institutions and political choices. Addressing these concerns therefore requires engagement across government agencies, legal institutions, political actors, media platforms, and civil society.

For governments, the challenge extends beyond expanding prison infrastructure. Greater investment in judicial capacity, including timely appointments, improved court infrastructure, and strengthened digital systems, remains necessary for addressing pendency and ensuring

timely adjudication. Administrative coordination between prisons, courts, police, and legal aid authorities can further support case monitoring and reduce procedural delays. Existing legal safeguards relating to prolonged detention and bail require more consistent implementation, particularly in cases involving economically vulnerable individuals.

Political parties also play an important role in shaping public and legislative priorities relating to justice administration. Criminal justice reform has often received limited sustained attention within electoral and policy debates despite its implications for constitutional rights and public institutions. Legislative engagement with issues such as legal aid, prison reform, undertrial review mechanisms, and court capacity can contribute to more informed and long-term policy approaches.

Legal institutions, including bar associations, legal aid authorities, and judicial bodies, remain central to improving access to justice. Expansion of jail legal aid clinics, legal literacy programmes, and defence support services may assist individuals who face financial and procedural barriers within the justice system. Strengthening institutional coordination and promoting timely representation are particularly relevant in contexts where undertrial detention intersects with poverty and limited legal awareness.

Media institutions similarly influence public understanding of justice. Reporting on crime and incarceration often focuses on individual cases or sensational events, while structural issues such as pendency, legal aid, and prison conditions receive comparatively limited attention. More sustained and evidence-based reporting on justice institutions can support informed public discussion and encourage greater transparency regarding systemic challenges and reform efforts.

Civil society organisations and academic institutions continue to play an important complementary role. Through legal awareness campaigns, research, advocacy, and community engagement, these actors help document patterns that may otherwise remain underexamined. Their work also contributes to public dialogue and provides important evidence for institutional reform and policy development.

Access to justice is therefore best understood as a shared constitutional and institutional responsibility. Prison statistics and judicial data do more than just describe inmate populations or court workloads; they illuminate how laws, institutions, and social conditions intersect in shaping experiences of justice. Strengthening access to justice consequently requires not only procedural efficiency but also sustained engagement across institutions and public life.

References

1. Government of India. (1950). The Constitution of India. Ministry of Law and Justice. <https://legislative.gov.in/constitution-of-india/>
2. India Justice Report. (2025). India Justice Report 2025: Ranking states on the capacity of police, judiciary, prisons and legal aid. Tata Trusts, Centre for Social Justice, Common Cause, and partners. <https://indiajusticereport.org>
3. National Crime Records Bureau. (2026). Prison statistics India 2024. Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India. <https://ncrb.gov.in>
4. National Judicial Data Grid. (2026). District and taluka courts of India: Pending cases dashboard (Data retrieved May 29, 2026). e-Courts Project, Government of India. <https://njdg.ecourts.gov.in/>

Law as an Instrument of Oppression

Political Detention, Legislative Weaponisation, and the Erosion of Constitutional Liberty in Contemporary India

Intro: That the first sitting Chief Minister in India's history to be arrested required multiple rounds of Supreme Court intervention to secure bail pending trial encapsulates a great deal about the ED's operational relationship with political adversarialism.

The distinction between rule of *law* and rule *by* law maps with uncomfortable precision onto the institutional condition this article examines. A.V. Dicey located the rule of law in the equal subjection of all persons and institutions to courts operating independently of executive direction;⁶ the Constitution of India's commitments under Articles 14, 19, and 21 embed this principle in a framework of equality, expressive freedom, and personal liberty constrained only by fair procedure.⁷ The corruption of this ideal occurs not when legality is formally abandoned but when it is instrumentalised, when legal forms are retained while their substantive purposes are evacuated.⁸

Past years of India's constitutional experience suggest that aspiration and institutional reality have diverged in measurable ways. What follows examines that divergence across three specific registers: the UAPA's prolonged detention regime, the political deployment of the Enforcement Directorate, and the legal marginalisation of independent journalism.

The Architecture of Legislative Repression

The structural foundation of this divergence is a body of special legislation whose internal logic systematically privileges detention over adjudication. Section 43D(5) of the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act 1967, substantially reconfigured by the 2019 Amendment, provides that bail shall not be granted where there exist reasonable grounds to believe the accusation is *prima facie* true.⁹ In *NIA v Zahoor Ahmad Shah Watali*, the Supreme Court confirmed that the scope of bail inquiry under the UAPA is materially narrower than the ordinary criminal standard, effectively foreclosing substantive bail review at the pre-trial stage.¹⁰

The Prevention of Money Laundering Act 2002 replicates this architecture in the domain of economic crime:¹¹ in *Vijay Madanlal Choudhary v Union of India*, the Supreme Court upheld the Enforcement Directorate's expansive powers of arrest, attachment, and reversed evidential burden, insulating the agency from standard procedural challenge.¹² Both regimes

⁶AV Dicey, *Introduction to the Study of the Law of the Constitution* (10th edn, Macmillan 1959) 107–108.

⁷Constitution of India 1950, arts 14, 19 and 21.

⁸See Upendra Baxi, *The Future of Human Rights* (3rd edn, OUP 2012) 35–42; Roberto Mangabeira Unger, *The Critical Legal Studies Movement* (Harvard University Press 1983) 1–18.

⁹Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act 1967 (as amended by the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Amendment Act 2019), s 43D(5).

¹⁰*NIA v Zahoor Ahmad Shah Watali* (2019) 5 SCC 1, [12]–[15].

¹¹Prevention of Money Laundering Act 2002.

¹²*Vijay Madanlal Choudhary v Union of India* (2022) 9 SCC 321.

operate formally within the shadow of *Maneka Gandhi*'s expansive reading of Article 21,¹³ yet in practice reduce its guarantees to a formal residue that courts can invoke only in exceptional circumstances.

Bhima Koregaon and the Accretion of UAPA Detention (2024–2026)

The Bhima Koregaon prosecutions have, across seven years, demonstrated with clinical precision the human cost of the UAPA's bail-restrictive architecture. Several accused, activists, academics, and lawyers arrested under the Act on allegations of association with banned organisations, have endured prolonged pre-trial incarceration, with human rights organisations extensively documenting the conditions of their detention.¹⁴

The death of Father Stan Swamy in custody in July 2021, without conviction of any offence, drew condemnation from United Nations Special Rapporteurs¹⁵ and has come to represent, in international human rights discourse, the consequences of indefinite pre-trial detention under punitive bail legislation. The Supreme Court in *Union of India v K A Najeeb* confirmed that constitutional courts retain the power to grant bail on Article 21 grounds notwithstanding the UAPA's statutory bar;¹⁶ this principle yielded bail for Vernon Gonsalves and Arun Ferreira in September 2023 after years of incarceration.¹⁷ That such relief required exhaustive judicial engagement before materialising illuminates the systemic inertia these regimes create.¹⁸

Through 2024 and into 2025, the case continued to generate significant Supreme Court engagement. The Court monitored the conditions and legal basis of Gautam Navlakha's house arrest, a concession extracted on grounds of age and ill-health, through multiple hearings in 2024, while the underlying trial before the NIA Special Court proceeded without resolution.¹⁹

Meanwhile, constitutional petitions challenging the UAPA's 2019 Amendment, including the power to designate individuals as terrorists under Section 35 without judicial determination, remain pending before the Supreme Court, their resolution deferred even as the provisions continue to be actively invoked.²⁰ This temporal gap between the deployment of exceptional powers and the adjudication of their constitutionality is not incidental to the regime; it is structural to it.

¹³*Maneka Gandhi v Union of India* AIR 1978 SC 597.

¹⁴Amnesty International, 'India 2023' in *Amnesty International Report 2023/24* (Amnesty International 2024); Human Rights Watch, *World Report 2024: India* (HRW 2024).

¹⁵United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights Defenders, 'Statement on the Death of Father Stan Swamy, Jesuit Priest and Human Rights Defender in India' (UN OHCHR, 8 July 2021) <<https://www.ohchr.org>> accessed 2 June 2026.

¹⁶*Union of India v K A Najeeb* (2021) 3 SCC 713, [18]–[22].

¹⁷*Vernon Gonsalves v State of Maharashtra* (Supreme Court, September 2023); Human Rights Watch, *World Report 2024: India* (HRW 2024).

¹⁸Human Rights Watch, *World Report 2024: India* (HRW 2024)

<<https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2024/country-chapters/india>> accessed 2 June 2026.

¹⁹*Gautam Navlakha v National Investigation Agency* (Supreme Court proceedings, 2024): the Court continued to monitor the conditions and legal basis of Navlakha's house arrest through multiple hearings; see also Human Rights Watch, *World Report 2024: India* (HRW 2024).

²⁰Multiple constitutional petitions challenging provisions of the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Amendment Act 2019, including the power to designate individuals as terrorists under s 35 without judicial determination, remain pending before the Supreme Court; see Human Rights Watch, *World Report 2024: India* (HRW 2024).

The Enforcement Directorate's Political Calculus (2024–2026)

The arrest of Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal by the Enforcement Directorate on 21 March 2024, in the weeks immediately preceding India's Lok Sabha elections, placed the ED's operating calculus under acute constitutional scrutiny.²¹ The Supreme Court granted Kejriwal a 21 day interim bail on 10 May 2024 for election campaign participation,²² a relief whose framing, acknowledging his status as a constitutionally elected representative, was itself a judicial concession that the arrest had acquired dimensions beyond the merely criminal. He surrendered as directed and was subsequently granted regular bail by the Supreme Court on 12 July 2024.²³ That the first sitting Chief Minister in India's history to be arrested required multiple rounds of Supreme Court intervention to secure bail pending trial encapsulates a great deal about the ED's operational relationship with political adversarialism.

The Kejriwal case was not an anomaly. In *Manish Sisodia v Central Bureau of Investigation*, the Supreme Court on 9 August 2024 granted bail after noting over seventeen months of pre-trial detention, invoking Article 21 and the principle that bail, not incarceration, is the constitutional default where trial is unreasonably delayed.²⁴ In the same year, Hemant Soren, Chief Minister of Jharkhand, was arrested by the ED on 31 January 2024; he was released on bail, and his party's victory in the Jharkhand assembly elections in November 2024 introduced an unusual democratic reckoning into the narrative of his prosecution.²⁵ Taken together, these episodes document what Human Rights Watch has characterised as a discernible pattern of high-profile ED investigations tracking political opposition,²⁶ one that implicates Article 14's guarantee of equality before law not merely as a doctrinal matter but as a live measure of institutional legitimacy.²⁷

Journalism Under Legal Siege (2024–2026)

The period under review has seen the legal marginalisation of independent journalism consolidate as a structural feature of India's democratic landscape. India's ranking on the Reporters Without Borders World Press Freedom Index stood at 159th out of 180 countries in 2024.²⁸ The constitutional protection of free expression under Article 19(1)(a) remains

²¹Human Rights Watch, *World Report 2024: India* (HRW 2024); Amnesty International, 'India 2023' in *Amnesty International Report 2023/24* (Amnesty International 2024).

²²*Arvind Kejriwal v Directorate of Enforcement* (Supreme Court, 10 May 2024): the Court granted a twenty-one-day interim bail expressly for the purpose of election campaign participation, acknowledging Kejriwal's status as a constitutionally elected representative.

²³*Arvind Kejriwal v Directorate of Enforcement* (Supreme Court, 12 July 2024).

²⁴*Manish Sisodia v Central Bureau of Investigation* (Supreme Court, 9 August 2024): the Court granted bail after noting over seventeen months of pre-trial detention, invoking Article 21 and the principle that bail, not jail, is the constitutional default where trial is unreasonably delayed.

²⁵*Hemant Soren v Enforcement Directorate* (Supreme Court proceedings, 2024): Soren, the Chief Minister of Jharkhand, was arrested by the Enforcement Directorate on 31 January 2024; he was subsequently released on bail and re-elected as Chief Minister following the Jharkhand state assembly elections in November 2024.

²⁶Human Rights Watch, *World Report 2024: India* (HRW 2024)

<<https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2024/country-chapters/india>> accessed 2 June 2026.

²⁷Constitution of India 1950, art 14; MP Jain, *Indian Constitutional Law* (8th edn, LexisNexis 2018) 893–920; Dicey (n 1) 107–108.

²⁸Reporters Without Borders (RSF), *World Press Freedom Index 2024* (RSF 2024) <<https://rsf.org/en/index>> accessed 2 June 2026.

formally intact;²⁹ the erosion of press freedom operates not through explicit prohibition but through the instrumentalisation of broadly framed statutory provisions, increasingly, the UAPA itself, to impose prohibitive legal costs on critical reporting. The Committee to Protect Journalists has documented multiple cases in which journalists faced serious legal jeopardy in connection with reporting on communal violence, political corruption, and security operations.³⁰ The Supreme Court's May 2024 ruling in *Prabir Purkayastha v State (NCT of Delhi)*, holding that grounds of arrest must be furnished in writing at the time of arrest and that failure to do so invalidates the arrest, provided important procedural clarity arising from the prosecution of a digital media founder under the UAPA.³¹ The judgment addressed the mechanics of arrest rather than the legitimacy of its statutory basis: significant relief, but relief that leaves the broader institutional architecture of press suppression structurally intact.

Reform bail-restrictive legislation

The weaponisation of law is not a repudiation of the rule of law but a mutation of it, one that retains legal form while evacuating legal substance, producing prosecutions that formally comply with constitutional procedure while their substantive purposes remain constitutionally indefensible. Upendra Baxi has observed that the discourse on rights is susceptible to appropriation by the very structures it was designed to constrain: the state participates in the language of constitutionalism to legitimise what constitutional purpose would condemn.³² Remedying this condition requires more than judicial case management. It requires reform of bail-restrictive legislation to align with international fair trial standards,³³ structural insulation of investigative agencies from executive direction, and the restoration of conditions under which journalism and advocacy are practised without existential legal risk. The Indian Constitution was designed to protect citizens from the power of the state itself. That design, and the institutions charged with its enforcement, remain worth defending.

²⁹Constitution of India 1950, art 19(1)(a).

³⁰Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), *Attacks on the Press 2024* (CPJ 2024) <<https://cpj.org>> accessed 2 June 2026.

³¹*Prabir Purkayastha v State (NCT of Delhi)* 2024 SCC OnLine SC 882, decided 15 May 2024.

³²Upendra Baxi, *The Future of Human Rights* (3rd edn, OUP 2012) 1–25.

³³International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (adopted 16 December 1966, entered into force 23 March 1976) 999 UNTS 171, art 9; UN Human Rights Committee, *General Comment No 35: Article 9 (Liberty and Security of Person)*, UN Doc CCPR/C/GC/35 (16 December 2014) para 38.

References

A. Primary Sources

Cases

- Arvind Kejriwal v Directorate of Enforcement* (Supreme Court, 10 May 2024) (21-day interim bail for Lok Sabha elections)
- Arvind Kejriwal v Directorate of Enforcement* (Supreme Court, 12 July 2024)
- Gautam Navlakha v National Investigation Agency* (Supreme Court proceedings, 2024)
- Hemant Soren v Enforcement Directorate* (Supreme Court proceedings, 2024)
- Maneka Gandhi v Union of India* AIR 1978 SC 597
- Manish Sisodia v Central Bureau of Investigation* (Supreme Court, 9 August 2024)
- NIA v Zahoor Ahmad Shah Watali* (2019) 5 SCC 1
- Prabir Purkayastha v State (NCT of Delhi)* 2024 SCC OnLine SC 882
- Union of India v K A Najeeb* (2021) 3 SCC 713
- Vernon Gonsalves v State of Maharashtra* (Supreme Court, September 2023)
- Vijay Madanlal Choudhary v Union of India* (2022) 9 SCC 321

Legislation and International Instruments

- Constitution of India 1950
- International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (adopted 16 December 1966, entered into force 23 March 1976) 999 UNTS 171
- Prevention of Money Laundering Act 2002
- Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act 1967 (as amended by the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Amendment Act 2019)

B. Secondary Sources

Books

- Austin G, *The Indian Constitution: Cornerstone of a Nation* (Clarendon Press 1966)
- Baxi U, *The Future of Human Rights* (3rd edn, OUP 2012)
- Dicey AV, *Introduction to the Study of the Law of the Constitution* (10th edn, Macmillan 1959)
- Jain MP, *Indian Constitutional Law* (8th edn, LexisNexis 2018)
- Unger RM, *The Critical Legal Studies Movement* (Harvard University Press 1983)

Reports and Other Materials

- Amnesty International, 'India 2023' in *Amnesty International Report 2023/24* (Amnesty International 2024)
- Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), *Attacks on the Press 2024* (CPJ 2024) <<https://cpj.org>> accessed 2 June 2026
- Human Rights Watch, *World Report 2024: India* (HRW 2024) <<https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2024/country-chapters/india>> accessed 2 June 2026
- Reporters Without Borders (RSF), *World Press Freedom Index 2024* (RSF 2024) <<https://rsf.org/en/index>> accessed 2 June 2026

UN Human Rights Committee, *General Comment No 35: Article 9 (Liberty and Security of Person)*, UN Doc CCPR/C/GC/35 (16 December 2014)

United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights Defenders, 'Statement on the Death of Father Stan Swamy' (UN OHCHR, 8 July 2021) <<https://www.ohchr.org>> accessed 2 June 2026

Education (School)

The Quiet Dismantling: How School Closures and Mergers Undermine the Right to Education in India

***Intro:** Private schools are not bound by the RTE's neighbourhood norms or reservation quotas. For marginalized families, the choice is often not between a good government school and a good private school. It is between a distant, understaffed government school and no school at all. The result is a two-tier system where quality education becomes a commodity.*

In 2009, India made a historic commitment. The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009, turned education for children of 6-14 age group into a fundamental right under Article 21A of the Constitution linking it with right to life under Article 45. The Act enacted on 1st April, 2010 had to be implemented within three years in all schools. The law was clear: every child, regardless of caste, gender, religion, disability, or economic status, was entitled to a neighbourhood school with adequate teachers, infrastructure, and learning materials.

Sixteen years later, that promise is being tested by a different logic. Across states, governments are closing and merging thousands of schools in the name of rationalisation, consolidation and resource optimisation. The numbers tell a stark story. A recent report says that between 2014-15 and 2024-25, India lost 93,779 government schools. In Madhya Pradesh alone, over 49,000 schools were shut in 15 years, with 300 more merged this session. Meanwhile, 51,000 new private schools opened in the same decade.

What is happening on the ground? Why it matters under the RTE framework? What will it take to reverse the trend?

The Scale of the Problem: Numbers That Demand Attention

The data from the Ministry of Education, presented in Parliament, shows a systemic contraction of public schooling.

Government Schools Shrinking

- In 2014-15, India had 11,07,101 government schools. By 2024-25, that number fell to 10,13,322.
- That is an average of 25 government schools closing every day for 10 years.
- Enrolment in government schools dropped by 2.25 crore students in the same period.

Private Schools Expanding

- Over 51,000 new private schools opened between 2014-15 and 2024-25.
- Enrolment in private schools rose by 1.12 crore.
- Half of the children who left government schools moved to private schools.

State-Wise Impact

The burden is not evenly distributed. North and East India have seen the sharpest cuts.

- Madhya Pradesh: 30,000 schools closed.
- Uttar Pradesh: 25,000 schools closed.
- Within MP, districts like Chhindwara, Betul, and Rewa each lost over 1,400 schools.
- Bihar identified over 8,500 schools for merger, with 1,773 already merged. Here, the logic to merge these schools is that these schools lack proper building.
- Madhya Pradesh reorganised 36,000 schools into 16,000.

At the same time, teacher shortages persist. MP has 1,15,678 sanctioned teacher posts vacant out of 2,89,005. 1,968 schools run with a single teacher, and 46,417 schools have only two teachers. Nationally, 8.4 lakh teacher posts remain vacant, and 1.04 lakh schools function as single-teacher institutions serving 34 lakh students.

The Legal Test: What the RTE Act Actually Requires

The RTE Act is not silent on this issue. It sets a legal floor for school availability and quality.

Neighbourhood Norms

Section 6 and Rule 4 of the RTE Rules, 2010 mandate a primary school within 1 km and an upper primary school within 3 km of every habitation. This is measured by walking distance, not road distance on a map. When a school is merged, children are pushed beyond this limit unless the State provides free transport and escorts. In hilly, forested, or riverine areas, an extra 2 km can mean crossing a river or walking for an hour.

No Denial of Admission

Section 3 guarantees every child the right to free and compulsory education. Section 4 prohibits denial of admission and mandates special training for out-of-school children. A merger that results in dropouts violates this core duty.

Infrastructure and Teacher Norms

The schedule to the RTE Act specifies minimum infrastructure and Pupil-Teacher Ratio norms: 1:30 for primary and 1:35 for upper primary. Nationally, only 25.5 per cent of schools meet these norms. In MP, it is even lower. We have to remember that merging two non-compliant schools into one does not create compliance unless infrastructure and teachers are added first.

Community Participation

Section 21 mandates School Management Committees with 75 per cent parent representation. SMCs are meant to monitor school functioning and prepare development plans. Closing a village school often kills the SMC and severs the link between parents and the education system. A school is not just a building; it is a site of socialisation and local accountability.

The Ground Reality: Why Mergers Don't Deliver

The official rationale for mergers is better resource utilisation. Consolidated schools, the argument goes, can offer improved facilities, more qualified teachers, and a wider range of subjects. The evidence from states that have implemented large-scale mergers tells a different story.

Increased Distance and Dropout

In Rajasthan, a study found that mergers beyond 2 km led to a 12-18 per cent drop in attendance within one year, especially for girls in Classes 1-3. The same pattern is emerging in MP, UP, and Bihar. MP estimates 1.5-3 lakh potential dropouts from the 5,000-school merger. Nationally, 42 lakh children left government schools in four years.

Quality Does Not Improve Automatically

Merging two 30-student schools into one 60-student school does not improve learning if the receiving school is already overcrowded and understaffed. MP's data shows that even after mergers, 15,170 schools have fewer than 20 students and the state is not planning to post surplus teachers there. Learning outcomes depend on teaching practices, not just school size.

Equity Gaps Widen

Children with disabilities, tribal children, children of migrant and unorganized sector workers, and first-generation learners depend on neighbourhood schools. A school 500 meters off a main road may be "within 1 km" on paper but inaccessible during monsoon. For a child with a mobility impairment, 300 meters without a ramp is a barrier. The RTE Act makes no distinction between accessible and inaccessible habitations.

Loss of Community Identity

Schools function as community hubs. When a school closes, the SMC becomes defunct, parent engagement drops, and local monitoring vanishes. Rebuilding that trust takes years. As one educationist put it, "If a polling station can be set up for one voter in a remote forest, why can't a school be kept open for one child who wants to study?"

The Budget Problem: Underfunding as Policy

None of this can be separated from financing. The Ministry of Education received ₹1,39,289 crore for 2026-27, an 8.17 per cent increase from the previous year. But that is only 2.6 per cent of the Union Budget and 0.36 per cent of the GDP.

This is far below the 6 per cent of GDP target recommended by the Kothari Commission in 1968 and reiterated in NEP 2020. The Department of School Education gets ₹83,562 crore, just 1.56 per cent of the Union Budget. Worse, 100 per cent of Samagra Shiksha and PM POSHAN is now financed through the Prarambhik Shiksha Kosh, the education cess meant for additional needs, not core funding.

Underfunding creates the conditions for closure. When states cannot fill teacher posts or build classrooms, they label schools "low enrolment" and merge them. The cost is then

passed to families in the form of longer travel, higher private tuition, or children dropping out of school.

The Shift towards Privatisation

The contraction of public schooling coincides with the expansion of private schooling. Between 2014-15 and 2024-25, government school enrolment fell by 2.24 crore, while private school enrolment rose by 1.12 crore.

This is not a neutral market shift. Private schools are not bound by RTE's neighbourhood norms or reservation quotas. For marginalized families, the choice is often not between a good government school and a good private school. It is between a distant, understaffed government school and no school at all. The result is a two-tier system where quality education becomes a commodity.

What a Legally Sound Alternative Looks Like

If the goal is to improve quality and resource use without violating the right to education, the approach must change.

1: Conduct Child-Centric Impact Assessments

Before any merger, map habitations using GPS, hold Gram Sabha consultations, and create a child-wise transition plan. Track every child for 12 months after the change. No school should be merged if it pushes a child beyond 1 km/3 km without free transport.

2: Fill Teacher Vacancies and Meet PTR Norms

Transfer teachers with students. No school should run with a single teacher unless it is a last-resort, temporary arrangement with a clear timeline for recruitment.

3: Strengthen SMCs

Provide training, funds, and real decision-making power to SMCs. They are the first tier of accountability under the RTE Act.

4: Invest in Infrastructure

Use the education cess for additional needs, not to replace core budget allocations. Libraries, labs, toilets, and inclusive support systems are not luxuries; they are legal requirements.

5: Keep Small Schools Functional

For habitations beyond 3 km, consider seasonal hostels, bridge courses, or cluster teaching with at least one teacher posted on-site. The EGS model of the early 2000s showed that community-managed schools can work with state support.

The Stakes for Indian Democracy

Education is more than literacy and numeracy. It is how a society transmits values, builds critical thinking, and creates the conditions for equal citizenship. Libraries, peer learning, creative engagement, and discussions matter as much as test scores, especially for children growing up in environments marked by exclusion and instability.

Reducing education to measurable outcomes ignores its social, cultural, and emotional dimensions. Public education systems cannot be strengthened through metrics alone. They require sustained investment in relationships, participation, and community ownership.

The future of India is in its children. And the only vehicle through which education can reach the marginalised and disadvantaged is a robust national system of public education.

Conclusion: Counting Children, Not Schools

The RTE Act shifted education from a welfare scheme to a right. Rights are not subject to cost-benefit analysis. They are subject to fulfilment.

A school closure or merger that reduces access is not rationalization. It is retrogression. It undermines Article 21A and the promise made to every child in this country.

The test is simple: will this decision increase or decrease the number of children in a classroom tomorrow? If it decreases, the decision must be withdrawn.

India's choice is clear. We can continue to close schools and watch enrolment fall, or we can fill teacher posts, fund infrastructure, and make every neighbourhood school functional. The law is on the side of the latter. The question is whether policy will follow.

Higher Education/Skill Building

Higher Education in India: Promises and Limitations 2025-2026

Intro: Higher education in India is also plagued with increasing surveillance by the state and non-state actors. The academic syllabi, pedagogy, programme structures depend on the whims and fancies of the regime, disregarding long established academic practices.

The Modi Government's National Education Policy (NEP-2020) places great emphasis on developing "quality higher education" whose purpose is "more than the creation of greater opportunities for individual employment" (Section 9.1.3). It emphasises the important role of higher education in promoting societal well-being, Constitutional values, scientific temper, and creativity, spirit of service and 21st-century capabilities (Sections 9.1 and 9.1.1). It seeks "to develop all capacities of human beings" (Section 11.3).

To realise these goals, the higher education system must be "multidisciplinary", engage in "high quality teaching and research" (Section 10.14), and most importantly, must have "motivated, energised and capable faculty" (Section 13). NEP also promises to create "outstanding public institutions" alongside private ones, backed by adequate public funding (Section 10.9)¹.

For higher education, the overall Budget Allocation in the financial year 2025-26 is Rs. 50077.95 crore out of which Scheme allocation is Rs. 6990.88 crore and Non- Scheme allocation is Rs. 43087.07 crore. There has been an overall increase of Rs. 2458.18 crore (5.16 per cent) in the Budget Allocation of Department of Higher Education in the FY 2025-26 with respect to financial year 2024-25. The total Allocation of Autonomous Bodies in 2025-26 increased to Rs. 42732 crore from Rs. 39777.40 crore in 2024-25. This is an increase of 7.42 per cent. Allocation in Central Universities has been kept at Rs. 16691.31 crore, against Rs. 15928 crore in 2024-25 which is Rs 763.31 crore more i.e. 4.79 per cent increase. UGC has been allocated Rs.3335.97 crore in 2025-26, against Rs. 2500 crore in 2024-25 which is Rs. 835.97 crore more i.e. 33.44 per cent increase. IITs have been allocated Rs. 11349.00 crore in 2025-26, against Rs. 10324.50 crore in 2024-25 which is Rs. 1024.50 crore more i.e. 9.92 per cent increase. IIMs have been allocated Rs.251.89 crore in 2025-26, against Rs. 212.21 crore in 2024-25 increasing the allocation by Rs. 39.68 crore i.e. 18.70 per cent increase. However, the highest increase can be seen in the allocation for

IITs, Rs.407.00 crore in 2025-26, against Rs.315.91 crore in 2024-25 increasing the allocation by Rs. 91.09 crore i.e 28.83 per cent increase.

One of the most interesting aspects is the increased grant for Promotion of Indian Languages which has gone up to Rs.347.03 crore in 2025-26, against Rs.310.10 crore in 2024-25 increasing the allocation by Rs. 36.93 crore i.e. 11.91 per cent increase². It is proposed to incorporate a Bharatiya Bhasha Pustak scheme to provide digital-form Indian language books

Overall, the government has increased the total education budget to ₹128,650 crores, marking a 6.22 per cent increase over be 2024-25.

It is proposed that IITs which started after 2014 will get new infrastructure to attract 500 new students. There will be enhanced provision of 10,000 fellowships for technological research in IITs and IISC under PM research fellowship scheme. Additionally, five national centres of excellence will be launched for skilling to equip youth for “make for India, make for the world” Rs 500 crores will be invested to set up a centre for Artificial Intelligence. Now India has 23 IITs, 21 IIMs, and 20 AIIMS, alongside two International IIT Campuses in Zanzibar and Abu Dhabi. A centralized Academic Bank of Credit now covers 2660 institutions with over 4.6 crore identity cards issued. This academic bank of credits will help facilitate flexible entry-exit pathways and biannual admissions introduced by 153 universities to achieve the NEP target of 50 per cent Gross Enrollment Ratio by 2035³. While the UGC claims that these measures aim to significantly expand academic flexibility by offering students greater choice in subject selection and enabling a more flexible higher education system, the colleges, particularly serving in towns in Tier 2 and Tier 3, are struggling to implement these changes⁴.

Challenges before the NEP

The Indian higher education system despite all the laudatory attributes faces the challenge of equity. In a deeply hierarchical society, beset with caste, gender, ethnic and religious fissures, it is a struggle to ensure quality education for all. There are multiple accounts of students committing suicide due to caste and gendered discrimination⁵. There is a scant mechanism to resolve the issue of student dropouts in various institutes of higher education. The data from parliament reveals that 13,500 students have dropped out of the top educational institutions, such as IITs, NITs, IIMs, Central Universities, etc. Even more shocking is the representation of faculty at top-tier institutions. A study shows that even in the top five IITs, 98% of the faculty are upper castes, revealing that affirmative action in these institutions has not applied with due care. A response in the Lok Sabha pointed out

that only 4% of professors in 45 central universities belong to the other backward castes (OBCs). Furthermore, being directives prioritizing scholarship disbursement and preventing drop-outs, the implementation remains negligent. There are multiple instances when fellowships are not disbursed on time, leading to a crisis for marginalized students⁶. Thus, in this sense, caste has rediscovered itself, much as racism did in the West. Contemporary racism often avoids direct reference to race and instead relies on discourses of culture, migration, crime or competence. Caste in India follows a similar path. It survives less through formal exclusion and more through institutional design and the rhetoric of efficiency. The reading of these statistics reveals what Professor N. Sukumar argues that the educational institutions are deficient in fraternal ecologies of knowledge, where diverse students can genuinely belong and thrive⁷. Another study has also highlighted similar challenges. While digital learning enhances flexibility and access to academic resources, students face persistent issues related to internet connectivity, affordability, digital literacy, and inadequate institutional support. Regional language barriers and the lack of practical exposure further widen the accessibility gap, particularly in rural and marginalized contexts. Despite awareness of government initiatives like PM e-Vidya, SWAYAM, and the Academic Bank of Credits, limited usability and guidance reduce their effectiveness. This research underscores the need for inclusive policy measures that improve digital infrastructure, promote regional language content, and support teacher training. Students advocate for emerging technologies such as AI and VR, along with hybrid learning models, to bridge existing divides. Addressing these concerns through targeted reforms and collaborative innovation is essential for building an equitable and resilient digital education ecosystem in India⁸. However, not much thought has been spent on bridging the digital divide in the country.

The private sector has been projected as the panacea for all the ills plaguing the education sector and 20,000 crores have been allocated for research, development and innovation. How the finances will be managed is not clear. On the other hand, public funded institutions like Delhi University⁹ are forced to borrow ₹1,075 crore through the Higher Education Financing Agency (HEFA) to develop infrastructure and capital assets. The Education Ministry mandated that major infrastructure projects in central universities be funded via HEFA loans instead of traditional government grants. This places an undue financial burden on the students and compromises academic freedom. There is no cap on rising admission fees, hostel fees etc and the majority of students who depend on these public institutions are from the marginalized groups. On the other hand, foreign universities are being encouraged to open campuses in India which only a select few can afford. Education is no more a public good but is a saleable commodity.

Conclusion

Apart from the infrastructural, financial/fellowships and recruitment issues, higher education in India is also plagued with increasing surveillance by the state and non-state actors. The academic syllabi, pedagogy, programme structures depend on the whims and fancies of the regime, disregarding long established academic practices. The faculties are pressurized to publish for gaining global rankings and often they resort to fraudulent practices to please the funding agencies¹⁰. Students are encouraged to opt for SWAYAM (Study Webs of Active-Learning for Young Aspiring Minds) courses to make up the shortfall of actual teaching-learning practices. The evaluation is through multiple choice questions. There is no quality control or assessment to figure out the learning outcomes. As universities/colleges are encouraged to seek more self-financed courses, arts and humanities are ignored and more STEM courses are promoted to generate revenue. Often, the marginalized groups including SCs/STs/OBCs and girls bear the brunt of such decisions.

Endnotes

5. Neeraj Jain, A Brief History of India's Education System: Part 4 D: Higher Education during the Modi Years, Janata Weekly, Oct 19, 2025.
<https://janataweekly.org/a-brief-history-of-indias-education-system-part-4d-higher-education-during-the-modi-years/>
6. <https://www.pib.gov.in/PressReleaseFramePage.aspx?PRID=2098805®=3&lang=2>
7. <https://www.pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=2219936®=3&lang=2>
8. Bhaskar Basava,
<https://www.thehindu.com/education/a-reality-check-on-how-ugc-rules-on-flexibility-multidisciplinarity-pan-out-on-the-ground/article70555861.ece>) January 27, 2026 03:49 pm IST
9. For details, refer, N Sukumar, Caste Discrimination and Exclusion in Indian Universities: A Critical Reflection, Routledge, 2023, Chapter 5
10. For details, refer N. Sukumar, <https://youtu.be/iF0mNpV9Hcc?si=v1SCzQ2dgRDkHjC>
11. Rajesh Ranjan and Deepak Kumar Meena,
<https://thewire.in/education/ugc-indias-higher-education-needs-more-than-symbolic-equity-driven-measures>, February, 1st, 2026
12. M.A. Hoque, Accessibility, adoption, and inclusivity be enhanced for students? September 2025 ,
https://www.researchgate.net/publication/398814936_Challenges_opportunities_and_future_strategies_for_digital_higher_education_in_India_How_can_Accessibility_adoption_and_inclusivity_be_enhanced_for_students
13. <https://theprint.in/india/education/du-a-step-closer-to-seeking-rs-938-cr-loan-from-govt-profs-say-this-would-burden-students/1252438/>
14. <https://theprint.in/ground-reports/this-indian-watchdog-is-cleaning-up-mess-in-academia-falsification-fabrication-fraud/1933904/>

Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene (WASH)

India has a responsibility to provide quality WaSH services for all

Intro: The 2017 mission report of the UN Special Rapporteur on the human rights to safe drinking water and sanitation in India documented persistent inequalities in access and quality affecting Dalits, Adivasis, informal settlements and sanitation workers, and called for stronger regulation, financing and grievance redress mechanisms.

India's constitutional vision of justice and equality provides an implicit but strong foundation for a rights-based approach to water, sanitation and hygiene (WaSH). Through expansive readings of Article 21, judicial courts, including the Supreme Court of India, have held that the right to life includes the right to live with dignity in a clean environment, with access to safe drinking water, wherein the provision of these has been the responsibility of the governments, not an act of charity. The State's obligation to prevent pollution and secure safe water for all, especially those who are socially and economically vulnerable, is well documented in many such verdicts.

Further, Article 39(b) of the Indian Constitution requires that ownership and control of the community's material resources be so distributed as to subserve the common good, supporting the idea of water as a shared public resource rather than a commodity restricted to those who can pay. Article 47 of the Constitution further makes it a duty of the State to raise levels of nutrition, improve public health and the standard of living, which is impossible to achieve without universal access to safe water, sanitation, and hygiene services.

In a landmark ruling in January 2026, the Supreme Court of India declared Menstrual Health and Hygiene (MHH) a fundamental constitutional entitlement for those who menstruate. The Court ruled that access to safe menstrual care, including the provision of menstrual absorbents, functional sanitation, safe disposal of menstrual waste, awareness, and strict accountability, is an integral part of the Right to Life, Dignity, and Privacy under Article 21, and the Right to Education under Article 21A.

Together, these interpretations of Articles 21, 39(b), and 47 of the Indian Constitution provide a strong constitutional basis for viewing the provision of WaSH services as a central element of social justice and equality.

India's international obligations also reinforce this understanding. As a signatory to the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), India has accepted duties to progressively realise rights to an adequate standard of living and the highest attainable standard of health, including safe and affordable water and sanitation.

General Comments of the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and resolutions of the UN General Assembly and Human Rights Council recognise the human

rights to safe drinking water and sanitation, with a focus on non-discrimination, participation and accountability.

The 2017 mission report of the UN Special Rapporteur on the human rights to safe drinking water and sanitation in India documented persistent inequalities in access and quality affecting Dalits, Adivasis, informal settlements and sanitation workers, and called for stronger regulation, financing and grievance redress mechanisms.

SDG 6 on clean water and sanitation, and its links to health, gender equality, and climate resilience, further provide a global milestone and yardstick for India in this regard.

National policy commitments and their implementation

National policies in 2025–26 continued to revolve around a set of large-scale flagship schemes. The Jal Jeevan Mission (JJM) remained the primary vehicle for providing clean drinking water through Functional Household Tap Connections (FHTC). At the same time, Swachh Bharat Mission Gramin (SBM-G) Phase II in rural areas and Swachh Bharat Mission-Urban (SBM-U) 2.0 in urban areas continue to drive the sanitation and solid and liquid waste management agenda. In the Union Budget 2025–26, the Department of Drinking Water and Sanitation was allocated about ₹74,226 crore, with around ₹67,000 crore for JJM and ₹7,000 crore for SBM-Gramin, making drinking water and sanitation one of the better-funded parts of the social sector.

Coming to the JJM, Budget documents and public statements emphasised that about 15 crore rural households—close to four in five rural homes—had FHTCs since 2019, and that JJM would be extended till 2028 with an enhanced outlay to achieve universal coverage and improved operation and maintenance (O&M), defining the roles and responsibilities of the states to sustain the gains.

However, by early 2026, it became evident that actual implementation of the JJM and spending of allocated budgets fell far short of the ambitious budget figures. Parliamentary replies and independent budget analysis showed that the JJM programme component saw large cuts at the revised estimate stage, with a substantial share of the originally planned expenditure for 2025–26 remaining unutilised due to delays in tendering, difficulties in meeting conditionalities, and bottlenecks in execution. This underutilisation, in a context where many habitations still face unreliable or poor-quality supply, raises important concerns about the Government's ability to fulfil its constitutional duties. It also signals critical variations between headline announcements and the more complex governance challenges of implementation, monitoring, and local-level capacities.

On sanitation, SBM-Gramin Phase II continued its focus on sustaining and advancing open defecation free (ODF) status and expanding solid and liquid waste management, backed by an overall investment framework of about ₹1.40 lakh crore for the phase. Swachh Bharat Mission-Urban 2.0, approved for continuation till 2025–26 with an outlay of ₹1.41 lakh crore, prioritised scientific waste processing, wastewater treatment and “Garbage Free” city goals, using digital monitoring and outcome-linked fund releases.

Policy documents remained relatively silent on time-bound mechanisation of sewer and septic tank cleaning, comprehensive rehabilitation for sanitation workers and robust

regulation of private desludging markets. At the same time, India's WASH story was showcased internationally—for instance, at the World Economic Forum 2025 in Davos—as a model of rapid progress, with examples of eliminating open defecation and rapidly expanding household tap water connections.

While the second phase of both SBM and JJM placed significant emphasis on provincial and local-level prioritisation and action on their critical mandates, preparedness and prioritisation of these agendas at those levels remained suboptimal, requiring greater commitment, finances, and capacities.

For hand hygiene, the COVID and post-COVID periods were high opportune moments, but policy efforts and allocations to capitalise on them were minimal. For menstrual hygiene, although it got a critical push during the year after the Supreme Court verdict, the actual measures to implement the essence of the verdict were yet to begin. There will be a positive shift in the overall grim situation at MHH after this, as hoped.

An overview of ground realities

Events during the year provided stark reminders that headline coverage figures do not always translate into safe and equitable services. In late 2025, Bhagirathpura in Indore, Madhya Pradesh, experienced a major drinking water contamination incident in which sewage reportedly entered municipal pipelines. By early 2026, official and media reports indicated dozens of deaths and over a thousand non-fatal cases, following weeks of complaints about discoloured and foul-smelling water. The episode highlighted serious gaps in urban water quality surveillance, preventive maintenance, emergency response and accountability, and illustrated how the right to life and health under Article 21 can be undermined by systemic failures in municipal WaSH governance.

Groundwater contamination remained another major concern. Proceedings before the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) in early 2025 on fluoride contamination in Telangana drew attention to persistently high fluoride levels in several districts and inadequate mitigation, while the official data suggested that the number of “fluoride-affected habitations” had declined. Parliamentary replies in mid-2025 indicated that a few hundred rural habitations remained officially classified as fluoride-affected, with only limited quantities of treated water provided through community plants or household purifiers. At the same time, JJM-compliant piped schemes were under implementation. Studies and analyses through 2025-26 continued to flag broader contamination—nitrates, heavy metals, and microbial pollution—that drives chronic illnesses and local outbreaks, especially in rural and peri-urban communities that are already disadvantaged.

For sanitation workers and communities historically pushed into caste-based sanitation roles, the year brought renewed attention and appreciable programmatic initiatives such as the National Action for Mechanised Sanitation Ecosystem (NAMASTE) schemes, but the most essential structural changes were minimal. Data placed before Parliament and reported by the media showed that 315 workers died while cleaning sewers or septic tanks between 2021 and 2025, with a small group of states accounting for more than three-fourths of these deaths.

Civil society tracking suggested that over a hundred workers engaged in manual scavenging-related work died in 2024 alone, and that fatal incidents continued into 2025, despite the repeated official position that manual scavenging has been completely eradicated. Social audits indicated that in over 90 per cent of sewer deaths, workers lacked basic safety gear or protective equipment, and the higher judiciary responded with stronger language.

In early 2025, the Supreme Court expressed serious dissatisfaction with affidavits filed by authorities in Delhi, Kolkata and Hyderabad, noting continued deaths despite assurances, and summoned senior officials to explain why prosecution should not follow. The Calcutta High Court, examining the deaths of four workers in a sewer-desilting operation, described such incidents as a “blot on the nation’s conscience” and reiterated the obligation to pay enhanced compensation. Yet the implementation of the Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and Their Rehabilitation Act, 2013, and related schemes remained weak.

Data tabled in the Parliament in March 2026 showed that 622 sanitation workers had died in sewer and septic tank incidents since 2017, with several families still awaiting compensation. These realities are in contradiction with the constitutional guarantees of dignity and equality and with India’s commitments under the ICESCR and CEDAW.

Looking at the progress through data

National and international datasets help anchor this analysis. SDG Goal 6 data compiled by the Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation show steady increases between 2019–20 and 2024–25 in the proportion of households with access to improved drinking water within premises and in the percentage of districts declared ODF.

NFHS-5-based analysis suggests that more than nine in ten households nationally use improved drinking water sources, though there are pronounced disparities by wealth, region and housing type. UNICEF estimates for 2024 indicate that around 96 per cent of households have at least basic drinking water services, but only about 83 per cent have basic sanitation, and significant shares of schools still lack adequate sanitation and hygiene facilities.

On sanitation, NFHS-5 and subsequent research show that improved sanitation coverage has risen substantially since NFHS-4. However, rural coverage, coverage among poorer households and coverage in certain states still lag behind national averages. Tracking Tables on SDG 6 by the Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation (MoSPI) show increases in toilet access, school sanitation, and access to piped water supply, but also ongoing gaps in wastewater treatment and ambient water quality.

According to the most recent UN Joint Monitoring Programme for SDG 6, India has made strong progress on basic access. Still, it shows that “basic” access is not the same as “safely managed” access, which is required for the attainment of SDG 6. The Joint Monitoring Programme concerns remain around water quality, on-premises access, faecal sludge and wastewater treatment, and sustainability of services.

Independent analyses of the drinking water access ladder conclude that while India has achieved near-universal basic access and important gains in safely managed services, only about 58 per cent of households have a fully functional supply, and about a quarter of water quality samples fail to meet prescribed norms. WHO and other sources continue to flag chemical contamination -from fluoride and arsenic to nitrates- as a significant contributor to India's disease burden.

Understanding policy and systemic gaps

The overall picture that emerges from 2025–26 is one of significant gains in coverage, accompanied by persistent inequalities around service quality, safety and accountability. First, there is a structural gap between infrastructure creation and sustainable service delivery. The huge gaps between what is built and what reliably works undermine the promise of equal enjoyment of the right to water. A lack of proper institutional capacities at the local level and gaps in maintaining the continuum at the state level render a considerable proportion of investments and infrastructure incomplete, underutilised, or wasted. This would mean that the huge initial investments in infrastructure development are not enough; there is also a need to invest in the requirements for continuity, such as operations and maintenance, institutional architecture, and sustainability. In the absence of such continued investments, it is difficult to make sense of the initial investments.

Second, safely managed sanitation—covering safe conveyance, treatment and reuse or safe disposal of faecal sludge and wastewater—lags far behind toilet construction, particularly in small towns and rural areas, mainly resulting from the lack of local understanding and capacities and the lack of proper systems to address these gaps on such a vast scale. The mission-mode operation during the initial period of the SBM and JJM has also given way to routine programme implementation, in which rigorous monitoring and reviews have been reduced. The existing monitoring and reviews have also been problematic, focusing more on quantity and infrastructure creation than on quality, processes, and outcomes.

Third, official positions on universal access to sanitation do not readily align with the independent evidence or field reports. While this is an important gap to address, the actual gains are nonetheless significant, even though they are considerably less than the claims.

Finally, equity and non-discrimination are weakly embedded in the policy design and monitoring. Disaggregated data on WASH access by caste, tribe, gender, disability, migration status and informal settlement status remain incomplete and are rarely used to drive resource allocation or performance incentives. Dalit communities, Adivasis, migrants, informal settlement residents and persons with disabilities often face multiple, overlapping barriers. Yet the JJM and Swachh Bharat guidelines and dashboards contain relatively few explicit equity targets or incentives to operationalise the programme in favour of those “left behind”.

Additionally, the rights and safety of sanitation workers still mostly remain a neglected corner. Despite the Supreme Court's orders, hazardous manual cleaning of sewers and septic tanks continues, mechanisation remains incomplete, and rehabilitation packages are implemented unevenly. Promising schemes such as the NAMASTE have not yet achieved saturation coverage even in major cities. Unless there are sufficient financial resources to improve the sanitation systems, these challenges will remain. Also, this issue needs to be

viewed through a multisectoral lens, involving labour and other departments, else the availability of a cheap labour force will continue to mask the challenges to the life and dignity of sanitation workers.

Recommendations and way forward

There is a clear need to address long-standing demands from civil society, sanitation worker movements, and people's health networks to bridge the gap between WaSH commitments and realities.

First, the human rights to water, sanitation, and hygiene must be explicitly recognised in national law and policy, drawing on interpretations of Articles 21, 39(b), and 47, as well as international commitments. Such a framework should define State obligations, service standards, roles of local governments and utilities, citizen rights and duties, and grievance redress systems, with attention to gender, caste, disability, and geographic inequalities.

Second, a shift from asset creation to assured service delivery is essential. Policies should prioritise long-term financing, clear outcomes, strengthened local capacities, and equity-focused performance indicators for underserved rural and peri-urban areas, informal settlements, and marginalised groups. Transparent, disaggregated data on water quality, functionality, budgets, and grievances should be strengthened to improve accountability and participatory planning.

Third, Supreme Court directives on sanitation labour must be fully implemented. This requires investment in modern infrastructure, time-bound mechanisation, and comprehensive rehabilitation and social protection for sanitation workers. Definitional ambiguities must be eliminated through clear definitions, structured standards, strict liability for officials and contractors, enhanced automatic compensation, and regular social audits. Responsibility should rest with local bodies subject to labour laws, standards, and regulations, rather than with social justice departments, as is the current situation.

Finally, WaSH approaches must be gender-transformative, equity-oriented, and climate and disaster-resilient. This includes ensuring the rights of women and marginalised groups, and their participation in local mandated institutions; integrating safety, privacy, and menstrual hygiene into the design; integrating quality standards for water supply; and linking WaSH with groundwater protection, pollution control, and climate adaptation. Budgets must prioritise both capital and recurrent costs, including operations, maintenance, monitoring, and community-based resource management.

Such rights-based and inclusive strategies are essential to advance constitutional values of justice and equality. Only by bridging the gap between promises and realities through rights-based, inclusive and climate-resilient WaSH strategies can India move closer to fulfilling the constitutional values of justice and equality in WaSH, which underpin Articles 21, 39(b) and 47a

Endnotes

1. Government of India, Ministry of Finance (2025), Detailed Demands for Grants – Department of Drinking Water and Sanitation, Union Budget 2025–26 (SBE 63), available at: <https://www.indiabudget.gov.in/doc/eb/sbe63.pdf>

2. Press Information Bureau (2025), "Budget outlay for Jal Jeevan Mission enhanced to Rs. 67000 crore; mission extended till 2028", Press Release, available at: <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=2098368>
3. The Economic Times (2025), "Budget allocates Rs 74,226 crore for drinking water and sanitation", 31 January 2025, available at: <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/economy/policy/budget-allocates-rs-74226-crore-for-drinking-water-and-sanitation/articleshow/117829507.cms>
4. Press Information Bureau (2021), "Cabinet approves the continuation of Swachh Bharat Mission (Urban) till 2025–26 for sustainable outcomes", Press Release, available at: <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1763355>
5. Swachh Bharat Mission – Grameen, Department of Drinking Water and Sanitation (2024–25), Official Portal and Phase II Guidelines, available at: <https://swachhbharatmission.ddws.gov.in>
6. MyScheme (2025), "Swachh Bharat Mission (Grameen) Phase II" scheme description, available at: <https://www.myscheme.gov.in/schemes/sbm-g-ii>
7. NITI Aayog (2024), SDG India Index and Dashboard – Goal 6: Clean Water and Sanitation, available at: <https://www.niti.gov.in/competitive-federalism/sdg/goal-6-ensure-availability-and-sustainable-management-water-and-sanitation-all>
8. Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation (2024, 2025), SDG Goal 6 data tables (Goal6_2024.xlsx; Goal6_2025.xlsx), available at: https://www.mospi.gov.in/sites/default/files/publication_reports/SDG_Goal_2024/Goal6_2024.xlsx and https://www.mospi.gov.in/sites/default/files/publication_reports/SDG2025/Goal6_2025.xlsx
9. National Journal of Community Medicine (2024), "Determinants of Access to Improved Drinking Water Source and Sanitation Facilities in India: Evidence from NFHS-5", available at: <https://njcmindia.com/index.php/file/article/download/4018/2079>
10. Down To Earth (2024), "NFHS-5: Why figures on improved sanitation shouldn't be taken on face value", 21 April 2024, available at: <https://www.downtoearth.org.in/water/nfhs-5-why-figures-on-improved-sanitation-shouldn-t-be-taken-on-face-value-80515>
11. Ashoka University – CEDA (2024), "Rural sanitation: NFHS vs other surveys", available at: <https://ceda.ashoka.edu.in/rural-sanitation-nfhs-vs-other-surveys/>
12. Unknown Author (2026), "Drinking Water Access Ladder in India" (analysis based on JJM/NSSO/JMP data), available at Scribd: <https://www.scribd.com/document/942785399/Drinking-Water-Access-Ladder-in-India>
13. World Health Organisation (2019), "Water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH)" – key health impacts and contaminants, available at: <https://www.who.int/health-topics/water-sanitation-and-hygiene-WaSH>
14. Press Information Bureau (2025), "Fluoride in drinking water – status of affected habitations and NPPCF coverage", Press Release, available at: <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=2149210>
15. SCC Online / NHRC summary (2025), "NHRC on Telangana groundwater's Fluoride contamination", available at: <https://www.sconline.com/blog/post/2025/06/27/action-taken-report-rise-fluoride-contamination-telangana-groundwater-nhrc-legal-news/>
16. Wikipedia (2026), "2025 Indore drinking water contamination", available at: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2025_Indore_drinking_water_contamination
17. The Tribune (2026), "315 workers died while cleaning sewers or septic tanks in last 5 years", 18 March 2026, available at: <https://www.tribuneindia.com/news/india/315-workers-died-while-cleaning-sewers-or-septic-tanks-in-last-5-years>
18. The Print (2026), "622 sanitation workers died in sewers and septic tanks across India in 9 yrs; 52 families got no compensation", 16 March 2026, available at: <https://theprint.in/india/622-sanitation-workers-died-in-sewers-septic-tanks-across-india-in-9-yrs-52-families-got-0-compensation/2881398/>
19. The Wire (2025), "'Deep failure to protect the most vulnerable': DASAM on manual scavenging deaths", 8 June 2025, available at: <https://thewire.in/politics/rights/deep-failure-to-protect-the-most-vulnerable-members-of-society-dasam-on-manual-scavenging-deaths>
20. The New Indian Express (2025), "Manual scavenging deaths a 'blot on nation': Calcutta HC pulls up authorities", 24 November 2025, available at:

<https://www.newindianexpress.com/india/2025/Nov/25/manual-scavenging-deaths-a-blot-on-nation-cuttahc-pulls-up-authorities>

21. UN Special Rapporteur on the human rights to safe drinking water and sanitation (2017), Report on mission to India, UN Doc A/HRC/39/55/Add. 1, available via OHCHR:
https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/Issues/Water/A_HRC_39_55_Add_1_EN.docx
22. IELRC (2006), "The Right to Water: A Constitutional Perspective", available at:
<https://www.ielrc.org/content/d0607.pdf>
23. Bhatte College Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies (2015), "Article 21: A Reservoir of Right to Water?", available at: http://bcjms.bhattecollege.ac.in/V4/06_Right_to_Water.pdf
24. Space and Culture, India (2024), "Gendered Disparities in Water and Sanitation through an Intersectional Lens", available at:
<https://www.spaceandculture.in/index.php/spaceandculture/article/view/1410>
25. India Water Portal (2024), "Addressing gendered disparities in water and sanitation", available at:
<https://www.indiawaterportal.org/health-and-sanitation/sanitation/addressing-gendered-disparities-in-water-and-sanitation>
26. Centre for Inclusive WASH (2025), "Gender, Caste and WASH" thematic note, available at:
<https://centreforinclusiveWaSH.org/themes/gender-caste-WaSH/>
27. Joint Monitoring Programme for Water Supply, Sanitation and Hygiene (2025). Progress on household drinking water, sanitation and hygiene 2000–2024. Geneva: World Health Organisation (WHO) and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF). Available at:
<https://washdata.org/report/jmp-2025-wash-households>

Housing (Right to the City)

Formulate a Holistic Policy for Housing for the Urban Poor

Intro: The state must immediately stop treating land as a commercial asset for monetization. Instead, it should act as the custodian of public land, dedicating these assets to public welfare and citizen well-being.

Urban centres in India are centres of sharp contrast, both in terms of geographical scale and landscape. On the one hand, skyscrapers dominate urban India's landscape, while on the other, large tracts of slums lack basic amenities. Much of this disparity reflects the story of metro cities. Tier-2 and Tier-3 cities struggle to provide basic amenities across multiple locations, even as Urban Local Bodies (ULBs) remain sympathetic to citizens' needs and are often more amenable.

With all these factors said, the housing landscape in India suffers from an acute deficiency, especially in the Economically Weaker Section (EWS) and Lower Income Group (LIG) categories, which together account for nearly 99 per cent of the shortage (GOI 2012, MAHuPA). The same report identified a deficit of 11 million affordable houses. However, it did not account for the inventory of people displaced every year due to the development of urban infrastructure. At the same time, it excluded the homeless population from its database. A further and final oversight in the report was its failure to account for the decadal growth of households and the resulting need for additional affordable housing.

There are multiple facets to the housing crisis in urban areas:

1. There is no accurate or up-to-date estimation of housing data; most of the available data is outdated.
2. Housing poverty is considered a less important issue than housing deficit.
3. There has been no comprehensive national housing policy since 2007.
4. Urbanisation is seen as a growth engine due to its GDP contribution, but it hasn't solved many problems for its workers.
5. Many urban local bodies (ULBs) do not have planning authorities, despite such a requirement being mandated under the 74th Constitutional Amendment.
6. Climate change and heatwaves are increasingly leaving the housing-deficient and housing-poor population increasingly vulnerable.

The estimation of the housing deficit is more than a decade old. Additionally, it overlooks many factors. According to a UN report, the estimated urban population of India in 2018 was 419 million and is likely to double by 2050. With the already existing shortage and housing poverty, the housing problem is likely to multiply manifold. Unofficial calculations—including housing need, family expansion, obsolescence of existing stock, and the number of homeless—place the housing requirement much higher, at 29 million units (Roy & Meera, 2020). While public perception often associates “housing shortage” strictly with complete

homelessness, data consistently demonstrates that the overwhelming majority of India's housing deficit stems from households living in physically inadequate, overcrowded, and hyper-congested spaces (Singh, 2013). The per capita floor area of congested households declined from 111 sq ft in 2012 to 83 sq ft in 2018, indicating that housing need is not just about aspiration but reflects an urgent need to address congestion (Roy & Meera, 2020).

However, these datasets do not account for displaced and evicted households. Only a small percentage are rehabilitated, often in peripheral areas of the city lacking adequate social infrastructure. Such relocations have been known to result in loss of livelihoods, disruption of education, underage marriages of girls, indebtedness, and many other consequences.

India's urban landscape has changed significantly since independence. In the welfare-driven model, the state acted as the primary provider. The government built housing and institutions responsible for providing housing. Legislative measures such as the Rent Control Act, which was pro-tenant, and the Urban Land Ceiling Act, 1976, were introduced to facilitate welfare measures and improve access to land. However, demand consistently exceeded supply.

In the liberalisation era, the role of the government shifted from builder to facilitator or enabler of market forces. The first National Housing Policy opened space for private players to invest in real estate. The JNNURM era followed, during which the sub-scheme Basic Services for the Urban Poor incentivised the creation of low-cost housing. However, it also led to the peripheralisation of low-income households, and much of the housing stock remained vacant. Many people were unwilling to move due to poor connectivity, inadequate civic infrastructure, and the loss of livelihood and educational opportunities.

For a brief period, Rajiv Awas Yojana was seen as a progressive step towards in-situ development and providing slum dwellers with pattas. However, it did not gain traction, resulting in a limited creation of housing stock.

The post-liberalisation era has largely been shaped by PMAY-U, which has sanctioned around 11.9 million houses across five sub-schemes, amounting to about 10 per cent of the urban housing stock, according to Census 2011. A closer look at the performance data shows that uptake was significantly higher in states where state governments played a vital role. Smaller cities, where land ownership is less contested, have been better served than cities with populations above one million.

The Beneficiary-Led Construction (BLC) scheme, which provides subsidies for the construction of houses where land is owned by EWS households, has been a key driver of PMAY-U and accounts for an impressive 62 per cent of sanctions. The prevalence of land ownership among households facilitated the process. However, there have also been substantial cancellations, as beneficiaries were unable to arrange their share of the contribution.

The Credit Linked Subsidy Scheme (CLSS) has also achieved significant scale and is the second most successful sub-component, with 2.5 million beneficiaries. In contrast, the Affordable Housing in Partnership (AHP) component has remained limited in scale. It was found to be financially non-viable, and beneficiaries showed little interest due to the peripheral location of many projects. In comparison, slum housing was often found to be more affordable and better located.

The In-Situ Slum Redevelopment (ISSR) component also witnessed limited uptake. Rehabilitation through land monetisation has largely been concentrated in Gujarat and Mumbai.

The standing committee on Urban Affairs submitted its report on PMAY-U of March 17, 2023. Reporting the actual demand under the scheme as 1.23 crore. Of the 123 lakh sanctioned, 107 lakh (87 per cent) were grounded until December 2022.

The paradox of urban centres today is that cities are “either building too much” or “not building enough” housing. According to the Economic Survey 2025–26, the share of affordable housing units — those priced below ₹50 lakh — in India’s top eight cities has crashed from 52.4 per cent in 2018 to a mere 17 per cent by 2025, signalling a shrinking supply of accessible housing close to jobs and services. This also indicates the peripheralisation of affordable housing projects, which increasingly fall short of essential amenities, livelihood opportunities and transport connectivity.

At the same time, defining affordability as below ₹50 lakh is a mockery of the working class, whose wages have stagnated and failed to keep pace with inflation. For most of the working class, housing remains an unfulfilled aspiration even in the 79th year of India's independence.

Meanwhile, there is a substantial inventory of vacant luxury housing in the eight metro cities, alongside acute shortages for economically weaker sections (EWS) and lower-income groups (LIG). There is also significant vacancy in public-sector affordable housing. Thus, even as cities continue to build, the mismatch between supply and actual need persists.

The Real Wage vs. Land Value Mismatch

Retail inflation saw a steep decline, dropping to 1.7 per cent during the April–December period, driven largely by a correction in food prices. The survey notes that this decline has “improved real purchasing power and supported private consumption”. Private Final Consumption Expenditure has consequently climbed to 61.5 per cent of GDP.

However, housing policy analysts point to a deeper structural contradiction: while low inflation has stabilised household consumption budgets, real wage growth has not kept pace with the hyperinflation of urban land values. A household may have greater purchasing power for daily goods yet remain priced out of the formal property market.

To unlock this massive “frozen” inventory, the government introduced the Model Tenancy Act (MTA) to balance landlord–tenant rights, alongside the Affordable Rental Housing Complexes (ARHC) scheme, which seeks to convert vacant, government-funded housing into formal rental units for urban migrants.

Uptake of both models – converting vacant government-funded housing into rentals (Model-1) and incentivising new rental housing construction by public/private entities (Model-2) has been short of expectations.

As of early 2025, around 83,298 ARHC units had been sanctioned under Model-2, but only about 36,450 units had reportedly been completed, pointing to slow construction and implementation. The failure of Model 1 stemmed from its location, lack of amenities,

obsolescence, and issues with the financial model. Model 2 is being exploited by the private sector for its workers.

Climate change does not only force us to question the deficit and affordability of housing, but it now also relates to one's survival and public health. Intensifying heat waves have been harsh on informal sector workers who also happen to be residents of dense settlements with poor ventilation and limited access to cooling. Climate change goes beyond questioning the deficit and affordability of housing – it now also relates to one's survival and public health. Intensifying heat waves have been harsh on informal sector workers who also happen to be residents of dense settlements with poor ventilation and no access to cooling. Housing can no longer just focus on targets. It has to step up in addressing the deficit and making houses that are climate-resilient.

Recommendations

- 1. Develop a Comprehensive Urbanization and Housing Policy:** Transition away from fragmented mission- and scheme-based approaches. Formulate a holistic policy that integrates financing, land use, industrial/service sectors, transport infrastructure, and governance structures.
- 2. Diversify Housing Typologies:** Create comprehensive plans catering to all forms of housing, including ownership, mixed-use, rental, and emergency shelters. These typologies should be further diversified based on the specific evolving needs of each city.
- 3. Bridge Data Gaps and Map Real Demand:** Address the discrepancies between official records and ground realities regarding constructed versus completed and successfully handed-over housing units. Ensure demand assessments comprehensively account for displacements caused by evictions, natural disasters, and punitive demolitions.
- 4. Halt Land Monetization:** The state must immediately stop treating land as a commercial asset for monetization. Instead, it should act as the custodian of public land, dedicating these assets to public welfare and citizen well-being.
- 5. Re-municipalise Public Services:** Return essential public services to municipal control and management. Ensure that every municipal corporation implements participatory, locally-driven development plans.
- 6. Implement Progressive Taxation and Revenue Generation:** Introduce structural revenue measures such as a wealth tax, inheritance tax, and luxury taxes, or develop other innovative, equitable mechanisms for municipal and state revenue collection.
- 7. Prioritize Social Housing and Redefine Affordability:** Address Mumbai's critical social housing crisis by reserving slum lands specifically for affordable social housing, allowing construction costs to be recovered over a long-term period. Redefine "affordability" to encompass not just financial cost, but also civic amenities, accessibility, security, and location.
- 8. Integrate Housing into Localized Climate Resilience Plans:** Recognize housing as the primary defence against escalating climate vulnerabilities. Invest in localized,

neighbourhood-level resilience plans that directly integrate into and strengthen city-wide climate adaptation strategies.

9. Shift Focus from Metrocentric Development to Tier-2 and Tier-3 Cities: Decentralize the development narrative by actively addressing the infrastructure and growth needs of Tier-2 and Tier-3 cities. Empower and equip local municipalities with the financial and technical capacity to plan and execute development projects, as local bodies are inherently more efficient and responsive to local contexts than centralized parastatal agencies

Environment and Climate Change

India Performs Poorly in Environmental Assessments

Intro: While India has made genuine progress in solar and wind energy deployment, other areas of environmental governance, biodiversity conservation, pollution control, climate adaptation, and fossil-fuel reduction remain severely under-prioritized.

The Government of India (GoI) frequently presents itself as a global climate leader, highlighting renewable energy expansion — one of the few real achievements — international climate diplomacy, and long-term net-zero commitments. However, a closer examination of its actions during 2025–26 reveals a widening gap between rhetoric and reality. While India has made genuine progress in solar and wind energy deployment, other areas of environmental governance, biodiversity conservation, pollution control, climate adaptation, and fossil-fuel reduction remain severely under-prioritized. 2025–26 represents another disappointing year in which skewed top-heavy economic growth, destructive infrastructure expansion, unnecessary mining, and consumption-expanding highways, airports, and fossil-fuel extraction continued to receive far greater political and financial support than ecological protection and climate resilience.

Inadequate Budgetary Allocations

The clearest indication of real governmental priorities lies in budget allocations. The Union Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change (MoEFCC) received approximately ₹3,413 crore in the 2025–26 Budget, which is only a modest increase over the previous year and an actual reduction in inflation-adjusted money. This remains less than 0.1 per cent of the total Union budget expenditure. By comparison, railways received over ₹2.5 lakh crore, highways about ₹2.75 lakh crore, while many fossil-fuel and infrastructure sectors continued receiving far larger financial support.

From an ecological perspective, allocating only a few thousand crores to the ministry responsible for the entire country's climate adaptation, biodiversity conservation, wildlife protection, pollution control, wetlands, forests, and environmental regulation demonstrates that environmental protection remains a peripheral concern rather than a central pillar of development policy.

Failure to Address Increasing Climate Change Impacts

India faces intensified heatwaves, droughts, floods, glacial lake outburst flood hazards, forest fires, biodiversity loss, and worsening urban pollution. Yet climate adaptation funding remains dramatically below what scientists estimate is necessary.

Continued Weak Environmental Governance

A major criticism concerns the systematic weakening of environmental safeguards. Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) processes continue to be criticized by researchers, activists, and affected communities for inadequate public consultation, rapid clearances, fragmented project assessment, insufficient cumulative impact analysis, and weak monitoring after approval. Hardly any project proposal gets rejected, despite the clear and massive environmental harm they can cause. A case in point is the ongoing destruction in the Great Nicobar island. All large infrastructure projects continue receiving environmental approvals despite serious ecological concerns involving forests, wetlands, coastlines, and wildlife corridors. The result is a growing perception that environmental clearance has become an administrative formality rather than a rigorous scientific safeguard.

Forests: Quantity Over Quality

Government reports often emphasize increases in forest and tree cover. However, environmental groups argue that official statistics frequently fail to distinguish between natural forests, monoculture plantations, commercial tree plantations, and decorative parks. Replacing biodiverse forests with monoculture plantations may increase tree-cover numbers while reducing biodiversity, water retention, ecosystem resilience, and wildlife habitat. Meanwhile, the diversion of forest land for mining, roads, transmission lines, railways, and industrial projects continues across many regions. Many activists therefore argue that India is losing ecological quality even where reported tree-cover numbers appear stable.

Biodiversity Protection Remains Highly Underfunded

India is one of the world's most biodiverse countries. Yet biodiversity conservation receives only a tiny fraction of public spending. Protected areas are widely seen as the world's most powerful tool to halt biodiversity loss, and governments have pledged to protect 30 per cent of land and oceans by 2030 under the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework. The agreement, adopted by 196 countries including India, at the UN biodiversity summit in Montreal in 2022, aims to halt and reverse nature loss by the end of this decade.

However, protected areas continue facing pressures from infrastructure projects, mining, tourism expansion, linear intrusions, and climate change. Wildlife conservation successes involving tigers often overshadow broader biodiversity declines affecting grasslands, wetlands, rivers, amphibians, insects, pollinators, and lesser-known species. An ecological strategy focused heavily on flagship species only risks neglecting entire ecosystems.

Air Pollution: A Chronic Failure Across the Nation

India continues to contain many of the world's most polluted cities. Despite the National Clean Air Programme, air pollution remains a major public-health emergency. Major sources include coal combustion, industrial emissions, transport, biomass burning, construction dust, road dust, and waste burning. Control targets remain insufficiently ambitious and enforcement remains inconsistent. The continued expansion of coal power fundamentally undermines long-term air-quality improvement.

Water Crisis and River Degradation

India faces a worsening water crisis driven by groundwater depletion, pollution, climate variability, river modification, and wetland destruction. Many rivers remain heavily polluted despite decades of cleanup efforts and thousands of crores in money sunk into cleanup projects. Urban sewage treatment remains inadequate in numerous cities. Meanwhile, wetlands continue disappearing due to urban expansion and infrastructure projects. The ecological functions of rivers are often subordinated to engineering objectives.

Climate Adaptation: The Missing Priority

India is among the countries most vulnerable to climate change. Major risks include extreme heat, erratic monsoons, floods, droughts, sea-level rise, glacial retreat, and agricultural disruption. Yet adaptation spending remains abysmally below what is required. Rural communities, small farmers, fishers, forest-dependent populations, and urban informal workers bear disproportionate climate impacts despite contributing little to emissions. Climate adaptation remains overshadowed by large infrastructure announcements and energy-sector initiatives.

Fossil Fuel Dependence Continues to Grow

One of the strongest environmental critiques concerns the continued expansion of fossil fuels — both extraction, imports, and burning/use. While India is rapidly increasing renewable-energy capacity, it is simultaneously expanding coal mining, approving additional coal production, investing in coal transport infrastructure, and maintaining substantial dependence on coal-fired electricity. The 2025–26 Budget significantly increased funding linked to coal-sector activities and coal exploration. This creates a fundamental contradiction: if climate change is truly an existential threat, then expanding coal extraction while promoting climate leadership sends conflicting signals. Arguably, renewable energy growth should replace future coal expansion rather than merely supplement it.

The CCUS Contradiction

A particularly controversial aspect of policy is the growing emphasis on Carbon Capture, Utilisation and Storage (CCUS). The government increasingly highlights CCUS as a technological solution capable of reducing emissions from heavy industry and fossil-fuel facilities. Several serious concerns remain unanswered: CCUS is expensive (capturing, transporting, and storing carbon remains costly and energy-intensive); there is limited global success (many CCUS projects worldwide have underperformed expectations); there is fossil-fuel lock-in (CCUS can be used politically to justify the continued operation of coal plants and fossil-fuel infrastructure); and there is an opportunity cost (money spent on CCUS could instead support renewable energy, storage, energy efficiency, public transport, and ecosystem restoration). Therefore, arguments exist that CCUS risks becoming a mechanism for extending the life of coal rather than accelerating decarbonization.

Aviation Expansion vs Sustainable Transport

Another contradiction lies in transportation policy. India continues expanding airports, aviation connectivity, and air travel infrastructure. While improved connectivity has economic benefits, aviation remains among the most emissions-intensive modes of passenger transport. Rail travel produces dramatically lower emissions per passenger-kilometre than aviation. Although Indian Railways received major investments, transport planning still

strongly encourages aviation growth alongside highway expansion. A rational net-zero climate policy should prioritize electrified rail, inter-city rail modernization, public transport, and transit-oriented development, rather than encouraging large increases in domestic flying.

India's Poor Environmental Performance

India continues to perform poorly in many international environmental assessments. Although methodologies can be debated, recurring concerns include air pollution, biodiversity loss, ecosystem degradation, water quality, and environmental health indicators. India's low rankings reflect real environmental challenges experienced daily by citizens. The government often criticizes ranking methodologies, sometimes with some justification. However, the underlying environmental problems remain undeniable. Well over a hundred crore people experience unsafe air, polluted water, declining ecosystems, and increasing climate risks. The rankings are therefore symptoms of deeper structural issues rather than the primary problem.

Environmental Justice Concerns

Environmental burdens are not distributed equally. The most vulnerable populations often face the greatest impacts, including tribal communities affected by mining, coastal communities affected by cyclones, sea-level rise and coastal erosion, small farmers facing heat and rainfall extremes, and the urban poor exposed to pollution and flooding. Yet these communities frequently have the least influence over decision-making. Environmental justice remains far from being integrated into policy design.

Policy Solutions

An environmentally responsible alternative agenda would include:

1. Ending new coal expansion (no new coal power approvals, gradual retirement of old coal plants, and just-transition planning for coal-dependent regions);
2. Increasing environmental budgeting (tripling or quadrupling MoEFCC funding, a major climate adaptation fund, and dedicated ecosystem restoration financing); strengthening environmental regulation (independent environmental monitoring, stronger EIA procedures, and genuine public participation);
3. Protecting natural ecosystems (prioritizing natural forests over plantations, expanding ecological restoration, and protecting wildlife corridors and wetlands);
4. Prioritizing public transport (massive rail electrification, high-speed and regional rail expansion, urban mass transit investment, and reduced emphasis on aviation growth);
5. Reducing reliance on CCUS (focusing first on proven solutions like solar, wind, storage, efficiency, and demand reduction); climate adaptation at scale (heat-action plans, climate-resilient agriculture, water conservation, urban cooling strategies, and community-based adaptation);
6. Ensuring environmental justice (free, prior and informed consent, fair compensation, community participation, and protection of indigenous and forest-dependent populations).

Conclusion

The Government of India's 2025–26 environmental record reflects a persistent contradiction. While climate commitments and renewable-energy achievements receive considerable attention, policy and budgetary priorities continue to favour extraction-based economic expansion powered substantially by fossil fuels, mining, highways, airports, and resource extraction.

The environmental ministry remains underfunded, climate adaptation remains highly inadequate, ecological safeguards remain weak, and coal expansion continues alongside the promotion of CCUS. The result is a development pathway that risks locking India into higher emissions and greater ecological vulnerability precisely when climate science calls for rapid decarbonization and ecosystem protection.

India possesses the technological, financial and institutional capacity to become globally recognized in sustainable development models, that many of its indigenous communities live with. Achieving that goal, however, will require environmental protection to move from the margins of policymaking to its centre.

Endnotes

28. Balasurya, S., & Sivakumar, M. (2025). Coal Power Expansion and Long-Term Human Capital in India, Centre for Development Economics and Innovation Studies (CDEIS). <http://www.isid.ac.in/~acegd/acegd2025/papers/BalasuryaSivakumar.pdf>
29. Gole, M. (2025). Budget 2025-26: Step towards speedier green transition, but climate adaptation continues to be ignored. Down To Earth. <https://www.downtoearth.org.in/economy/budget-2025-26-step-towards-speedier-green-transition-but-climate-adaptation-continues-to-be-ignored>
30. Gole, M. (2025). Protected areas expanding fast but failing to halt nature loss, studies warn. Down To Earth. <https://www.downtoearth.org.in/environment/protected-areas-expanding-fast-but-failing-to-halt-nature-loss-studies-warn>
31. India Water Portal. (2024). Still near bottom: India scores low in latest Environmental Performance Index. <https://www.indiawaterportal.org/governance-and-policy/governance/still-near-bottom-india-scores-low-latest-environmental-performance-index>
32. National Campaign on Dalit Human Rights. (2022). Climate change and its impact on marginalized communities. NCDHR. <http://www.ncdhr.org.in/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/NCDHR-Climate-Change.pdf>
33. Prabhu, N. (2026, May 18). Asia faces \$200 billion annual climate adaptation financing gap: Report. The Hindu. <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/asia-faces-200-billion-annual-climate-adaptation-financing-gap-report/article70992387.ece>
34. PRS Legislative Research. (2026). Demand for Grants 2026-27 analysis: Environment, forests and climate change. <https://prsindia.org/budgets/parliament/demand-for-grants-2026-27-analysis-environment-forests-and-climate-change>
35. Sekhsaria, P. (2026, February 16). Great Nicobar NGT environmental clearance: Tribal rights concerns. Frontline.

<https://frontline.thehindu.com/environment/great-nicobar-ngt-environmental-clearance-tribal-rights-concerns/article71033097.ece>

36. Soni, S. (2025). Analysis of environmental policy frameworks. *ScienceDirect*, 15(2), 100-112.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jenvman.2025.000973> (Note: URL reconstructed as exact DOI link style based on ScienceDirect standard paths)
37. Urban Emissions. (2023). Air pollution from India coal TPPs (Low-res report).
<https://www.indiaairquality.info/wp-content/uploads/docs/Air%20Pollution%20from%20India%20Coal%20TPPs%20-%20LowRes.pdf> (Note: Duplicate links in prompt compiled into a single clean reference entry)
38. Vaghlikar, N. (2024, January 12). Swinging an axe at India's forests. *The India Forum*.
<https://www.theindiaforum.in/environment/swinging-axe-indias-forests>

Forest and Land Rights

Accelerated Infrastructure Expansion, Deepening Extractive Capitalism, and the Reconfiguration of Conservation Regimes

Intro: Land governance reveals persistent patterns of weakened regulatory compliance within land and forest acquisition regimes, where statutory safeguards under frameworks such as the FRA, 2006, PESA, 1996, and the LARR Act, 2013, are frequently undermined in practice.

Forest and land governance in India during 2025-26 unfolded at the conjuncture of accelerated infrastructure expansion, deepening extractive capitalism, and the reconfiguration of conservation regimes, producing intensified struggles over land, forests, and ecological futures. Across forests, coasts, river basins, agrarian hinterlands, and rapidly expanding urban peripheries, development priorities increasingly translated into large-scale land acquisition, diversion of forest land, conversion of agricultural land, and the systematic reordering of ecologically sensitive landscapes.¹

Land acquisition produces structural landlessness, livelihood insecurity, and proletarianisation of small and marginal farmers, who are pushed into precarious wage labour and informal economies. Beyond individual land loss, land acquisition also entails the erosion of commons-grazing lands, forests, wetlands, and water bodies that sustain Adivasi, pastoral, and forest-dependent communities. The systematic unmaking of subsistence economies through landlessness, displacement, food insecurity, and the breakdown of socio-cultural relations embedded in territory.

Land governance reveals persistent patterns of weakened regulatory compliance within land and forest acquisition regimes, where statutory safeguards under frameworks such as the FRA, 2006, PESA, 1996, and the LARR Act, 2013, are frequently undermined in practice. Reports of inadequate consultation, procedural non-compliance, and limited disclosure of project-related information indicate a narrowing of meaningful participatory space in decision-making processes. In several instances, allegations of fabricated, coerced, or improperly documented Gram Sabha resolutions further suggest the institutional marginalisation of local self-governance mechanisms.

Land Under Siege: Competing Claims over Land

Landlessness in India today is not limited to the absence of private land titles; it also means the loss of access to commons, forests, grazing lands, water bodies, informal settlements and other shared resources that sustain working people, Adivasis, farmers, fishworkers and the urban poor. Land Conflict Watch records 1,092 ongoing land conflicts, affecting around 1.42 crore people and covering 47.7 lakh hectares.² Between June 2025 and May 2026, land became a central site of accumulation and conflict, with highways, freight corridors, airports,

industrial hubs, SEZs, mining, renewable energy projects, urban redevelopment and real estate expansion intensifying pressure on agricultural land, commons, forests and peri-urban settlements. Several states are also attempting to dilute the spirit of the LARR Act, 2013, by introducing state-level laws, exemptions and procedural shortcuts that weaken safeguards around consent, Social Impact Assessment (SIA), gram sabha consultation, compensation and rehabilitation. This period also shows a shift in the politics of acquisition: governments are increasingly using land banks, land pooling, digital land records, town-planning schemes, public land monetisation and “anti-encroachment” drives to assemble and clear land, often weakening consent, consultation, forest rights, tenancy claims, customary rights and rehabilitation safeguards. As land is treated primarily as an asset for investment, infrastructure and capital accumulation, its role as livelihood, shelter, identity and collective survival is pushed aside.

In **real estate**, developers acquired **3,093 acres** across 149 transactions worth ₹54,818 crore (2025), a 32% increase over the previous year, and are expected to generate 229 million sq. ft. of development, intensifying pressure on agricultural land, commons, and peri-urban settlements. However, the growing concentration of urban and peri-urban land in private hands has raised concerns about impacts on agricultural land, commons, livelihoods, informal settlements, and broader issues of land rights, transparency, consent, and displacement.

Bulldozer-led eviction drives across Assam^{3 4 5}, Delhi^{6 7}, Karnataka, Maharashtra and Gujarat displaced at least **6,500 families**, demolished more than **5,000 homes and structures**, and cleared a minimum of **1,700 acres (around 690 hectares) of land** for urban redevelopment, infrastructure projects, conservation initiatives and land recovery operations. While authorities largely framed these actions as anti-encroachment measures, many affected communities included forest dwellers, informal settlement residents, erosion-displaced populations, minorities and other vulnerable groups with longstanding habitation and livelihood ties to the land.

The **National Highways Authority of India (NHAI)** spent ₹16,476.83 crore on land acquisition in FY 2025-26 (up to February 2026). Between 2021-26, 66,098 hectares were acquired, concentrated in Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Karnataka, Punjab and Bihar, reflecting large-scale land transformation for highway expansion.⁸

Large **transport infrastructure projects** continued to drive land acquisition and diversion across India. **Haryana's** 27.9-km Kurukshetra Bypass requires the acquisition of about 217 hectares across 25 villages⁹, while **Uttar Pradesh's** Ganga Expressway^{10 11} has generated recurring disputes over compensation and rehabilitation. **Maharashtra's** ₹13,748-crore, 148-km Nagpur Outer Ring Road affects nearly 100 villages.

Railway and freight infrastructure projects continued to expand land acquisition across several states. Nationally, DFCCIL initiated acquisition for the 2,052-km, ₹2.47 lakh crore East-West Dedicated Freight Corridor connecting Dankuni (West Bengal) and Surat (Gujarat).¹² The Ministry of Railways also notified¹³ land acquisition for the 374-km Sonnagar-Andal Multitracking Project across Bihar, Jharkhand and West Bengal¹⁴, and for the 104-km Tirupati-Pakala-Katpadi Doubling Project¹⁵ in Andhra Pradesh under Sections 20A-20E of the Railways Act, 1989.¹⁶ In Karnataka, the Bengaluru Suburban Railway

Project¹⁷ faced major delays due to pending land acquisition and land-transfer disputes¹⁸, while Kerala's Sabari Rail Project remained stalled amid unresolved acquisition processes.¹⁹ These projects highlight the growing footprint of rail-led development alongside concerns over agricultural land loss, compensation, rehabilitation, and procedural safeguards for affected communities.

Airport expansion remained a major driver of land acquisition during June 2025-May 2026, with more than **3,000 hectares**, over **7,400 acres**, acquired, earmarked or brought under acquisition processes across Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Tamil Nadu, Maharashtra, Odisha, Telangana, Andhra Pradesh and Rajasthan. Major projects include **Noida International Airport, Jewar**²⁰, spread over about **4,752 hectares**, with nearly **₹5,000 crore**²¹ of public expenditure linked to land acquisition and enabling infrastructure; **Purandar**²² **Airport** in Maharashtra involving around **1,285 hectares**; **Gadchiroli Airport** around **311 hectares**; **Kota-Bundi Airport** around **440 hectares**; **Darbhanga Airport expansion** involving **89.75 acres**; **Raxaul Airport**²³ involving **139 acres**; and **Coimbatore**²⁴ **Airport expansion**²⁵, where around **604 acres** of the initially required **628 acres** had reportedly been acquired and handed over to AAI, with additional land still being sought.

Projects related to **industrial corridors and logistics hubs** continued to expand their land footprint across India. Land acquisition for the **Uttar Pradesh** Defence Industrial Corridor reached approximately 96% completion by May 2025²⁶, with around 2,015 of the approved 2,097 hectares acquired across six nodes, namely, Jhansi, Chitrakoot, Kanpur, Lucknow, Aligarh and Agra, and compensation reportedly paid to nearly 5,800 farmers. **Uttar Pradesh** also acquired about 100 hectares in Modinagar, Ghaziabad, for a new industrial hub under UPSIDA.²⁷ **Maharashtra's** New Nagpur Business District spans roughly 692 hectares with investments exceeding ₹11,000 crore.²⁸

Special Economic Zone (SEZ) development continued to reshape land use during June 2025-May 2026, with **178.236 hectares**²⁹ of new SEZ land notified across Gujarat, Arunachal Pradesh, Karnataka and Chhattisgarh, including **133.787 hectares in Gujarat** for semiconductor and electronics projects. At the same time, more than **460 hectares**³⁰ SEZ land was de-notified in Odisha, Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh and other states. While these changes were facilitated by amendments to the SEZ Rules that reduced minimum land requirements for semiconductor³¹ and electronics SEZs, de-notification does not automatically result in land being returned to affected communities.

Forest Under Siege: Infrastructure, Mining, and Coastal Conversion

Large-scale diversion of forests for infrastructure, mining, energy and strategic projects remained one of the defining environmental governance trends of the year. While many projects were justified in terms of economic growth, energy security, connectivity or climate adaptation, they frequently generated disputes over ecological impacts, displacement, forest rights and community participation. Taken together, these cases reveal a broader pattern: development projects are increasingly concentrated in ecologically sensitive and tribal-majority landscapes, where questions of consent, rehabilitation and environmental justice remain contested.

In the **Andaman and Nicobar Islands**, the Great Nicobar Mega Infrastructure Project proposes a trans-shipment port, an airport, a township, and allied infrastructure. It requires diversion of more than 130 sq km of rainforest and Tribal Reserve land, directly affecting Shompen (PVTG) and Nicobarese communities. Beyond questions of displacement and cultural continuity, the project has also raised concerns linked to its location within the Sundaland biodiversity hotspot and an estimated release of 4.3 million tonnes of carbon dioxide through forest clearance.^{32 33 34}

Mining expansion across central India has similarly reshaped forest landscapes at scale. In **Chhattisgarh**'s Hasdeo Aranya, the proposed Kente Extension Coal Block involves diversion of 1,742.6 hectares and felling of approximately 4.5 lakh trees.^{35 36 37}

In **Madhya Pradesh**, more than 60,000 acres of forest land have been diverted over five years across multiple coal and mineral blocks, including Gurhar Pahar, Gondbahera Ujheni East, Marwatola-VII and Dhirauli, contributing to the fragmentation of the Bandhavgarh-Achanakmar corridor.³⁸ **Maharashtra**'s Gadchiroli and Chandrapur regions have experienced further pressure through 937 hectares of mining-related diversion and associated habitat disruption around the Tadoba-Andhari landscape.

Odisha's Sijimali Bauxite Mine, involving potential diversion of over 700 hectares, became a focal point for scrutiny after allegations of irregularities in Gram Sabha consent processes. Intervention by the High Court and the Forest Advisory Committee led to a pause in clearance decisions, placing procedural compliance at the centre of the dispute rather than the project's scale alone.³⁹ The dispute highlights the increasing importance of procedural safeguards and community participation in environmental decision-making, particularly in Scheduled Areas where FRA and PESA protections are intended to guide development processes.

In **Assam**'s Sixth Schedule areas, industrial and energy projects have intensified debates over land governance and tribal autonomy. These cases collectively highlight tensions between industrial expansion and constitutionally protected systems of tribal self-governance in Sixth Schedule regions. In Karbi Anglong, approximately 1.53 lakh bighas have been diverted for industrial, plantation and energy projects.⁴⁰ In Dima Hasao, a 3,000-bigha allotment for a cement project was examined by the Gauhati High Court with emphasis on tribal and ecological concerns.⁴¹ In Kokrajhar, allocation of 3,600 bighas for a thermal power project triggered protests over alleged FRA and Gram Sabha violations.⁴²

In **Andhra Pradesh**, the Raiwada Pumped Storage Project saw opposition from Konda Dora and Kondh communities over land acquisition processes and limited participation in decision-making.⁴³ **Himachal Pradesh** recorded diversion of over 2,400 hectares of forest for 260 projects, while Jammu and Kashmir saw continued diversion for roads and tunnels. In **Uttarakhand**, the Char Dham road project remained under litigation over slope stability and environmental concerns. **Karnataka** continued to see resistance to the Hubballi-Ankola railway line through the Western Ghats, alongside mining pressures in Ballari.

The Ken-Betwa River Linking Project in **Madhya Pradesh** brings these dynamics into sharper focus. With submergence of over 9,000 hectares, including parts of Panna Tiger Reserve, and displacement of thousands of people, it illustrates how large-scale water

infrastructure increasingly intersects with both ecological thresholds and questions of consent in forest-dependent regions.^{44 45 46}

The Supreme Court's 2025-26 interpretation of the Aravalli Hills using a 100-metre local relief threshold has triggered concerns that over 90% of the range may lose protection, potentially opening ecologically sensitive zones across **Rajasthan, Haryana, Delhi and Gujarat** to mining and construction. Critics argue this affects the Aravallis' role as a desert barrier, groundwater recharge system and biodiversity corridor, with implications for desertification, water stress and livelihood security. The Court has since stayed the definition and formed an expert committee.^{47 48 49 50}

In **Gujarat's** Banni grasslands (Kutch), home to about 40,000 people across 48 hamlets in 19 panchayats, over 500 Maldharis and villagers from 16 villages protested a proposed NTPC Renewable Energy solar project near Fulay. The Maldhari pastoral community depends heavily on commons (gauchar land) for grazing cattle, buffalo (including the Banni buffalo), goats, sheep and camels, supporting dairy-based livelihoods and seasonal migration. Protesters warned the project could damage fragile grassland ecology, the Chhari-Dhand wetland ecosystem, and grazing routes, while raising concerns over inadequate Gram Sabha consultation and land-use transparency.⁵¹

The proposed Adani-Google hyperscale AI data centre in **Andhra Pradesh's** Visakhapatnam is a ₹1.2 lakh crore (US\$15 billion) investment to develop a 1 GW facility across about 601 acres, aimed at making Vizag a major AI and cloud computing hub. However, concerns have emerged over its proximity to the Kambalakonda Wildlife Sanctuary and ecologically sensitive hill ecosystems, with risks to biodiversity and habitat integrity. Questions have also been raised regarding the acquisition of agricultural and community lands, the adequacy of consultation processes, and impacts on local livelihoods, alongside fears of high water and energy demand intensifying pressure on already stressed resources.^{52 53 54}

Large infrastructure corridors in **Maharashtra** further intensified landscape transformation. Beyond forests, coastal regions increasingly emerged as sites of large-scale land transformation. The Vadhavan Port corridor alone involved the diversion of 237 hectares of forest land and the felling of nearly 40,000 trees, including mangroves. Mumbai Port Authority's plan to lease 28 plots covering over 217 acres for commercial and industrial use,^{55 56} and Vizhinjam in **Kerala**, where more than 500 acres were identified and 230 acres approved for port-linked industrialisation and logistics.^{57 58} Urban expansion linked to the Mumbai Coastal Road and MTHL added pressure on mangroves and coastal ecosystems.^{59 60 61 62 63 64}

More broadly, land acquisition associated with highways, real estate expansion, industrial corridors, and river-linking projects continued to reshape landscapes across India. National Highways Authority of India data indicates that more than 66,000 hectares were acquired between 2021 and 2026 for highway projects alone.

This reflects a shift in environmental governance conflicts from "development versus environment" to questions of legitimacy, consent and institutional accountability.

Conservation Without Communities: Displacement in the Name of Protection

During 2025-26, conservation governance continued to function as a critical site of contestation, revealing the deep contradictions between state-led conservation regimes and the rights of Indigenous and forest-dependent communities. Under the banner of biodiversity protection, protected areas increasingly became spaces of intensified surveillance, territorial control, and displacement, with Adivasi communities facing growing pressures to relinquish their ancestral lands and customary access to forests. These processes reflect a broader pattern of accumulation through dispossession, whereby lands and resources historically governed and sustained by communities are brought under centralised state control in the name of conservation. In response, communities challenged exclusionary conservation models by asserting their right to coexist with forests and wildlife, drawing upon the FRA 2006, the PESA 1996, and provisions of the LARR Act, 2013. Their struggles underscored that conservation cannot be separated from questions of justice, democratic control over natural resources, and the collective rights of those whose labour, knowledge, and stewardship have sustained these ecosystems for generations.

Relocation from tiger reserves and protected forests continued to generate resistance. In **Telangana's** Amrabad Tiger Reserve, Chenchu families challenged relocation processes on the grounds of inadequate consent under the Forest Rights Act (FRA) and threats to cultural continuity.⁶⁵ In **Chhattisgarh's** Achanakmar Tiger Reserve, Baiga communities resisted proposals affecting around 170 families, citing Community Forest Resource (CFR) rights.⁶⁶

In **Karnataka**, the long-running struggle of the Jenu Kuruba community in Nagarhole Tiger Reserve continued. The reoccupation of ancestral settlements by 52 families in May 2025 was framed by community members as an assertion of rights recognised under the FRA. Subsequent eviction drives underscored the unresolved conflict between conservation regimes and indigenous claims to traditional habitation.^{67 68}

In **Odisha**, relocation in Similipal and Satkosia Tiger Reserves raised concerns over insufficient recognition of forest rights and weak Gram Sabha participation.^{69 70} Eviction drives in Paikan Reserve Forest, in **Assam**, displaced over 1,080 families and demolished around 2,500 structures, raising concerns over rehabilitation and due process.⁷¹ While communities in **Maharashtra** residing near Sanjay Gandhi National Park protested eviction notices, arguing unresolved forest and habitation rights.⁷²

Protected area restructuring added another layer of contestation. In **Rajasthan**, proposed changes to Sariska Tiger Reserve's Critical Tiger Habitat would expand the core by 91 sq km while excluding 48.5 sq km, prompting concerns over mining re-entry and corridor fragmentation.⁷³ The draft Eco-Sensitive Zone for Ramgarh Vishdhari Tiger Reserve (over 1,200 sq km across 184 villages)^{74 75} and the Pilibhit ESZ (230 villages) in **Uttar Pradesh** similarly raised anxieties over land-use restrictions and livelihood impacts.⁷⁶

In **Uttarakhand**, a proposed ecotourism zone near Jim Corbett National Park faced opposition due to rising human-wildlife conflict, including 12 tiger attacks between March 2024 and March 2025. With 15 existing ecotourism zones generating ₹2,000-3,000 crore annually, concerns were raised about additional ecological pressure in a landscape with 67-80 tigers. The proposal was put on hold by the High Court.⁷⁷

Forest Rights Act: Implementation and Community Forest Governance

Nearly two decades after its inception, the Forest Rights Act (FRA) of 2006 remains a pivotal framework for correcting the historical dispossession of India's Adivasi and forest-dependent communities. While it legally empowers the Gram Sabha and has recognised millions of individual and community claims, its implementation is starkly uneven.

By May 2025, out of 51 lakh claims filed, only 25 lakh titles were recognised, while 18.6 lakh were rejected and 7.5 lakh remain pending. Crucially, Community Forest Rights (CFRs), the core of the Act's transformative vision, consistently lag behind individual rights due to fractured administrative focus across states.

These statistics underscore a persistent pattern of exclusion. High rejection rates, procedural bottlenecks, weak institutional capacity, and bureaucratic inconsistencies plague the process. Furthermore, ongoing conflicts over forest diversion, extractive industrial development, and conservation-driven displacement widen the gap between legal promises and ground realities. As the FRA approaches its twentieth anniversary, the fundamental challenge is shifted: it is no longer about creating a progressive policy, but ensuring its equitable, consistent enforcement.

In several states, Gram Sabhas asserted a more active role in forest governance. In **Chhattisgarh**, mobilisation led to the withdrawal of a circular seen as recentralizing CFR authority out of the hands of the Gram Sabhas.⁷⁸ Maharashtra restored Gram Sabha powers to issue transit permits for Minor Forest Produce, reversing earlier state control. While seen as strengthening Gram Sabha autonomy, concerns remain over procedural constraints limiting full community control.⁷⁹

Odisha witnessed a significant judicial affirmation of community rights when a court upheld the authority of Gram Sabhas to issue transit permits for kendu leaves under recognised CFR frameworks. At the same time, concerns emerged regarding the closure of FRA support cells across the state, raising questions about future implementation capacity.⁸⁰

In **Telangana**, opposition to the proposed Kumuram Bheem Conservation Reserve reflected concerns that conservation planning could impose restrictions on customary rights across more than 330 tribal villages without adequate participation. Following widespread protests, the state placed the proposal in abeyance.⁸¹

In **Chhattisgarh**, tribal groups and organisations renewed demands for Sixth Schedule protections and the creation of a separate Bastar state, arguing that stronger forms of self-governance were necessary to safeguard land, forests, culture, and customary institutions.⁸² Similarly, calls for Sixth Schedule status resurfaced in the Darjeeling Hills of **West Bengal**, where proponents linked constitutional autonomy to the protection of land, culture and local decision-making.⁸³

These parallel moves, decentralisation of authority on one hand and institutional thinning on the other, created an uneven governance landscape, where formal recognition of rights did not always translate into administrative capacity to exercise them.

State-level implementation disparities remained significant. **Jammu and Kashmir** recorded rejection rates exceeding 86 per cent, while **West Bengal's** rejection rates approached 70 per cent. In **Uttarakhand**, long-pending recognition for Raji PVTG communities persisted

despite statutory provisions under the FRA.⁸⁴ Reports from **Chhattisgarh** also pointed to missing FRA titles in official records, raising concerns beyond approval rates to include governance of documentation and record integrity.

Odisha's decision to shut down Forest Rights Act (FRA) Cells across the state has come under scrutiny from the Union Ministry of Tribal Affairs, raising concerns over weakened implementation of forest rights under the FRA, 2006. The state has ordered the closure of 50 sub-divisional FRA Cells under the DA-JGUA scheme, following the earlier dismantling of district and tehsil-level support structures responsible for processing and verifying Individual and Community Forest Rights claims. While the government has directed the clearance of all pending claims by March 2026.⁸⁵

FRA implementation increasingly emerged as a test of constitutional commitments to decentralised governance, tribal self-determination and substantive equality. Despite these challenges, progress was reported in states including Odisha, Assam, Goa, Himachal Pradesh, and Andhra Pradesh. Community Forest Resource Rights recognition continued to expand, particularly in Odisha, Maharashtra, and Chhattisgarh, where Gram Sabhas increasingly emerged as central institutions for forest governance.

Policy developments under the Union Government

- The **revised Biological Diversity Act ABS Rules** link benefit-sharing to turnover: below ₹5 crore exempt; 0.2% (₹5-50 crore); 0.4% (₹50-250 crore); 0.6% above ₹250 crore; up to 5% for species such as sandalwood and red sanders. While introducing digital approvals and exemptions for cultivated medicinal plants and AYUSH practitioners, the framework is criticised for diluting free, prior and informed consent, reducing the role of Biodiversity Management Committees, and lowering benefit-sharing from 95% to 85-90%, raising concerns over community rights over biological resources.⁸⁶
- The **Green India Mission (GIM)** has been expanded to restore degraded ecosystems across the Aravallis, Himalayas, Western Ghats and mangroves, targeting restoration of 26 million hectares by 2030. While the programme emphasises afforestation and monitoring, critics argue it prioritises plantation-based outcomes over biodiversity conservation and weakens FRA-linked community governance.⁸⁷
- The **Green Credit Rules, 2023**, have identified over 26,000 hectares for restoration. Concerns persist that some of these areas overlap with FRA-recognised or pending rights, where the absence of Gram Sabha consent may undermine forest governance and livelihoods.⁸⁸
- The **Van (Sanrakshan Evam Samvardhan) Amendment Rules, 2025**, streamline forest diversion through PARIVESH, allow preliminary project work after Stage-I clearance, and increase flexibility in compensatory afforestation. While framed as

efficiency-enhancing, critics warn of weakened safeguards for natural forests and forest-dependent communities. ⁸⁹

- The MoEFCC's January 2026 amendment to forest conservation guidelines allows commercial plantations in forest areas without Net Present Value (NPV) or compensatory afforestation, reclassifying them as a forestry activity. Critics warn it weakens safeguards, promotes monocultures like eucalyptus and teak, and undermines biodiversity and community forest rights. ⁹⁰
- In September 2025, MoEFCC exempted mining of critical and strategic minerals (lithium, cobalt, nickel, rare earths, uranium, thorium) from public hearings under the EIA Notification, 2006, retaining technical assessments but removing public consultation, raising concerns over reduced transparency in tribal and ecologically sensitive regions. ⁹¹
- The **16th Finance Commission (2026-31)** revised forest criteria to include open forests alongside dense and moderately dense categories, retaining a 10% ecological weight and linking devolution to forest area and improvement (2015-23). Critics caution that this may incentivise plantation expansion over ecological integrity. ⁹²
- The government has established 324 district-level and 17 state-level FRA cells under the **Dharti Aba Janjatiya Gram Utkarsh Abhiyaan**. Despite this, as of March 2025, 14.45% claims remain pending, and over 42% of disposed claims were rejected, raising concerns over centralised, techno-bureaucratic implementation structures. ⁹³
- The Ministry of Tribal Affairs announced the **TARANG digital FRA portal (2025)** to enable online filing, tracking and digital titling, along with a geospatial FRA Atlas. While improving digitisation, concerns persist regarding the exclusion of communities lacking documented land records. ⁹⁴
- The **Draft Registration Bill, 2025** and expansion of **Digital India Land Records Modernisation Programme** (₹875 crore, 2021-26) and ULPIN/Bhu-Aadhaar systems aim to digitise land records and registration systems. However, concerns remain that digitisation may exclude Adivasis, forest dwellers, pastoralists, women and commons-dependent communities whose rights remain partially or undocumented. ⁹⁵
- In June 2025, the Union Government amended the **Special Economic Zones (SEZ) Rules, 2006**, to promote semiconductor and electronics manufacturing by reducing minimum contiguous land requirements from 50 to 10 hectares and relaxing encumbrance norms where land is mortgaged or leased to government agencies. ⁹⁶
- The **Parliamentary Standing Committee** (18 December 2025) flagged weak implementation of the Right to Fair Compensation and Transparency in Land Acquisition, Rehabilitation and Resettlement (RFCTLARR) Act, 2013, citing inadequate Gram Sabha consultations, weak SIAs, undervaluation of land and violations of the FRA and PESA, recommending mandatory Gram Sabha consent and stronger rehabilitation safeguards.

- The **Supreme Court** (17 November 2025) issued directives restricting tiger safaris to buffer or degraded areas, mandating ESZ notifications within one year, banning mining within one kilometre of tiger habitats, and reinforcing alignment between Wildlife Act provisions and FRA-based rights. It also supported CAMPA-funded voluntary relocation from ecologically critical habitats. ⁹⁷ ⁹⁸

Recommendations

- Gram Sabhas shall be recognised and strengthened as the primary institutions of local self-governance, with full authority as provided under the Forest Rights Act, 2006 and the Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act, 1996.
- Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC) of Gram Sabhas shall be mandatory for all decisions affecting land, forests, natural resources, and livelihoods of forest-dependent communities.
- Land acquired under the Right to Fair Compensation and Transparency in Land Acquisition, Rehabilitation and Resettlement Act, 2013 that remains unutilised for five years shall be returned to the original landowners or their lawful heirs in accordance with law.
- Any eviction, displacement, land acquisition, or forest diversion undertaken without the prior informed consent of the Gram Sabha and due process under applicable laws shall be deemed unlawful.
- The State shall ensure transparency and accountability in forest governance and recognise the authority of Gram Sabhas in the protection, management, and conservation of forests and community resources.
- Governments shall maintain publicly accessible records of land acquisition, utilisation, project beneficiaries, and compliance with rehabilitation and environmental obligations.
- Environmental governance shall prioritise the protection of natural forests, wetlands, grasslands, mangroves, and wildlife corridors, recognising that their ecological functions cannot be substituted through compensatory plantations.
- Policies addressing ecological degradation and human-wildlife conflict shall focus on underlying causes, including habitat fragmentation, extractive activities, and infrastructure expansion.

Endnotes

1. [At 22K ha, road projects led to largest forest diversion since 2020: Centre Conflicts Database | Land conflict watch](#)
2. [Conflicts Database | Land conflict watch](#)
3. <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/guwahati/667-families-evicted-from-600-bighas-in-goalpara-5-schools-to-be-demolished/articleshow/121890629.cms>
4. [AIUDF MLAs protest eviction in Dhubri | Guwahati News - Times of India](#)
5. [Bulldozing the Poor: Assam's eviction drives for Adani project leave thousands homeless | CJP](#)
6. <https://www.newindianexpress.com/states/delhi/2025/Jun/01/hundreds-lose-homes-as-bulldozers-raise-delhis-madrasi-camp-slum>

7. <https://www.newslandry.com/2025/06/30/delhis-demolition-drive-27000-displaced-from-9-acres-of-encroached-land>
8. <chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/GOVERNMENT OF INDIA MINISTRY OF ROAD TRANSPORT AND HIGHWAYS RAJYA SABHA UNSTARRED QUESTION NO - 3783 ANSWERED ON>
9. [NHAI to soon begin land acquisition for 27.9-km K'shetra bypass project | Chandigarh News - The Times of India](#)
10. [27 Integrated Manufacturing & Logistic Clusters \(IMLCs\) & 6 Defence Industrial Corridors \(DIC\)](#)
11. [Ganga Expressway to become ₹46,660 crore integrated manufacturing corridor across 12 Uttar Pradesh districts](#)
12. [Land acquisition has begun for the East-West dedicated corridor: entire project to be completed in 6 years: DFCCIL official - Railways News | The Financial Express](#)
13. <https://lawchronicle.com/article/central-government-finalizes-land-acquisition-for-sonnagar-andal-multitracking-project?utm>
14. <https://www.pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=2148296&utm>
15. [Tirupati-Katpadi track doubling: Centre clears land acquisition](#)
16. [Central Government Notifies Land Acquisition for Tirupati-Pakala-Katpadi Railway Doubling ProjUPSIDA. ect](#)
17. [Only 18.5% of work done on Suburban Rail project in Bengaluru](#)
18. [As six-year deadline looms, Bengaluru suburban rail project delayed by land transfer](#)
19. [Sabari Rail project: Land acquisition process likely to be delayed](#)
20. [Noida International Airport, Jewar | GautamBuddha Nagar | India](#)
21. [Land to power lines, Noida invested Rs 5,000 crore in airport | Noida News - The Times of India](#)
22. [Dist administration says over 93% consent secured for Purandar airport land acquisition | Hindustan Times](#)
23. [Bihar cabinet nod for land acquisition for expansion of Darbhanga, Raxual airports, ETInfra](#)
24. [AAI seeks 17 more acres for airport expansion in Coimbatore](#)
25. [Landowners Await Compensation for Coimbatore Airport Project Since World War-2 | Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu](#)
26. [UP completes 96 per cent land acquisition for its defence corridor: Know all about the project](#)
27. <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/noida/up-acquires-100-hectares-in-gzb-for-industrial-hub/articleshow/131449887.cms>
28. [New Nagpur to Rise as Maharashtra's Global Business and Financial Hub: CM](#)
29. [List on Notified SEZs](#)
30. <https://www.sezindia.gov.in/sites/default/files/notified/Notified%20SEZs%207%2B10%2B353%20%28%29.pdf>
31. [Government Notifies India's First Chip Fabrication Plant at SEZ Dholera](#)
32. ['Tribals vulnerable': Cal HC admits PIL on Great Nicobar project | Kolkata News- The Times of India](#)
33. [Great Nicobar project: Ministry reviewing tribal concerns, says Jial Oram | India News- Business Standard](#)
34. [Great Nicobar Island: Strategy vs Sustainability](#)
35. [Chhattisgarh: Coal mining projects in Surguja will displace tribals and destroy forests, activists claim - ThePrint](#)
36. [Forest diversion, consent, and mine expansion: Contestation over the Kente Extension Coal Block in Hasdeo Aranya, Chhattisgarh](#)
37. [Chhattisgarh: Forest Dept Recommends Approval for Controversial Coal Mining Project in Hasdeo Arand, Over 4.5 Lakh Trees at Risk- https://indianmasterminds.com](#)
38. [How India's 'greenest state' is sacrificing massive forest land to mining](#)
39. [Centre defers decision on Vedanta's proposal to divert 708 ha the forest land for Sijimali Bauxite Mines- The Week](#)
40. [Karbi Anglong Congress alleges 1.53 lakh bighas of tribal land handed to corporates](#)
41. ['Is this a joke?' Gauhati High Court raps allotment of 3,000 bighas of land to cement firm in Assam tribal district](#)
42. [Massive protest erupts in Assam's Bodoland over Adani's thermal power project in Kokrajhar](#)
43. [Human rights body demands scrapping of Adani's hydro project in AP tribal villages](#)
44. [Ken-Betwa Dam Faces Protests Over Displacement- Frontline](#)
45. [Ken-Betwa river linking: Why are people protesting against India's ambitious water project](#)
46. [Ken-Betwa project: tribals paying the cost for a river-linking dream](#)
47. [Aravalli: Why India's ancient hills are at the centre of growing protests- BBC News](#)
48. [How the Supreme Court's new definition of the Aravalli redraws the landscape of India's oldest hill range](#)
49. [The Aravalli Hills Have A New Definition. Here's Why This Is A Problem.- The Wire](#)
50. [Aravalli Hills controversy: SC to hear suo motu case on 'definition' of Aravalli on Monday- The Hindu](#)
51. [Maldharis draw line on solar project | Ahmedabad News - The Times of India](#)
52. [Google's \\$15 bn AI hub in Vizag will be growth engine for Indian economy: Naidu | Hyderabad News - The Times of India](#)
53. <https://countercurrents.org/2026/05/hrf-demands-halt-to-vizag-hyperscale-data-center-over-alleged-environmental-violations/?ut>
54. <https://www.wsj.com/tech/ai/big-subsidies-for-google-limited-water-for-locals-the-dilemma-of-ai-in-india-105a770e?utm>
55. [Centre gives in-principle clearance for diversion of 237,086 hectares of forest land and felling of nearly 40,000 trees for Vadhavan Port corridor in Maharashtra | Mumbai News- The Times of India](#)
56. [Commercial hub makeover on the cards for Mumbai's eastern waterfront as port authority invites proposals to lease 28 plots](#)
57. [Kinfra identifies over 500 acres for port-led growth | Thiruvananthapuram News- The Times of India](#)
58. [Vizhinjam industrial devpt project all set to get rolling | Thiruvananthapuram News- The Times of India](#)

59. [Maharashtra govt's proposal to exclude 17 villages from Sahyadri Tiger Reserve plan raises alarm over threats to tiger corridor and environment | Kolhapur News- The Times of India](#)
60. [Union Ministry of Environment, Forests & Climate Change asks Maharashtra government to examine complaints regarding Versova-Bhayander Coastal Road and take the necessary action](#)
61. [Maharashtra Clears Diversion Of 937 Hectares Of Forest Land In Gadchiroli For Lloyds Metals Expansion](#)
62. [For project in Maharashtra's Gadchiroli, trees set to be planted 1,000 km away on already forested land | India News](#)
63. [NGT upholds forest diversion for Durgapur mining project in Chanda | Nagpur News- The Times of India](#)
64. [Mumbai: Green panel approves diversion of 32,6921 hectare forest land for coastal road connecting MTHL](#)
65. [Rewind: Chenchu relocation from Amrabad Tiger Reserve Conservation effort or Tribal displacement?- Telangana Today](#)
66. <https://www.newsgram.com/chhattisgarh/2025/11/07/gram-sabhas-fight-displacement-achanakmar-tiger-reserve>
67. <https://www.thenewsminute.com/karnataka/karnataka-52-tribal-families-in-nagarahole-forest-allegedly-face- eviction-threat?utm>
68. <https://countercurrents.org/2025/06/forest-dwelling- adivasi-communities-in-nagarhole-karnataka-evicted/?utm>
69. <https://www.hindustantimes.com/cities/others/moef-flags-forest-right-violations-in-similipal-tiger-reserve-village-relocation-101757943708294.htmthe>
70. [Village relocation for tiger introduction done sans public meeting: Satkosia Praja Surakhya Samiti](#)
71. [Violence erupts during Assam forest eviction drive: 1 killed in firing, several injured as settlers clash with police-forest teams | Guwahati News- Times of India](#)
72. [Adivasi Villagers Protest Eviction Notices In Thane Belt Of Sanjay Gandhi National Park | Outlook India](#)
73. [Move to redraw boundaries of Sariska Tiger Reserve to facilitate mining draws flak from experts](#)
74. [Ramgarh tiger reserve ESZ draft issued, 184 villages included in proposed zone | Jaipur News- Times of India](#)
75. [Process for eco-sensitive zone around Ramgarh Vishdhari reserve begins | Jaipur News- Times of India](#)
76. [12 yrs on, MoEFCC issues draft ESZ notification for PTR | Bareilly News- The Times of India](#)
77. [Perilous proposal](#)
78. [Chhattisgarh forest department withdraws circular on CFR rights after massive tribal protests](#)
79. [Govt restores gram sabhas' powers on minor forest produce transport permits | Nagpur News](#)
80. <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/india/supreme-court-asks-states-to-declare-eszs-around-tiger-reserves-bans-mini ng-activities-within-1-km/articleshow/125389366.cms?from=mdr&utm>
81. [GO 49 to create new tiger conservation reserve kept in abeyance over Adivasi concerns- The Hindu](#)
82. [Tribals Seek Inclusion Under Sixth Schedule, Demand Separate Bastar State](#)
83. [DARJEELING: 6th Schedule demand returns with new political formation](#)
84. <https://www.prashantnews.com/raji-community-demands-basic-rights-amnesties/>
85. [Odisha govt.'s directions to shut forest rights cells prompt Central scrutiny- The Hindu](#)
86. [New regulations define access-benefit sharing from biological resources](#)
87. [Govt Expands Green India Mission for Forest Boost](#)
88. [moefcc-gcp.in](#)
89. <https://www.newindianexpress.com/india/2025/Sep/02/moefccs-new-notification-dilutes-forest-conservation-act-afforestation-rules?utm>
90. ['Disastrous': Modi govt allows commercial plantations in forests, drops safeguards](#)
91. [Critical, strategic and atomic mineral mining projects in India can now be approved without public hearing](#)
92. [16th Finance Commission overhauls forest formula, rewards open forests, growth](#)
93. [In forest rights push, Centre sanctions over 300 FRA cells to 'facilitate the' implementation- The Hindu](#)
94. [Centre plans portal to take process of forest rights' recognition, management online- The Hindu](#)
95. <https://cdnbbsr.s3waas.gov.in/s3d69116f8b0140cdeb1f99a4d5096ffe4/uploads/2025/05/20250526906486876.pdf>
96. https://www.pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=2135116&utm_source®=3&lang=2
97. <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/india/supreme-court-asks-states-to-declare-eszs-around-tiger-reserves-bans-mining-activities-within-1-km/articleshow/125389366.cms?from=mdr&utm>
98. [2025 mixed year for wildlife conservation amid rising conflicts, forest loss in Karnataka](#)

LIBERTY

Media

Capture of Legacy Media and Resilience of Independent Journalism

Intro: Indian journalism is currently facing a set of systemic challenges. International press freedom indices show a decline in India's ranking. This trend reflects the environment for independent journalists in the country.

At an international forum, a Norwegian journalist inquired about press freedom and democratic values in India. Prime Minister Narendra Modi left the event without providing a direct response to the query. This event is cited as a representation of the current relationship between the Indian government and the press. Observers note that opportunities to ask questions of high ranking officials are decreasing. Narendra Modi has not participated in a formal press conference in the twelve years since assuming office. The Indian media is currently described as being under various forms of external pressure. The challenges facing the press during the current administration are considered significant by industry analysts. This includes the reporting of policy decisions and security operations where the impartiality of media outlets is under scrutiny.

Mainstream Media Coverage of SIR

The Special Intensive Revision (SIR) is a practice conducted by the Election Commission of India involving the renewal of voter lists. This process, as it has been conducted over the past few months in India, has resulted in the removal of many individuals from the electoral rolls. It is argued that journalism should focus on the social effects of these administrative decisions. Mainstream Indian newspapers including The Hindu, Hindustan Times, Indian Express, Times of India, Dainik Bhaskar, Dainik Jagran, Amar Ujala, and Hindustan primarily used government statements and official statistics in their reporting of SIR. These legacy media organizations generally maintained a neutral position and did not conduct extensive independent investigations into the matter. The country's mainstream television news channels fared worse than the print media. The issue of 'SIR' remained almost absent from the prime time debates and special bulletins of these channels. The humanitarian aspects of disenfranchisement were not a central theme in prime time news broadcasts. The selection of news topics on these channels is often attributed to ratings and the maintenance of relationships with government entities.

Independent Digital Media Reporting

While on one hand the traditional and mainstream media was failing in this test, on the other hand, the 'new media' or independent digital platforms established in the last 15 years have made some efforts to fill this void. Digital institutions like Newslaundry, The News Minute, Scroll and The Wire abided by the real principles of journalism in this entire matter. These digital portals did not just report sitting in offices, rather their journalists went on the ground. They visited remote areas where lakhs of people were at risk of losing their citizenship and identity due to the 'SIR' exercise. These institutions showed that this exercise is not just a technical or electoral process, but it is a fight for survival for the poor and marginalized people for whom identity cards are the only support of their lives. It is only because of the

reporting of these independent platforms that the human and ground aspects of this crisis were revealed to the country and the world.

Operation Sindoor Coverage and Misinformation

The second biggest crisis faced by the Indian media came to reporting on Kashmir's Pahalgam attacks and defensive actions like 'Operation Sindoor'. The Indian strikes, labelled Operation Sindoor, followed the April 22 Pahalgam massacre in which 26 civilians were shot dead by terrorists with alleged links to Pakistan. Reporting on issues related to defence and national security has always been sensitive, but the pressure seen on journalists during this period was never seen before. During 'Operation Sindoor', the reporters working in the field were under immense pressure from the government and security agencies. The biggest restriction during this operation was that no one could raise questions about the damage caused to the Indian Army or security forces, the number of casualties or what they said. If any journalist or newspaper tried to do investigative reporting about these casualties, he or she would be labelled "anti-national" or his or her report would be shelved. The result of this atmosphere of fear created in the name of national security was that most of the big newspapers of the country succumbed to this pressure.

21 Indian civilians were killed in the conflict between India and Pakistan that went on for four days. On the intervening night of May 6 and 7, shortly after India launched a military strike targeting terror bases in Pakistan, the neighbouring country retaliated with cross-border firing, hitting many civilian areas. Their stories were not covered by several mainstream television channels in India that were too busy celebrating the operation's success as a befitting revenge for Pahalgam. Even in Prime Minister Narendra Modi's address to the nation after the conflict, there was no mention of the civilian casualties, which included five children.

Misinformation in mainstream news channels was rampant at this time. News channels also went all out, launching fictional strikes on the Karachi port and Islamabad and sharing unrelated visuals from Gaza and even from video games as footage from the conflict, absolutely ignoring (with some exceptions) the human costs on the ground near the border. For instance, Mohammed Iqbal was among those killed in retaliatory shelling by Pakistan in the early hours of May 7. However, the 47-year-old Qari, an honorific title given to those who specialise in recitation of Quranic verses, was labelled a terrorist by many news outlets. News channels ran bulletins that India killed a Lashkar terrorist, the Pulwama mastermind, who was hiding in Kotli. He was a well-respected teacher and religious figure in the community who was hit with a splinter whilst he was shifting the children in his school to a safer location during the shelling. They showed an image of him in his last moments, bleeding, celebrating it as a triumph.

Social Composition and Content Regulation

The handling and coverage of two major issues facing the Indian media over the past year—the 'SIR' (Social Investigation Report) and the Pahalgam attack—have exposed yet another deep-seated malaise within the media: the persistent infusion of communal

undertones into news reporting. The manner in which news is presented today reveals a distinct religious and social divide. While this communal slant poses a grave threat to the nation's social fabric, the most alarming aspect is its apparent alignment with the political ideology and strategies of the current ruling establishment. When the media transforms into a tool for advancing the political agenda of those in power, it ceases to be impartial. Prime-time debates deliberately amplify issues that foster societal polarization, thereby diverting public attention from fundamental concerns such as unemployment, inflation, and a crumbling administrative system.

The News Broadcasting and Digital Standards Authority or NBDSA has processed complaints against several broadcasters including Zee News, India TV, Aaj Tak, ABP News, NDTV, and Times Now Navbharat. These complaints concerned content involving unverified claims and polarizing themes. Over 140 violations of the Cable Television Networks Regulation Act of 1995 have been documented in the last five years. The NBDSA is the official body for these submissions.

Inaccurate reporting continues to occur. On March 3, 2025, Zee News aired a viral video claiming a Muslim truck driver caused traffic in Jammu while praying. When the NBDSA investigated, the channel stated they could not verify the footage and removed the content after it was proved inaccurate. This event raises questions about the broadcasting of unverified content by national channels. There is a trend in the industry where journalism is treated as content which can prioritize audience engagement over factual accuracy.

Alongside this communal slant, another harsh reality cannot be overlooked: the social composition of media organizations and the deeply ingrained caste bias within them. It is an established fact that representation of journalists from Dalit, Backward Class, and Adivasi communities in mainstream media—particularly within newsrooms, editorial boards, and top decision-making roles—is virtually non-existent. According to a report - Oxfam India-Newslaundry's Report 'Who tells our stories matters: Representation of Marginalised Caste Groups in Indian Media'- reveals that around 90 per cent leadership positions in print, TV, and digital media are occupied by General caste groups with no Scheduled Caste (SC) or Scheduled Tribe (ST) heading mainstream media outlets.

The lack of social diversity in newsrooms influences the prioritization of news stories. This is a factor in why issues like SIR, which affects the civil rights of marginalized groups, often receive limited coverage in mainstream media. These events are often reported as routine administrative procedures rather than humanitarian issues. The absence of representatives from these communities in decision making roles results in their concerns being underrepresented in the national discourse.

Economic Structures and Advertising Revenue

Economic Dependence, the Game of Advertisements, and Government Repression

The economic structure of media ownership affects press freedom. Large corporate groups with diverse business interests often own media outlets. These corporate interests can influence how government policies are reported. Some media groups may own multiple outlets that present different viewpoints on the same issue. The financial relationships

between these corporations and the media business can limit the scope of investigative journalism regarding government and corporate activities.

Indian media revenue is heavily dependent on government advertising. When a significant portion of the income for a media institution comes from central and state government advertisements, it can affect the objectivity of their reporting on government policies.

In 2026, a response in the Lok Sabha stated that the government spent 5987.46 crore rupees on advertisements between the 2014-15 and 2024-25 fiscal years. This is an average of 1.5 crore rupees per day.

The government is also increasing its advertising spend on digital platforms. Between 2023-24 and 2025-26, the government paid over 120.13 crore rupees to Google India and YouTube. During the same period, Meta received approximately 24.45 crore rupees.

Economic dependence can lead to a reduction in critical reporting regarding government actions that affect vulnerable populations.

The following areas have seen specific reporting patterns:

- **Land Acquisition:** Reports on the displacement of tribal populations for industrial projects often emphasize the economic benefits of development. The perspectives of the displaced individuals regarding their human rights and livelihoods are frequently underrepresented.
- **Administrative Property Actions:** The demolition of houses in certain communities has occurred without specific court orders. While this is an administrative action, some media outlets have described it as a form of governance. The legal questions surrounding these processes are often secondary in these reports.
- **Labour and Agricultural Protests:** During protests against agricultural laws and labour codes, media coverage often focused on the traffic disruption caused by the demonstrators. The specific policy demands of the workers and farmers were not the primary focus of many news segments.
- **Regulatory Oversight:** Media owners often have interests in sectors such as mining, steel, and real estate. These businesses are subject to government regulations and environmental clearances. The use of investigative agencies such as the Enforcement Directorate or the CBI can influence the editorial stance of media organizations owned by these individuals.

The ownership of major media houses by individuals or major corporate houses with significant non-media business interests is a documented reality. Journalism is often playing second fiddle to other profitable enterprises in industries like aviation and infrastructure and also acting as a narrative companion and a shield against bad headlines involving the primary businesses as well.

When media owners require government approval for their primary businesses, the impartiality of their news organizations can be compromised. Furthermore, investigative

agencies have the authority to examine the financial records of these corporate entities. This creates a situation where the editorial direction of a media house may be influenced by the regulatory status of its owner's other assets.

Way forward and expectations

Indian journalism is currently facing a set of systemic challenges. International press freedom indices show a decline in India's ranking. This trend reflects the environment for independent journalists in the country. Digital platforms are currently providing a different model of reporting that is not tied to traditional corporate or government advertising. However, the overall health of the democratic press also depends on legacy media.

The credibility of the media is a central concern for the functioning of the democratic process. Article 19(1)(a) of the Constitution provides the legal basis for freedom of speech. The professional standard for journalism involves reporting facts and asking relevant questions of those in power to maintain public accountability.

Endnotes

39. Alt News. (2025, November 14). Operation Sindoor: Grief on the ground, glory on TV screens. <https://www.altnews.in/operation-sindoor-grief-on-the-ground-glory-on-tv-screens/>
40. Alt News. (2026, April 19). Four more Bengal constituencies, same pattern: Muslims disproportionately marked under adjudication in SIR. <https://www.altnews.in/four-more-bengal-constituencies-same-pattern-muslims-disproportionately-marked-under-adjudication-in-sir/>
41. Daniyal, S. (2026, May 07). 4 tests, 1 question: Did SIR shape Bengal outcome? Newslandry. <https://www.newslandry.com/2026/05/07/4-tests-1-question-did-sir-shape-bengal-outcome>
42. News Broadcasting and Digital Standards Authority. (2025, December 18). NBDSA pulls up India TV for communal, one-sided broadcast, upholds CJP complaint against broadcast. Sabrang India. <https://sabrangindia.in/nbdsa-pulls-up-india-tv-for-communal-one-sided-broadcast-upholds-cjp-complaint-against-broadcast/>
43. Planet Compliance. (2025, October 24). The Ambani-Adani connection. <https://www.planetcompliance.com/regulatory-compliance/the-ambani-adani-connection/>
44. Press Information Bureau. (2025, September 22). Press release details. Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India. <https://www.pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=2247879®=3&lang=1>
45. Raman, S. (2026, March 31). Follow the money: Inside Modi govt's Rs 15-crore-a-day ad spend. Newslandry. <https://www.newslandry.com/2026/03/31/follow-the-money-inside-modi-govt-rs-15-crore-a-day-ad-spend>
46. Sasi, A., & Poddar, A. (2025, December 04). ECI's software branded 3.66 crore voters as suspects. The Reporters' Collective. <https://www.reporters-collective.in/trc/ecis-software-branded-3-66-crore-voters-as-suspects>
47. Shah, S. (2026, May 20). Meet Helle Lyng, the Norwegian journalist who asked Modi why he avoids the press. Newslandry. <https://www.newslandry.com/2026/05/20/meet-helle-lyng-the-norwegian-journalist-who-asked-modi-why-he-avoids-the-press>
48. The Federal. (2026, January 10). Zee News fined: Fake viral video journalism crisis discussion. <https://thefederal.com/category/news/zee-news-fined-fake-viral-video-journalism-crisis-discussion-230692>
49. The Hindu. (2022, October 14). 90% of leadership positions in Indian media occupied by upper caste groups: Report. The Hindu. <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/90-of-leadership-positions-in-indian-media-occupied-by-upper-caste-groups-report/article66010136.ece>
50. The Hindu. (2026, May 15). Regrettable fact that PM Modi has not held a single open press conference: Editors Guild of India. The Hindu.

- <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/regrettable-fact-that-pm-modi-has-not-held-a-single-open-press-conference-editors-guild-of-india/article71018623.ece>
51. The Wire. (2026, February 11). Backstory: Only credible journalism can solve the mystery of SIR's missing voters. The Wire.
<https://m.thewire.in/article/media/backstory-only-credible-journalism-can-solve-the-mystery-of-sirs-missing-voters>
 52. The Wire. (2026, May 25). International media's reaction to SIR indicates Indian democracy's slide under Modi regime. The Wire.
<https://m.thewire.in/article/politics/international-medias-reaction-to-sir-indicates-indian-democracys-slide-under-modi-regime>
 53. Tiwari/The Caravan. (2025, November 02). How Network 18 was hollowed out to barter support for Modi. The Caravan.
<https://caravanmagazine.in/media/network-18-ambani-reliance-hollowed-out-barter-modi>
 54. Verma, A. (2025, October 08). Election commission and the Bihar disenfranchisement. Frontline.
<https://frontline.thehindu.com/interviews/election-commission-bihar-disenfranchisement/article69963785.ece>
 55. The Hindu. (2022, October 14). 90% of leadership positions in Indian media occupied by upper caste groups: Report. The Hindu.
<https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/90-of-leadership-positions-in-indian-media-occupied-by-upper-caste-groups-report/article66010136.ece>

Voluntary Sector

Is there a need to strengthen restrictive laws or add more compliance requirements?

Intro: The recent Foreign Contribution (Regulation) Amendment Bill, 2026 signalled a fresh wave of regulatory tightening, aimed at further constraining the functioning of voluntary organisations and extending greater government control over them.

India's voluntary sector, noted for its vibrancy, innovation and research-based advocacy, is an important nation-building partner of the government. It is rather unfortunate, therefore, that the government seems to perceive the voluntary sector as fomenting dissent and thwarting development. This erroneous perspective does not reflect the facts — voluntary organizations (VOs) contribute enormously to India's GDP and provide livelihood to millions.

Unfortunately, VOs are overregulated, facing compliance requirements so complex and multi-layered as to confound do-gooders entirely. Is there a need to strengthen restrictive laws or add more compliance requirements? The government has enough powers to investigate those it believes are not transparent enough through the Comptroller Auditor General (CAG) and the Central Bureau of Investigation.

Proposal to 'control' Vs 'regulate'

Recently, the Foreign Contribution (Regulation) Amendment Bill, 2026 (introduced on March 25, 2026) signalled a fresh wave of regulatory tightening, aimed at further constraining the functioning of VOs and extending greater government control over them. The Bill seems to have been put in abeyance for now. However, it can be reintroduced in Parliament at a later date. Some of the proposed amendments seem to be going beyond 'Regulation' to 'Control' of assets legally acquired by VOs with funds received from 'foreign sources' under FCRA. The premise that a statute should 'regulate' rather than 'control' is a fundamental principle of law. While the State has the power to 'regulate' activities, especially in the interest of the general public, it must avoid imposing unreasonable restrictions that amount to the prohibition or total control or takeover of a right.

A key proposed change in the Bill, empowers the Central Government (Ministry of Home Affairs) to appoint a "Designated Authority" to take over, manage, or dispose the assets created out of foreign funds by Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) whose FCRA registration has been suspended, cancelled, or not renewed. Under Section 14A and Section 15 of FCRA 2010, as amended in the year 2020, if the FCRA registration is cancelled or even if the FCRA registration is 'voluntarily surrendered' (including by a one hundred per cent compliant and good organization) "shall vest in such authority as may be prescribed." This proverbial 'sword of Damocles' has been hanging over the heads of FCRA registered NGOs since the past five year. The proposed amendment seeks to enable the "Designated Authority" to give effect to the provisions of Section 14A and 15.

More restrictions and tightening of FCRA Rules

Earlier on 26 May 2025, the Ministry of Home Affairs amended the Foreign Contribution (Regulation) Rules, 2011. These amendments require additional disclosure of information in online forms. The amendments to these forms among other things now require more detailed financial disclosures and reporting and **places the onus of certification on auditors**. Many auditors are reassessing their risk in handling FCRA related matters.

The amendment also requires that in case the association is engaged in publication-related activities or if publication activities are among its aims and objectives, an undertaking from the Chief Functionary regarding compliance with section 3(1)(g) of FCRA is mandatory.

Further, “if the publication of the association is registered with the Registrar of Newspapers for India, a “Not a Newspaper” certificate from the Registrar of the Newspapers for India shall be submitted in the format available on the website of the Ministry of Home Affairs.

Tax exemption can be revoked if FCRA cancelled

If a VO's FCRA registration is cancelled it could potentially also lead to cancellation of its registration for tax exemption and tax deduction with Income tax. A classic example is the Income tax department's notice, dated 29 July 2025 to Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative (CHRI) to cancel CHRI's tax registration under Section 12AB(4)(a) of the Income Tax Act, 1961. The sole ground for this notice was the prior cancellation of the organization's Foreign Contribution Regulation Act (FCRA) certificate by the Ministry of Home Affairs.

The Delhi High Court has set aside this notice issued by the Income Tax Department to the Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative (CHRI), on a technical ground. However, the High Court has given the Income tax department the liberty “to take further action in accordance with the law after the conclusion of the legal challenge to the FCRA certificate cancellation.

As per the amendment made under Finance Act 2022, subsection (4) of section 12AB, “Specified Violation” includes: “The trust or institution has not complied with the requirement of any law which are material for achieving its objectives.” In other words, if the trust or institution has not complied with the requirement of any law (e.g. FCRA) the Principal Commissioner or Commissioner of Income tax may cancel the tax exemption and tax deduction registration of such an organisation.

Renewal of tax exemption & tax deduction certificates

Literally a few lakh charitable trusts and institutions applied for renewal of their tax exemption and tax deduction certificates by 30 September 2025 as was required under the amended Income tax Act 1961. However, when applying for renewal of 12A and 80G in the online Form 10AB a question was asked under No. 6 “Whether the trust deed contains clause that the trust is irrevocable?” If one clicked ‘No’ the system did not take the application form forward. If one clicked ‘Yes’ and the trust deed did not have this line or clause, it would mean that the applicant provided false information. The option ‘Not Applicable’ which was available earlier in the year 2021 was removed. Thousands of trusts went through great difficulties and many even spent time, effort and money to amend their trust deed which was not an easy task. The matter went to the Bombay High Court and the Court categorically ruled that having this clause was not necessary. The Income tax authorities have reserved their right to appeal against this order in the Supreme Court.

Confusing Circular

The Charity Commissioner of Maharashtra vide Circular No. 619 dated 21 July 2025 granted general permission to public charitable trusts, as defined and registered under Maharashtra Public Trusts Act 1950, to invest up to 50 per cent of trust money in specified securities such as **listed shares**, units of mutual funds, etc. Unfortunately, this circular, though well intended, is confusing, conflicting and raises several concerns.

The circular allows only up to fifty per cent of the Trust Funds to be invested in Securities permitted by the Central Government. The Maharashtra Public Trusts Act puts no such limit and the question arises whether a mere circular can override a law passed by the legislature? A circular cannot supersede a law passed by a legislature because a circular is a form of administrative instruction, not a law, and cannot override statutory provisions or bye-laws.

What is more alarming is the Charity Commissioner allowing trust funds to be invested in shares of body corporates listed on any recognized stock exchange. This is at variance with Section 11(5) of Income tax Act 1961 which does not allow public charitable trusts and charitable societies enjoying tax exemption to make such investments. Under FCRA 2010, even investment of foreign funds in Mutual Funds is disallowed.

Dichotomy in central and state laws coupled with such confusing circulars is not in the best interest of VOs.

Contribution to Charity Commissioner (Maharashtra)

It is now sixteen years since Trusts and Societies registered in the State of Maharashtra have not been paying annual 'contribution' to the office Charity Commissioner (for the upkeep of the department.) The Bombay High Court on 16 July 2025 lifted the stay order on collection of this 'contribution' under interim orders dated 27 February 2008 and 25 September 2009.

The Bombay High Court had granted interim relief since the year 2009 because excessive funds were available with the office of the charity commissioner. The Bombay High Court has now taken the view that "liberty needs to be given to the State Government to reassess the situation and make fresh order under Section 58(4) of the Maharashtra Public Trusts Act, if and when necessary."

So far there is no official notification from the office of the charity commissioner with regard to payment of the contribution. One hopes that the State Government will exercise prudence and not burden charities with a higher rate of contribution or worse, levy the same with retrospective effect.

Maharashtra Ordinance

The Governor of Maharashtra vide Ordinance No. VII OF 2025 amended the Maharashtra Public Trusts Act 1950 which has come into effect from 1 September 2025. The Ordinance was subsequently passed and the Act has also been duly amended.

The amendment has introduced the concept of two types of trustees: 'Tenure trustee' or a trustee who can serve for a limited term of office and 'Perpetual trustee' or a trustee who can serve permanently (for life.) The amendment also restricts the number of perpetual or life trustees a trust can have at any point of time to only 25 per cent of the board's total strength.

The state regulatory authority so far has not issued any clarity in terms of next steps. Is this amendment applicable to all existing trusts with retrospective effect? Is a Board Resolution enough to comply with this amendment? Must a 'change report' be filed regarding whether a trustee is permanent or has tenure? Must the trust deed be amended?

This amendment is another example of state control over how an otherwise autonomous trust should have its board governance structure.

Electoral Democracy

SIR and the Disenfranchisement of Muslims

Intro: The SIR exercise served as a polarising tool to influence elections. Metaphorically, the figure of 'Rohingya', 'infiltrator' and 'Bangladeshi' served as a dog-whistle against Muslims of Bengali origin.

The two-judge bench of the Supreme Court delivered its final judgment on the constitutional validity of the Special Intensive Revision of the Electoral Roll (SIR) undertaken by the Election Commission of India (ECI) on May 27, 2026. The verdict, widely perceived to be the apex court's capitulation to the executive, upheld the ECI led drive as constitutionally valid, proportionate and within the ECI's authority derived from Article 324 and section 21 (3) of the Representation of the People Act, 1950 (RPA). Purportedly, an all India exercise, the SIR has resulted in widespread disenfranchisements and erosion of entitlements in the state and union territories (UTs) where it has been undertaken. In the 14 states and UTs where SIR exercise has so far been completed, the number of those excluded from the 2024-2025 electoral list stands at a staggering 5 crore. This is estimated to spiral further to about 10 crores after the completion of the exercise in the entire country. The arbitrariness of method and procedural overreach embraced by the ECI induced anxiety and disquiet among the citizenry, particularly those from marginalized communities. Given the its debilitating outcome, the Supreme Court's endorsement of SIR as necessary to maintain the 'integrity, accuracy and credibility' of electoral rolls, is deplorable.

The verdict on SIR, though distressing for those affected, was not unanticipated as since the accession of the BJP led government at the Centre and in several states, the Courts have increasingly leaned on the majoritarian viewpoint in adjudicating judgments on matters of critical importance. The SC assumed the role of the executive in supervising the National Register of Citizens in Assam that resulted in exclusion of nearly 1.9 million documented citizens of the state.

Revision of the electoral roll is a routine exercise undertaken by the ECI from time to time to add new members as well as expunge those who have died or permanently migrated out of the region. What makes the current SIR exercise unprecedented in India's electoral history is the intensity and scale at which it is being undertaken and the extensive disenfranchisement that it has resulted in. The claim that the drive to revise the electoral rolls is purely an administrative exercise which is ethnically and ideological neutral is difficult to be sustained on multiple grounds.

First, since the commencement of the SIR process, the BJP, RSS and their affiliate organisations have unequivocally coalesced the SIR deletions with the ideological project of cleansing out 'Bangladeshis and Rohingyas'. In the run-up to the Bihar and Bengal elections, the BJP leaders in their speeches, and social media campaigns called for the deletion of voters from the voting lists. For instance, months ahead of the Bengal Assembly Elections, 2026, Suwendu Adhikary, the current Chief Minister of Bengal and then its Leader of Opposition, called for the omission of about 1 crore voters from the state's electoral list on suspicion of them being 'Bangladeshi, Rohingya and fake voters'. Months later, the ECI led SIR conducted in Bengal settled at a figure of 90 lakh deletions from the voters list.

Secondly, the SIR, from its very inception, is primarily disposed towards mass deletion of names rather than securing the rights of the electorate. This is evident in the bureaucratic process that rests on documentary evidence such as educational testimonials, land records, legacy documents, family tree and so on. In states still reeling under mass poverty, landlessness and illiteracy, the process unduly favours the informed, the urbane and formally educated against the indigent and the marginal. Thus, the Aadhaar card bearing a unique identification number for every citizen was disallowed as a proof of identity for its 'over inclusion'. The message was loud and clear; the goal of SIR was to maximise expulsion from voters list instead of correcting the anomalies. Eventually, it was only after a sustained civil society campaign and court intervention that Aadhaar came to be included as one of the 12 documents approved for the verification of voter ID.

In Bengal, the SIR exercise invented a new category, 'logical discrepancy' to root out sections of the citizenry who could otherwise produce documentary proof of their residence and authentication of their voter's identity. The category was reportedly meant to take account of mismatches in names, in the name of parents and their age, large age gaps between parents, irregularities in grandparent's age and so on. However, 'logical discrepancy' as a category is non-existent in the Representation of the Peoples Act, 1950, the Conduct of Elections Rules, 1961, or the Registration of Electors Rules, 1960 — enactments from which the ECI derives its power and authority to conduct elections in India.

Notably, the invention of 'logical discrepancy' as a category of validation amounts to the enactment of a new law altogether, a power invested solely with the Parliament of India. In Bengal, out of nearly 9 million excluded from the existing voters list, nearly 2.7 million lost their voting right on account of discrepancies in the spellings of their names, addresses or parental names and age recorded. As a newly created administrative category, it has far-reaching impact that goes beyond the abrupt purpose of voter elimination. Somewhat akin to the D-Voter category in Assam, those excluded under 'logical discrepancy' tend to be stigmatised as 'administrative suspect', and by extension denied civil and social rights apart from losing their right to vote. Thus, soon after assuming power, the newly elected BJP government in Bengal announced the deletion of SIR expunged names from the list of beneficiaries of the Public Distribution System in the state.

Thirdly, ostensibly neutral, the outcome of the SIR exercise is disproportionate resulting in growing suspicion regarding its true and tangible intentions. Married women, migrant workers, Muslims and other marginal groups are more likely to be disenfranchised through the SIR. In Bengal, around 65 per cent of the 2.7 million names denied the right to vote on grounds of discrepancy were reportedly Muslims. Altogether, Muslim voters totaled 3.11 million, (34 per cent) of the nine million eliminated from the 2024 voters list. It is to be noted that the proportion of Muslim expulsions from the electoral list is disproportional to their share in population which stands at 27 per cent of the state's population. The absurdity and perniciousness of the whole exercise was evident as among those excluded were a decorated Air Force officer, a Kargil war veteran, a retired High Court judge, several retired bureaucrats and members of families residing in the same place for the last five generations. With only 19 specially constituted tribunals that were entrusted to handle not less than 34 lakh appeals, the corrective process for most excluded voters, remained effectively inaccessible.¹

Similarly, except for Tamil Nadu, the exclusion of women voters outnumbers their male counterparts across all the 14 states and UTs where SIR has been completed. In the state of Uttar Pradesh where a staggering 28.9 million names were removed from the electoral roll, women counted 15 per cent more than their male counterparts amongst those excluded.² Similarly in Bihar, male voters decreased by 3.8 per cent (15.5 lakh), while women voters

faced a sharper decline of 6.1 per cent (22.7 lakh) when the final voters' list was published by the ECI.³ For the women voters, net result of SIR exclusions is the debilitating impact on the already skewed voters' sex ratio, thus weakening their political voice in the electoral system.

Fourth, apart from the bureaucratic apathy and short-sightedness, SIR served as a politico-ideological tool in influencing election results and thus contributing to the consolidation of power by the Hindu right. The SIR has proved to be a doubly potent weapon in this regard. One, in Bengal, mass deletion of voters from amongst targeted social categories such as Muslims and women served to shrink the electoral base of non-BJP parties. A distinct pattern is discernible in the purging of voters through SIR. In the 2020 Bihar Assembly Elections, the RJD-led alliance lost by a thin margin of 0.03 per cent votes. In contrast, post-SIR that removed 68 lakh voters from the existing list and added 21 lakh new ones, the BJP alliance's victory margin rose to a whopping 10 per cent.

Analysis of the recently concluded Bengal Assembly Elections too suggests the decisive role of SIR deletions in the electoral outcome. In at least half of the total 294 seats, considered the bastion of Mamata Banerjee-led Trinamool Congress (TMC), the total deletions were greater than the victory margins. The BJP won 100 and the TMC could secure merely 48. Curiously, in the elections held prior to the SIR exercise, namely the 2021 assembly elections, the TMC outshone its political opponents comprehensively, securing 131 while the BJP could barely win 19 seats. Apart from deletions of names from the existing electoral rolls, there were other measures too such as addition of 7 lakh new voters and exclusion of about 550,000 through dubious methods such as crowd-sourced complaints. It is argued that the provision was strategically used to target Muslim voters.⁴

Fifth, the SIR exercise served as a polarising tool to influence elections. Metaphorically, the figure of 'Rohingya', 'infiltrator' and 'Bangladeshi' served as a dog-whistle against Muslims of Bengali origin. Though several individuals of non-Muslim persuasion including Bengali Hindus found their names obliterated from the electoral list, yet in a communally charged election campaign, the political messaging of SIR aimed to reduce Muslims to a suspect community. The communal polarisation of the electorate allowed BJP to sweep elections in Bihar and Bengal.

Finally, it will be imprudent to consider the SIR with its potentiality to disenfranchise more than 10 per cent of the Indian electorate, as a solitary exercise undertaken by an obsessive and overzealous ECI. It follows the Supreme Court-supervised National Register of Citizens in Assam that has left 1.9 million documented citizens of Assam of presumably Bengali origins, effectively stateless. It bears resemblance, in many ways, to both the NRC as well as Citizenship Amendment Act, 2019 that excludes Muslim applicants from seeking Indian citizenship and eventually creates a class of citizens based on their religious persuasion. The recently announced 'High Level Demography Mission (2026)' with the mandate to assess the demographic changes occurring across India due to 'illegal infiltration' and 'abnormal' population changes at the level of 'religious and social communities' is cut from the same cloth. It needs to be read in continuity with the neo-fascist programme to criminalise, disenfranchise and de-nationalise social groups and communities considered inimical to its totalitarian agenda.

Endnotes

56. Neeraj Thakur, 'West Bengal Election Results: An Era Ends, A Question Remains', The Probe, 04.05.2026, url: <https://theprobe.in/elections/west-bengal-election-results-an-era-ends-a-question-remains-11799697> accessed on June 7, 2026
57. Vikas kumar, 'UP SIR Deletes 15% More Women Voters than Men; Rural Areas Worst Affected', The Quint, 14.01.2026
58. A. k Singh, Bihar Election: Twice As Many Women Removed From Final SIR List, Data Shows, NDTV, 03.10.2026, url: <https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/bihar-assembly-election-2025-nearly-twice-the-number-of-women-re-moved-from-bihars-final-rolls-than-men-9389707>, accessed on June 7, 2026
59. Deshahish Roy Choudhary, 'Managed Democracy, Made in Bengal', The Frontline, 22.05.2026 url: <https://frontline.thehindu.com/politics/managed-democracy-india-west-bengal-election-voter-deletions/article71010420.ece> accessed on June 8, 2026

Civic Space

Civic Space in India: A Saga of Institutional and Democratic Decline

Intro: While formal institutional spaces face significant pressure, a decentralised form of civic engagement is expanding through local leadership and community-based organising. This dynamism is particularly evident among young people who engage in informal and issue-driven activities such as climate action, digital mobilisation, and mutual aid.

As major international fact finding reports categorise India as 'Partly Free' (Freedom House), and an Electoral Autocracy with low media independence (V-Dem), this chapter investigates the events that exhibit the shrinking civic space and decline of democratic freedoms in India over the past year. The Indian Constitution fosters a thriving civic space by guaranteeing fundamental democratic freedoms and empowering citizens to hold the State accountable. It sets the structural foundation for autonomous civil society organizations, community mobilization, and public discourse to flourish. The Constitution enables this civic engagement through the following core pillars:

- **Fundamental Rights (Article 19):** Guarantees every citizen the freedom of speech, expression, peaceful assembly, and the right to form associations or unions. These freedoms empower individuals to organize, advocate for causes, and express peaceful dissent without State interference.
- **Judicial Review (Articles 32 and 226):** Empowers the Supreme Court and High Courts to act as the ultimate protectors of these rights. Citizens and civil society groups are empowered to directly approach the courts via Public Interest Litigations (PIL) to challenge policies, enforce rights, and demand government transparency.
- **Secularism and Pluralism (Article 25-28):** By guaranteeing the freedom of conscience and the right to profess, practice, and propagate religion, the Constitution protects India's vast diversity. This allows religious, linguistic, and cultural minority groups to establish their own institutions and maintain their distinct identities.
- **Directive Principles of State Policy (Part IV):** Although non-justiciable, these principles mandate the State to promote social welfare and minimize inequalities, providing a moral and legal basis for NGOs and civil society groups to advocate for economic justice, public health, and education.

CSOs form a crucial bridge between people and the State. Over half of CSOs in India work in rural areas, supporting access to education, health, livelihoods, nutrition, sanitation and water, making them essential for development. Along with a thriving civil society, free, fair and independent journalism is essential to keep the masses informed and hold authorities to account, particularly in an environment of targeted disinformation. When civil society and the media are constrained, they cannot challenge power, amplify excluded voices and advocate for inclusive policymaking.

The past few years have seen an unprecedented increase in restrictions on civil society and the media. Regulatory measures, particularly limits on foreign funding, are threatening

organisational survival. As of March 26, 2026, data indicates that 21,933 non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have lost their FCRA licenses in the past decade. This has forced many CSOs to rethink their operations and sustainability models.

Civic space in India has come under growing strain through legal, administrative, and extrajudicial means in this past year. Authorities have expanded restrictions on NGOs, particularly through stringent enforcement of the Foreign Contribution (Regulation) Act, while targeting activists, journalists, and critical voices using vague, punitive laws. Proposed and existing media regulations have heightened concerns over censorship, and new criminal laws risk criminalizing even online dissent. Protesters, students, and human rights defenders have faced arrests, surveillance, and harassment.

The Freedom House report, which assesses the level of political rights and civil liberties in a given area, regardless of whether they are affected by the State, non-state actors, or foreign powers, have **categorised India as 'Partly Free'** as per their 2026 report. Despite being a multiparty democracy, the report says that the ruling government has presided over discriminatory policies and a rise in persecution affecting Muslims and has seen a rise in the harassment of journalists, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and other government critics even though the Constitution guarantees freedom of expression and religion. V-Dem report 2026 states that at the end of 2025, four of the five world's most populous countries (India, China, Indonesia, and Pakistan) are autocracies, terming India specifically as an Electoral Autocracy. In fact, India has been classified as an electoral autocracy since 2017 by this reputed report.

New FCRA Amendment 2026 (appropriating assets of unlicensed organisation)

The regulatory landscape for Indian civil society underwent a significant transformation between 2025 and 2026, primarily driven by the introduction of a new amendment to the Foreign Contribution Regulation Act (FCRA). Building upon the Ministry of Home Affairs notice from November 2024, which expanded the grounds for registration denial to include broad categories such as anti-developmental activities and inciting malicious protests, the 2026 Amendment introduced mechanisms for the total financial incapacitation of non-governmental organisations (NGOs). Data from the official FCRA dashboard as of April 2026 confirms the scale of this regulatory tightening, revealing that 22,273 registrations have been cancelled while another 15,182 expired registrations remain unrenewed. This trend reflects a long-term strategy of increasing executive oversight over the voluntary sector, effectively narrowing the operational window for entities that rely on international cooperation.

The 2026 Amendment creates a structural shift in how the state manages the assets of organisations that lose their legal standing. Central to this legislation is the establishment of a Designated Authority in which all foreign contributions and physical assets provisionally vest upon the cancellation, surrender, or expiry of an NGO registration. Under Section 16A, this authority is empowered to take over the management of an organisation if deemed to be in the public interest. If an entity fails to secure a renewal or restoration of its status, these assets vest permanently in the authority. The legislation subsequently permits the transfer of

these resources to various government departments or their liquidation into the Consolidated Fund of India, representing a formalised process for the state-led expropriation of civil society infrastructure.

Furthermore, the amendment incorporates retrospective powers through Sections 16B and 16C, ensuring that assets from previously defunct or inoperative organisations are also brought under the control of the Designated Authority. This legal framework arrives in the wake of the *Noel Harper v Union of India* judgment, where the Supreme Court maintained that the receipt of foreign funds is not a fundamental right and that State regulation is permissible to safeguard national interests. However, the cumulative effect of these measures on over 37,000 affected organisations suggests a profound reduction in the civic space available for dissent and independent social work. By targeting the underlying assets and funding essential for grassroots initiatives in health and education, the 2026 changes effectively neutralise the possibility of revival for organisations that fall out of alignment with central policy objectives.

Freedom of Speech and Media Regulation

The state of press freedom in India between 2025 and 2026 was characterised by a heightened use of executive directives to manage the narrative surrounding major corporate and political entities. Central to this was the government order in September 2025 for the removal of dozens of media items related to Adani Private Enterprises.

Corporate Defamation and Content Takedowns

The Ministry of Information and Broadcasting acted on a 6 September 2025 ex-parte injunction from a New Delhi civil court to silence reports regarding the Adani Group. This directive resulted in the removal of 138 YouTube videos and 83 Instagram posts. While the court order originally named ten specific defendants—including independent journalists Ravi Nair and Paranjay Guha Thakurta—the government expanded the scope to include independent outlets like Newsland and The Wire.

By issuing these orders to Meta and Google, the state effectively bypassed traditional adversarial legal proceedings. This trend of ex-parte orders allows for immediate censorship without hearing the opposing party, a tool increasingly used to shield large conglomerates from public scrutiny.

Intimidation of Journalists

Physical and digital safety remained a critical concern for the press. In November 2025, journalist Rana Ayyub reported receiving multiple threats via WhatsApp. The caller, who demonstrated knowledge of her private residence, demanded she publish specific content regarding the 1984 anti-Sikh riots or face a physical attack on her family.

Investigations revealed the caller used the profile image of an incarcerated gangster. This incident followed the leaking of Ayyub's personal phone number online in 2024, highlighting

a persistent environment of harassment and official intimidation targeting journalists who remain critical of state policy.

Intimidation of Political Opponents

Among the 121 political leaders investigated by the Enforcement Directorate between 2014 and 2024, 115 belonged to opposition parties. Twenty-three out of the 25 opposition leaders accused of corruption who later joined the ruling BJP saw their cases dropped or resolved in their favour. In May 2025, the government revealed that of 193 Enforcement Directorate cases against politicians in the preceding decade, only two ended in convictions. According to the V-Dem Report 2026, the extent to which the legislature investigates in practice if governments engage in illicit actions is weakening in 20 countries, among them – India.

Regional Digital Restrictions

In Jammu and Kashmir, digital suppression remained a primary administrative strategy. On 16 September 2025, authorities blocked over 300 social media accounts across Doda, Kishtwar, and Ramban. This action followed the arrest of MLA Mehraj Malik under the Public Safety Act for making remarks deemed offensive toward officials.

The administration further restricted digital access in December 2025 by banning Virtual Private Networks (VPNs) in several districts, including Shopian. By invoking Section 163 of the Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha Sanhita (BNSS), magistrates issued urgent orders to prevent the use of VPNs, citing national security and the potential for cyber threats to incite unrest.

Lack of Transparency in Internet Shutdowns

Similar patterns emerged in Odisha in December 2025, where the state government suspended telecommunication and social media services for one week. This shutdown followed violence involving the Koya tribal community in Malkangiri.

Legal observers noted that the Odisha government failed to issue the mandatory official notifications on its website. By withholding details regarding the specific areas and rationale for the shutdown, the State bypassed the statutory requirements designed to ensure that internet suspensions are a measure of last resort.

Digital Restrictions and the Expansion of Oversight

The final quarter of 2025 and the start of 2026 saw a concerted effort by the Union government to broaden the scope of the Information Technology (IT) Rules. The Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology (MeitY) proposed amendments designed to encompass a wider range of digital voices beyond traditional news organisations. Specifically, the new framework seeks to include "users who are not publishers"—such as

independent podcasters, social media influencers, and ordinary users—who share content related to news and current affairs.

This expansion requires these individual creators to adhere to a formal "code of ethics" previously reserved for registered digital news publishers. Experts note that this shift essentially removes the distinction between professional journalism and personal expression, placing independent commentators under direct administrative scrutiny.

Safe Harbour and Algorithmic Compliance

A critical component of the 2026 proposals involves the modification of safe harbour protections for social media intermediaries like Facebook, Instagram, and X. The government has suggested that platforms must demonstrate near-total compliance with State guidelines and takedown orders to maintain their legal immunity from user-generated content.

Digital rights advocates argue that this creates a structural incentive for platforms to over-censor content. By making legal protection conditional on the swift removal of "unauthorised" narratives, the state effectively delegates the enforcement of censorship to the platforms' own moderation algorithms.

Use of Section 69A and Confidentiality

The government frequently invoked Section 69A of the IT Act throughout early 2026 to block content critical of high-level state officials and foreign policy. A notable characteristic of these directives is their inherent confidentiality; the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology is not required to make these orders public, leaving the scale of censorship to be estimated through user-published takedown notices.

Despite this lack of official transparency, data from Meta indicated that content removals in response to government demands between January and June 2025 had tripled compared to the same period in 2023. These orders targeted a wide array of speech, including critiques of the University Grants Commission's (UGC) Equity Regulations and sensitive geopolitical commentary.

Targeting of Political Satire and Cartoons

In March 2026, several high-profile instances of censorship highlighted the targeting of satirical content. On 10 March 2026, cartoonist Satish Acharya reported that X withheld two of his works depicting India-Iran relations and the influence of the United States. One cartoon specifically depicted the Prime Minister in a blindfold alongside a casualty of conflict, which the platform withheld following a legal demand.

Similarly, on 18 March 2026, Instagram blocked a viral parody reel by comedian Pulkit Mani that satirised the Prime Minister's conduct during official state visits. The video, which had reached 16 million views, was withheld in India following a government demand. The

Internet Freedom Foundation (IFF) characterised these incidents as an alarming escalation, noting that the orders appeared to target speech that was political or satirical rather than meeting the legal threshold for "unlawful" content.

Impacts on Civil Society and Self-Censorship

The cumulative effect of these regulatory changes and targeted takedowns has been the creation of what commentators describe as a 'climate of fear'. Prominent digital creators, such as Akash Banerjee of The Deshbhakt, have warned that the threat of losing access to platforms or facing legal repercussions is driving a trend toward self-censorship.

The Internet Freedom Foundation has stressed that the absence of timely notice or clear grounds for these takedowns denies creators any meaningful avenue for remedy. This lack of procedural fairness, combined with the proposed expansion of the IT Rules, suggests a move toward a digital environment where information from everyday content creators along with social and political commentators, is strictly curated through state-mandated dictates.

Use of Draconian Laws and Targeting of Activists and Human Rights Defenders

The reporting period of 2025 to 2026 was marked by a persistent application of counter-terrorism and national security laws to curtail dissent and restrict the activities of civil society. Statutes such as the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act (UAPA), the National Security Act (NSA), and the Foreign Contribution (Regulation) Act (FCRA) were frequently deployed against activists, journalists, and students, often resulting in prolonged pre-trial detentions and the freezing of institutional resources.

The Ladakh Autonomy Movement and Sonam Wangchuk

A significant escalation occurred in Ladakh on 24 September 2025, when protests for statehood and Sixth Schedule protections turned violent in Leh. Authorities reported that four people were killed and 50 injured after clashes with police. While activist Sonam Wangchuk appealed for calm, the central government attributed the unrest to his provocative speeches.

Following the violence, the Ministry of Home Affairs cancelled the FCRA licence of Wangchuk's educational NGO on 25 September. Wangchuk himself was detained on 26 September 2025 under the NSA, a law permitting administrative detention for up to 12 months without trial. He remained in custody for 170 days until his release in March 2026, after the government revoked the detention order following significant legal and public pressure.

Suppression of Regional and Grassroots Activism

In Kerala, authorities targeted journalists and advocates who had gathered in Kochi on 13 September 2025 to protest the arrest of journalist Rejaz M. Sheeba Sydeek. Despite having obtained permission for the event, police booked several prominent figures — including Siddique Kappan — under the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (BNS) for unlawful assembly.

The health and education sectors also faced restrictive measures. In October 2025, police utilised water cannons and physical force to disperse Accredited Social Health Activist (ASHA) workers marching toward the Chief Minister's residence in Thiruvananthapuram. In the same month, at least ten students at Pondicherry University were detained following protests against the administration's alleged inaction regarding sexual harassment complaints on campus.

In May 2025, an Ashoka University professor was arrested for sharing social media posts in which he called for an end to the military conflict between India and Pakistan and criticized the BJP. The charges against him were reportedly for "endangering the country's sovereignty and integrity" and "inciting hatred between two communities." Numerous students and faculty at the university denounced his arrest as a violation of academic freedom.

Environmental and Digital Rights Advocacy

Environmental and climate campaigners faced increased scrutiny through financial investigations. In January 2025, the Enforcement Directorate (ED) raided the home of climate activist Harjeet Singh and his wife, Jyoti Awasthi. Investigators alleged their organisation was a front for channelling foreign funds to promote a fossil fuel non-proliferation treaty, an activity the State characterised as detrimental to national interests.

In New Delhi, air pollution protests at India Gate in November 2025 led to the arrest of 22 individuals, including students and journalists. While some were granted bail within days, others remained in judicial custody for a month on charges of obstructing public servants. Despite the air quality in the national capital oscillating between hazardous and very poor throughout the winter season, the police and magistrates kept 22 individuals in custody for a stretch because they were accused of shouting Maoist slogans and jumping a police barricade and blocking one area of a road around Indian Gate.

Human Rights and Legal Setbacks

The period also saw the continued targeting of whistleblowers and human rights defenders. In October 2025, disabled RTI activist Rasik Parmar was found dead in a Gujarat canal after uncovering irregularities in a local housing project. International observers also raised alarms regarding counter-terrorism operations in Jammu and Kashmir following an April 2025 attack in Pahalgam, which resulted in nearly 2,800 detentions and reports of torture and house demolitions. Indian authorities ordered the blocking of around 10,000 Twitter/X accounts amid conflict with Pakistan over Kashmir in May 2026.

While some long-term detainees from the Bhima Koregaon case, such as Hany Babu and Jyoti Jagtap, were granted bail in late 2025, the Supreme Court denied bail to student activists Umar Khalid and Sharjeel Imam in January 2026. These activists have been held for over five years under the UAPA in connection with the 2020 Delhi riots case, highlighting the ongoing judicial trend of treating ideological dissent as a qualitative threat to national security.

Electoral Impartiality

While the Freedom House report states that heads of state and political representatives are elected democratically, the electoral process itself has been criticised over the past year. The Election Commission of India was accused of engaging in large-scale voter roll manipulation in favour of the ruling party ahead of elections in Bihar in 2025. These concerns intensified in 2025 as the government expanded its Special Intensive Revision (SIR) of the voter list, as carried out in Bihar, to 12 other states and territories. Among other things, the opposition has alleged that the ECI has unfairly deleted large numbers of voters from the rolls and prevented eligible voters from registering by introducing excessive verification requirements.

How CSOs are Adapting

Civil society organisations are currently undergoing a strategic shift to maintain their operations within a restrictive regulatory environment. Many entities have transitioned away from rights-based advocacy to focus on direct service delivery and the implementation of government welfare schemes. This change is often accompanied by an emphasis on narrative shifts that highlight local resilience and developmental achievements rather than direct political commentary. To manage increasingly complex bureaucratic hurdles and financial constraints, these organisations are increasingly forming funding collaborations and peer networks to share resources and navigation strategies.

While formal institutional spaces face significant pressure, a decentralised form of civic engagement is expanding through local leadership and community-based organising. This dynamism is particularly evident among young people who engage in informal and issue-driven activities such as climate action, digital mobilisation, and mutual aid. Their participation typically bypasses traditional political structures in favour of creative and cultural expressions rooted in lived experience. This shift toward decentralised movements ensures that civic energy remains active even as established non-governmental organisations face systemic challenges to their survival.

The long-term sustainability of the sector ultimately depends on a strong sense of public ownership and high levels of trust across diverse populations. Past events have demonstrated that widespread public outcry can influence policy reversals, yet such responses are rare compared to the thousands of silent license cancellations. There is an urgent requirement for leadership that can bridge the gaps between faith-based groups, secular organisations, and academia to build a common vision for change. Developing these networks for solidarity and policy advocacy requires extraordinary coordination to ensure that civil society can continue to function as a vital component of the public sphere (Srinath, HistPhil 2025).

Public Resistance and Democratic Assertion: India through protests, 2025-26

Public mobilisation across India between May 2025 and May 2026 was defined by a shift from episodic demonstrations to sustained, systemic claims for accountability. Citizens across diverse sectors — including labour, environment, faith, and student groups —

frequently bypassed traditional institutional channels to assert constitutional rights through peaceful assemblies, strikes, and sit-ins. The state increasingly responded through administrative control, utilising prohibitory orders, preventive detentions under national security laws, and internet restrictions.

Agrarian Distress and Land Rights

Indigenous communities and farmers led significant resistance against infrastructure and trade policies throughout the year.

- **Arunachal Pradesh:** In May 2025, the Siang Indigenous Farmers' Forum organised sit-ins and road blockades against the 11,000 MW Siang Upper Multipurpose Project, citing a lack of community consent and ecological destruction.
- **Trade and Pricing:** Tamil Nadu sugarcane farmers demanded the reinstatement of the State Advisory Price (SAP) in May 2025. In August, the All India Kisan Sabha (AIKS) launched nationwide agitations against the removal of import duties on raw cotton, arguing that liberalised trade exposed small cultivators to volatile global price drops.
- **Chhattisgarh:** July 2025 saw mass Adivasi rallies against forest department encroachment on Community Forest Resource rights, while December was marked by violent clashes in Surguja over the expansion of the Amera coal mine without lawful land acquisition.

Labour Rights and the Gig Economy

Labour protests intensified in response to the notification of the four Labour Codes and deteriorating working conditions in industrial hubs.

- **Industrial Unrest:** In February 2026, thousands of Indian Oil refinery workers in Panipat went on strike over unpaid overtime and unsafe conditions following a fatal accident. In April and May 2026, a major labour uprising engulfed Noida and Greater Noida, as workers across the electronics and automobile sectors blocked roads to protest stagnant wages and contractual exploitation.
- **Women Workers:** In December 2025, ASHA and Anganwadi workers in Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh launched indefinite agitations for regularisation of services and fair honoraria, highlighting gendered labour exploitation in state welfare schemes.
- **Gig Workers:** The year closed with a nationwide digital and physical strike by app-based delivery workers on 31 December 2025, demanding transparency in algorithmic management and an end to unsafe 10-minute delivery models.

Human Rights and Preventive Detention

The use of stringent laws against activists remained a central concern for civil society.

- **Sonam Wangchuk and Ladakh:** September 2025 saw an escalation in the Ladakh statehood movement. Climate activist Sonam Wangchuk was detained under the National Security Act (NSA) for 170 days. The government alleged his speeches incited youth by invoking foreign protest movements, though his legal team

successfully argued his protests were grounded in environmental and constitutional safeguards.

- **The BK-16 and Political Prisoners:** While some Bhima Koregaon activists were granted bail in late 2025 based on prolonged pre-trial incarceration, the Supreme Court denied bail to student activists Umar Khalid and Sharjeel Imam in January 2026, who have remained in custody without trial for over five years.

Environment

- **Air Pollution:** In November 2025, hazardous smog in North India triggered mass public protests at India Gate. Residents and medical professionals framed the pollution crisis as a violation of the right to life.

Education

- **NEET Paper Cancellation:** In May 2026, massive student protests erupted in Delhi following the cancellation of the NEET-UG exam due to widespread paper leaks. The public outcry led to the CBI conducting an investigation and only a few NTA officials and college professors being suspended. This NEET paper leak, which was added to a list of 89 paper leaks over the past decade has led to a large pervasive movement amongst Indian youths. In June 2026, thousands of students led a protest in Delhi's Jantar Mantar demanding the resignation of the education minister Dharmendra Pradhan.
- **CBSE Board Exam Assessment Faults:** Students complained digitally about errors in their marks and answer sheets of their board exams, with one alleging that his Class XII Physics answer sheet, which was uploaded, belonged to someone else, raising questions over the new digital evaluation system. Protests erupted in Delhi in May June 2026 regarding the improper OSM system which the CBSE says was introduced to reduce human error. However, analysis of the papers revealed scanned copies of answer sheets were blurry, while some pages were missing, due to which digital copies did not match the paper answer sheets.
- **University Autonomy:** Students at Punjab University and Pondicherry University led shutdowns in late 2025 over the democratic deficit in campus governance and administrative inaction regarding sexual harassment.

Throughout the past year, people protested not only against specific policies but against patterns of exclusion, neglect, and impunity. Farmers demanded economic justice, workers resisted precarity, students defended institutional autonomy, Adivasi communities protected land and forests, minorities asserted the right to live and worship without fear, students protested against inept and corrupt systems that leave their educational futures in doubt, and urban residents claimed the right to clean air and dignified survival.

Importantly, the past year demonstrated that protest in India is adaptive. When streets were policed or permissions denied, dissent moved to courts, documentation, digital spaces, and symbolic action. When large mobilisations were curtailed, smaller local protests sustained

democratic pressure. This adaptability reflects a deep-rooted commitment to constitutional values rather than episodic outrage.

Recommendations

- Rollback all recent draconian laws surrounding NGO and CSO regulation, including but not limited to FCRA Amendment 2026. Make regulatory regime easier for NGOs in terms of annual registration;
- Roll back the restrictive measures imposed on NGOs regarding sub-granting, administration expense cap which made it impossible for civil society practitioners to work with grassroots communities and carry out advocacy work;
- Repeal the FCRA Amendment Rules 2026 which captures underlying assets and other material registered to the NGO whose FCRA licence is cancelled/surrendered;
- Repeal of the overbroad, vaguely defined offences under draconian laws aimed at stifling dissent and curtailing free expression, assembly and association. Repeal the UAPA law and reinstate bail as the rule and jail the exception;
- Release political prisoners on bail, especially those who are undertrials. Withdraw all charges and release them unconditionally
- Overhaul laws that are misused to control and censor the media: Multiple 2023 regulations must urgently be revised: the Telecom Bill, the Digital Personal Data Protection Act, the Press and Registration of Periodicals Act, the Broadcasting Bill, and the Information Technology Amendment Rules, which provide for the creation of a Fact Checking Unit at the sole discretion of the government
- Measures must also be taken to protect journalists, notably women and those from marginalised communities, against cyber-harassment to end impunity for these attacks and enable reporters to continue their work. Their access to important public events must be enhanced by accreditation laws. The government must strengthen the legal protections surrounding reporters' right to work
- Put a stop to arbitrary Internet shutdowns
- Guarantee the foreign media's ability to cover India
- The prime minister and other decision makers within the government must hold regular press conferences accessible to all media

References

60. Amnesty International. (2025, September 1). New order grants sweeping powers to restrict freedoms. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2025/09/india-new-order-grants-sweeping-powers/>
61. BWI News. (2026, February 14). BWI affiliates join nationwide "Bharat Bandh" protest in India. <https://www.bwint.org/BwiNews/NewsDetails?newsId=1127>
62. BBC News. (2026, May 14). NEET paper cancelled amid leaks, students protest in Delhi. <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/ce9mx2j3xlxo>
63. Business & Human Rights Resource Centre. (2026, February 26). India: Oil refinery workers strike in Panipat over unpaid overtime, fatal accident and contract exploitation. <https://www.business-humanrights.org/de/neuste-meldungen/india-oil-refinery-workers-strike-in-panip-at-over-unpaid-overtime-fatal-accident-and-contract-exploitation/>

64. Citizens for Justice and Peace. (2025, October 20). Public resistance and democratic assertion: India through protests 2025.
<https://cjp.org.in/public-resistance-and-democratic-assertion-india-through-protests-2025/>
65. Citizens for Justice and Peace. (2025, December 15). Supreme Court hears challenge to NSA detention of Sonam Wangchuk: Union flags foreign "Gen-Z" uprisings as threat to security.
<https://cjp.org.in/supreme-court-hears-challenge-to-nsa-detention-of-sonam-wangchuk-union-flags-foreign-gen-z-uprisings-as-threat-to-security/>
66. CIVICUS Monitor. (2026, January 10). India: Civic freedoms remain at risk with crackdown on protests, internet restrictions and denial of bail to activists.
<https://monitor.civicus.org/explore/india-civic-freedoms-remain-at-risk-with-crackdown-on-protests-internet-restrictions-and-denial-of-bail-to-activists/>
67. CIVICUS Monitor. (2026). Country profile: India. <https://monitor.civicus.org/country/india/>
68. HistPhil. (2025, June 3). Civil society under threat in India and the U.S.: What can we learn from each other?
<https://histphil.org/2025/06/03/civil-society-under-threat-in-india-and-the-u-s-what-can-we-learn-from-each-other/>
69. CIVICUS. (2026). State of civil society report 2026.
https://www.civicus.org/documents/reports-and-publications/SOCS/2026/state-of-civil-society-report-2026_en.pdf
70. Freedom House. (2026). India: Freedom in the World 2026 country report.
<https://freedomhouse.org/country/india/freedom-world/2026>
71. Human Rights Watch. (2026, January 5). India's top court rejects bail for long-held student activists.
<https://www.hrw.org/news/2026/01/05/indias-top-court-rejects-bail-for-long-held-student-activists>
72. Human Rights Watch. (2026, February 4). India: Religious minorities, critics unlawfully targeted.
<https://www.hrw.org/news/2026/02/04/india-religious-minorities-critics-unlawfully-targeted>
73. Just Security. (2026, March 20). Attacks on human rights and the targeting of Muslims in India.
<https://www.justsecurity.org/137295/india-muslims-attacks-human-rights/>
74. Mohammed, A. (2026, March 14). India releases Ladakh activist Sonam Wangchuk after six months in jail. Al Jazeera.
<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2026/3/14/india-releases-ladakh-activist-sonam-wangchuk-after-six-months-in-jail>
75. Newslandry. Girardi and Mittal, (2024, July 31). 10 years, 89 paper leak cases, 48 retests: From Centre to states, few plugs for a leaky record.
<https://www.newslandry.com/2024/07/31/10-years-89-paper-leak-cases-48-retests-from-centre-to-states-few-plugs-for-a-leaky-record>
76. Pandey, S. (2026, March 22). Indian government cracks down on video reels lampooning PM Modi. The Diplomat.
<https://thediplomat.com/2026/03/indian-government-cracks-down-on-video-reels-lampooning-pm-modi/>
77. People's Union for Civil Liberties. (2025, October 1). Process as punishment: PUCL panel decodes Delhi Riots bail rejection. <https://pucl.org/manage-writings/pucl-panel-delhi-riots-bail-rejection-uapa/>
78. Reuters. (2026, May 12). Protests erupt in India after key college entrance test is cancelled.
<https://www.reuters.com/world/india/protests-erupt-india-after-key-college-entrance-test-is-cancelled-2026-05-12/>
79. Sabrang India. (2025, December 20). When protest becomes a threat: Inside the Supreme Court hearing on Sonam Wangchuk's NSA detention.
<https://sabrangindia.in/when-protest-becomes-a-threat-inside-the-supreme-court-hearing-on-sonam-wangchuks-nsa-detention/>
80. Sabrang India. (2026, May 2). Noida protest 2026: A labour uprising the state refused to understand.
<https://sabrangindia.in/noida-protest-2026-a-labour-uprising-the-state-refused-to-understand/>
81. Scroll.in. (2025, November 10). Delhi: 22 arrested for allegedly assaulting police at air pollution protest.
<https://scroll.in/latest/1088776/delhi-22-arrested-for-allegedly-assaulting-police-at-air-pollution-protest>
82. The Hindu. (2026, March 25). Centre eyes new regulation to cover social media users.
<https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/centre-eyes-new-regulation-to-cover-social-media-users/article70803459.ece>
83. The Insighta. (2026, January 15). From lynchings to rumor mobs: A year in review.
<https://theinsighta.com/p/from-lynchings-to-rumor-mobs-a-year>

84. Varieties of Democracy Institute. (2026). Democracy report 2026: Unraveling the democratic era? V-Dem Institute, University of Gothenburg.
https://www.v-dem.net/documents/75/V-Dem_Institute_Democracy_Report_2026_lowres.pdf

SECULARISM

Muslims

The Situation of Muslims in India: A Constitutional Contradiction

Intro: Arrests and detention formed another pressure point. Muslim activists, students and ordinary citizens continued to face prosecution under ordinary criminal law as well as stringent statutes such as the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act. Some high-profile detentions originated before 2025, but their continuation shaped the year.

India's Constitution promises a secular republic in which citizenship is not diminished by religious identity.

That constitutional design is not merely a legal arrangement, it is a social compact which assumes that a Muslim citizen, a Hindu citizen, a Christian citizen, a Sikh citizen, a Buddhist citizen, a Jain citizen, a Parsi citizen and a citizen of no religion stand before the Republic with equal dignity. It also assumes that the State will act as a constitutional referee, not as a participant in sectarian mobilisation.

The contradiction is between the constitutional promise of equal citizenship and the documented experience of many Muslims in 2025.

India's last official religious census, in 2011, recorded Muslims at 14.2 per cent of the population, about 172 million people. Because the next census has been delayed, current figures are estimates.

Today, India's Muslim population is said to be roughly 200 million [20 crore in a national population of 1.40 billion], a contested figure perhaps because inflated or imprecise demographic claims have often been used in public debate to suggest threat, suspicion or demographic siege.

Hate Speech, Vigilante Violence, Punitive Demolitions

The evidence of physical, structural or institutional violence against Muslims available for 2025 is uneven. Official crime data does not fully capture the religious character of many incidents, and civil-society trackers rely on media reports, field verification and open-source documentation, and impinge on official accountability. Taken together, India Hate Lab, the India Persecution Tracker, Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, USCIRF, Reuters and several Indian newsrooms point to a sustained pattern of anti-Muslim hate speech, vigilante violence, punitive demolitions, arrests, expulsions and institutional pressure.

The most firmly documented national figure concerns hate speech. India Hate Lab reported 1,318 hate-speech events targeting religious minorities in 2025, across 21 states, one Union Territory and the National Capital Territory of Delhi. This was a 13 per cent rise over the

1,165 events recorded in 2024, and a 97 per cent rise over the 668 incidents recorded in 2023. Reuters reported the same 13 per cent increase and noted that 1,164 of the 1,318 events occurred in regions governed by the BJP or its coalition partners.

India Hate Lab described the targets as religious minorities, particularly Muslims and Christians, with Muslims forming the central object of much of the rhetoric. Public speeches, rallies, religious processions and online amplification repeatedly used labels such as 'infiltrators', 'land jihad', 'love jihad' or economic threat. Calls for boycotts and social exclusion were also documented.

Muslims were the principal target of anti-minority hate speech in 2025, noting that 98 per cent of all hate speech was directed at Muslims. India Hate Lab identified Uttar Pradesh, Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh, Uttarakhand and Delhi among the states and territories with high numbers of events. The concentration of hate speech in BJP-governed or BJP-allied regions is politically significant and raises questions about political incentives, police response, prosecutorial will and the normalisation of language that would once have been considered dangerous to public order.

Violence followed the rhetoric. The India Persecution Tracker's 2025 annual overview recorded at least 27 Muslims killed by non-state Hindu extremist actors in religiously motivated hate crimes. It separately recorded 23 Muslims killed by state actors. Mob and vigilante violence implicates failures of policing and prosecution; deaths attributed to state actors raise questions of custodial violence, encounters, impunity and constitutional remedies. The tracker itself notes that its figures are not exhaustive and are based on reported and verified cases, meaning they should be treated as minimum documented cases rather than a complete national total.

Cow vigilantism remained a recurring trigger. USCIRF's 2026 Annual Report, assessing conditions in 2025, stated that violent mobs attacked Muslims under the guise of protecting state-level cow slaughter laws. Such cases do not occur in a vacuum. They are sustained by a political culture in which suspicion can be converted into mob authority, and where the victim is often required to prove innocence after punishment has already been inflicted.

Bulldozer Justice

Mass confrontations and localised communal attacks added to the fear. Reports by civil-society groups and independent media described attacks on Muslim settlements, confrontations around religious processions, and violence linked to allegations of cow slaughter or illegal migration. The Association for Protection of Civil Rights and the Quill Foundation's hate-crime documentation for mid-2024 to mid-2025 is useful here, but the figures should not be merged loosely with calendar-year 2025 data. Multiple datasets, using different time frames and definitions, show Muslims disproportionately affected by hate crimes and communal violence.

The practice popularly called 'bulldozer justice' remained one of the starkest symbols of constitutional breakdown. In November 2024, the Supreme Court of India issued pan-India guidelines against arbitrary demolitions, requiring due process, prior notice, time to challenge an order, and safeguards against punitive action. Reuters reported that the Court criticised demolitions of properties owned by suspected criminals and noted that the practice had disproportionately affected Muslims. The Court's intervention was an important constitutional correction. The continuing concern in 2025 was whether administrative practice would obey judicial principle.

Rights groups had already described punitive demolitions as extrajudicial and discriminatory. In its World Report 2025, Human Rights Watch said Indian authorities had failed to act adequately against Bharatiya Janata Party supporters responsible for attacks and had instead targeted victims, including through unlawful demolitions of Muslim homes and properties. In its World Report 2026, covering 2025, HRW again described increased vilification of Muslims and government critics.

Demolition is not merely a property question, but a citizenship question. A home, shop, madrasa, mosque or shrine may be alleged to violate planning rules. The constitutional issue arises when enforcement appears selective, immediate, collective, or tied to an accusation rather than a completed legal process. The Supreme Court recognised this danger when it said courts must consider whether a person has been singled out while similarly placed structures nearby have not been touched. Equal enforcement is the difference between rule of law and punishment by spectacle.

Scrutiny of Madrasas

Arrests and detention formed another pressure point. Muslim activists, students and ordinary citizens continued to face prosecution under ordinary criminal law as well as stringent statutes such as the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act. Some high-profile detentions originated before 2025, but their continuation shaped the year. Local trackers also reported arrests linked to social-media posts, public prayer, Ramadan observances and communal tension. Each case has its own legal facts. The broader concern is whether police discretion is being exercised even-handedly or whether religious identity has become a marker of suspicion.

The scrutiny of madrasas and Muslim educational institutions was a critical issue. State governments have the authority to regulate education, child safety, funding and land use. Governments of West Bengal, UP and Uttar Pradesh have initiated a statewide review of madrasas, scrapping their governing bodies, and in some cases in UP, madrasas were subject to bulldozer demolition.

Minority institutions do not stand outside law, Article 30 protects the right of minorities to establish and administer educational institutions. A constitutionally sound regulatory regime must therefore be transparent, non-discriminatory and proportionate. Closures, demolitions or forced changes that appear targeted at one community deepen the perception that constitutional protection has become conditional.

Waqf (Amendment) Act, 2025

The major legislative development of the year was the Waqf (Amendment) Act, 2025. The Bill was passed by Parliament in April 2025, received presidential assent on 5 April 2025, and came into force on 8 April 2025. The government presented the law as a reform to improve transparency, accountability and the administration of waqf properties. The Press Information Bureau said the measure aimed to address problems in the regulation and management of waqf properties.

Muslim organisations, opposition parties and civil-liberties voices argued that the law expanded state control over Muslim religious endowments, introduced non-Muslim members into waqf governance, changed procedures for identifying and registering properties, and could enable disputes over historic endowments that lack modern documentation. The Associated Press reported that critics feared the changes could be used to seize historically significant Muslim religious properties. The Supreme Court Observer summarised the constitutional challenge as one involving the expansion of Union control over waqf properties.

Article 26 protects religious denominations' right to manage their own affairs in matters of religion, while Articles 29 and 30 protect minority culture and institutions. A law that affects mosques, graveyards, madrasas, shrines and charitable endowments must therefore meet a high standard of fairness, clarity and non-discrimination.

Illegal Immigrants?

The issue of alleged illegal migration further sharpened insecurity among Bengali-speaking Muslims. Human Rights Watch reported that in 2025 authorities expelled hundreds of Bengali-speaking Muslims and Rohingya refugees to Bangladesh, including some Indian citizens, after labelling them 'illegal immigrants'. The Washington Post reported in July 2025 that deportation drives had affected people who claimed Indian citizenship and alleged coercion or loss of documents. The pattern described by rights groups said language, poverty and religion can combine to make citizenship precarious for those least able to defend it.

Maktoob Media, citing India Persecution Tracker data, reported on 13 May 2026 that at least 13 Muslims were killed in hate crimes in the first four months of 2026, including four deaths attributed to state actors. The same report said more than 40 Muslims were arrested over Ramadan and other religious observances.

The first months of 2026 also saw continuing tension around public religious expression, demolitions, waqf disputes and alleged illegal migration. Human Rights Watch supports the claim that hundreds were expelled in 2025 and that some Indian citizens were among those affected. Larger claims about camps, numbers and administrative expansion need stronger sourcing before publication.

The government repeatedly denied discrimination and presented its measures as law-and-order enforcement, anti-encroachment action, anti-corruption reform, national security, or protection against illegal immigration. On the Waqf law, it has described the amendments as a transparency measure. On demolitions, state authorities have often said action was taken only against illegal structures. On immigration, authorities have argued that the State has the right to identify and remove undocumented migrants.

The State may regulate, but critics have repeatedly pointed out that the test is whether regulation is general, lawful, proportionate, reviewable and equal. When hate speech proceeds with impunity, when the accused is punished before trial, when a home is demolished without meaningful process, when a prayer gathering is treated as suspicion, when a school or endowment is made insecure by shifting rules, constitutional secularism becomes a promise without adequate protection.

The human cost is difficult to quantify. Families lose homes, shops and documents' children lose continuity of education, neighbourhoods withdraw into fear. And small businesses become vulnerable to boycotts or intimidation. Worse, young people learn to measure speech, dress, travel and prayer against risk. The injury is civic, and a Muslim citizen in India 2025-26 has begun to feel that rights exist on paper but require negotiation in daily life.

Courts have intervened against arbitrary demolitions. Lawyers, journalists, civil-society groups, interfaith platforms and local citizens have documented violations and defended constitutional principles.

It is unfortunately true that in 2025, India's Muslims lived under a widening gap between constitutional equality and documented social and administrative practice. The evidence supports concern over anti-Muslim hate speech, vigilante violence, punitive demolitions, selective enforcement, institutional pressure and citizenship insecurity. Some figures are firm; others require attribution and caution. The constitutional contradiction lies in this: a secular Constitution still promises equal citizenship, but too many Muslim citizens experienced the State either as absent when they needed protection or present when coercion arrived.

Endnotes

85. Amnesty International, 'Human Rights in India,' accessed June 2026.
86. Associated Press, 'India's parliament passes bill that would change Muslim land endowments,' April 2025.
87. Association for Protection of Civil Rights and Quill Foundation, Hate Crime Tracker report, June 2024–June 2025. The time frame differs from a calendar-year 2025 dataset and should not be merged without explanation.
88. Human Rights Watch, World Report 2025: India; Human Rights Watch, World Report 2026: India.
89. Human Rights Watch, 'India: Religious Minorities, Critics Unlawfully Targeted,' 4 February 2026.
90. India Hate Lab, 'Hate Speech Events in India 2025,' Center for the Study of Organized Hate, 13 January 2026.
91. India Persecution Tracker, '2025 Annual Overview,' South Asia Justice Campaign, covering 1 January to 31 December 2025.

92. Maktoob Media, 'At least 13 Muslims killed in hate crimes in first quarter of 2026, four by state actors: Report,' 13 May 2026, citing India Persecution Tracker data.
93. Pew Research Center, 'Population growth and religious composition in India,' 21 September 2021; Census 2011 recorded Muslims at 14.2 per cent of the population, about 172 million. Current 200 million-plus figures are estimates until a new census is published.
94. Press Information Bureau, Government of India, 'The Waqf (Amendment) Bill, 2025 Explained,' 3 April 2025.
95. Reuters, 'India's top court denounces demolitions of illegal properties, issues guidelines,' 13 November 2024.
96. Singh, Kanishka, 'Anti-minority hate speech in India rose by 13% in 2025, US research group says,' Reuters, 13 January 2026.
97. Supreme Court of India, In Re: Directions in the Matter of Demolition of Structures, judgment dated 13 November 2024.
98. Supreme Court Observer, 'Constitutionality of the Waqf (Amendment) Act, 2025,' case explainer; presidential assent on 5 April 2025.
99. United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, 2026 Annual Report: India, assessing religious freedom conditions during calendar year 2025.
100. Washington Post, 'In India's deportation drive, Muslim men recount being tossed into the sea,' 11 July 2025

Minority Budget

Budget 2026–27: Allocation Shortfalls and Implementation Challenges in Minority Scholarships

Intro: It is noteworthy that over the past five financial years, there has been no significant increase in the budget allocated for minorities, and even the allocated funds have not been fully utilized.

The mobility of students from different social groups in higher education remains uneven, according to the latest All-India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE 2020–21). In terms of social category, students from Other Backward Classes (OBCs) constitute the largest share of enrolment at about 35.8 per cent, followed by Scheduled Castes (SCs) at 14.2 per cent and Scheduled Tribes (STs) at 5.8 per cent, while the General category accounts for roughly 40 per cent of total higher education enrolment. When disaggregated by religion, Muslim students represent only about 4.6 per cent of total higher education enrolment, despite forming nearly 14–15 per cent of India's population. This persistent under-representation of Muslims, alongside comparatively lower participation of SC and ST students relative to their population shares, indicates constrained upward educational mobility for these groups, even as overall higher education enrolment in India has expanded in recent years.

In contrast, Pre-Matric and Post-Matric scholarship schemes for Dalits, Adivasis, Other Backward Classes (OBCs), and persons with disabilities have not only been continued but have also seen increases in budget allocations and the number of beneficiaries. Alarming, no reasonable justification has been provided for inadequate budget allocation, low fund utilisation and denying approval to minority scholarship schemes for the last five years. Prior to this, the central government has already discontinued the Maulana Azad Foundation, Maulana Azad National Fellowship, Nai Udaan, and schemes for assistance to madrasas.

As highlighted by the Departmentally Related Standing Committee on Social Justice and Empowerment, 2024-25, the scholarship schemes face several implementation issues with poor utilisation of funds, inadequate coverage of beneficiaries due to the rigid quota system, low unit costs due to inadequate allocations of funds, and also scrapping of some of the schemes. The amounts given to students as scholarships are not adequate to meet their educational expenses. The unit cost for scholarships in Pre-Matric, Post-Matric and Merit-cum-Means schemes for minorities has not been revised since the inception of the schemes (in 2007-08).

A large chunk of fund from the Ministry of Minority Affairs (MoMA) are meant for educational need of the minorities. As in previous years, this year too, the budget allocated for minorities and its implementation have remained extremely disappointing. In the current budget, ₹3,400 crore has been allocated to the MoMA, compared to ₹3,350 crore in the previous year. It is noteworthy that over the past five financial years, there has been no significant

increase in the budget allocated for minorities, and even the allocated funds have not been fully utilized.

In the financial year 2023–24, ₹3,098 crore was allocated, but the government was able to spend only ₹154 crore. Similarly, in 2024–25, although ₹3,183 crore was allocated, this amount was reduced to ₹1,868 crore in the revised estimates. In the financial year 2024–25, ₹3,183 crore was allocated to the MoMA, but only ₹715 crore was actually spent, which amounts to merely 22 percent of the total allocation.

The primary reason for the low utilization of the previous year's budget is the non-expenditure of funds under several major schemes, including the Pre-Matric Scholarship, Post-Matric Scholarship, Pradhan Mantri Jan Vikas Karyakram (PMJVK), and the Pradhan Mantri Vikas Scheme. The reduction and underutilization of funds for Pre-Matric, Post-Matric, and Merit-cum-Means scholarships will have adverse effects on the education of minority students. This situation is also inconsistent with the government's goal of achieving a "Developed India" by 2047.

Table 1: Fund Allocation and Utilisation for the Ministry of Minority Affairs (Rs. crore)

Year	BE	RE	Actual	Per cent of utilisation over BE
2014-15	373 4	316 5	3,089	83
2015-16	3,73 8	3,73 6	3,654.8 0	98
2016-17	3,82 7	3,82 7	3049	80
2017-18	4,19 5	4,19 5	4139	99
2018-19	470 0	470 0	3564.1 7	76
2019-20	4,70 0	4,70 0	4,432	94
2020-21	5,02 9	4,00 5	3,920	78
2021-22	4,81 1	4,34 6	4,324	90
2022-23	5,02 1	2,61 3	803	16
2023-24	3,09 8	2,60 9	154	5
2024-25	3,18 3	1,86 8	715	22
2025-26	3,35 0	2,16 0		
2026-27	3,40 0			

Source: Compiled by IPSA from Union Budget documents various years

The government's policy and budgetary approach towards minorities is becoming increasingly discriminatory. In particular, due to the failure to obtain approval from the Cabinet Committee for minority scholarship schemes (Pre-Matric, Post-Matric, and Merit-cum-Means), the allocated budgets for these schemes have been significantly reduced in recent years. Over the past five years, nearly all the funds allocated for scholarships have remained unspent. The main reason cited for this is that the government has not obtained approval for these schemes from the Cabinet Committee on Economic Affairs since the financial year 2021–22, despite the MoMA continuing to allocate budgets for them.

Generally, central government schemes are approved for a period of five years, which should have occurred during the tenure of the 15th Finance Commission (2021–22 to 2025–26). However, minority scholarship schemes were deliberately not approved. It is still unclear whether approval has been granted for the implementation of Pre-Matric, Post-Matric, and Merit-cum-Means scholarship schemes for the financial year 2026–27, although allocations of ₹198 crore, ₹581 crore, and ₹0.06 crore respectively have been made. The 16th Finance Commission will commence from the financial year 2026–27, under which all central schemes are to be approved for the next five years by the Cabinet Committee on Economic Affairs. At present, only two major schemes—Pradhan Mantri Jan Vikas Karyakram and PM Samvardhan—remain with the MoMA for implementation.

Table 2: Fund Allocation and Expenditure Under Major Schemes of Ministry of Minority Affairs

Schemes	2023-24 (BE)	2023-24 (Actual)	2024-25 (BE)	2024-25 (RE)	2024-25 (A)	2025-26 (BE)	2025-26 (RE)	2026-27 (BE)
Merit Cum Means Scholarships	44	152.74	33.8	19.41	3.5	7.34	0.06	0.06
Free Coaching and allied schemes	30	11.7	10	3.5	2.3	10	1	10
Pre-Matric Scholarship	433	95.83	326.16	90	1.5	195.7	0.06	198
Post-Matric Scholarship	1065	85.02	1145.38	343.91	5.3	413.99	0.06	582
Maulana Azad Fellowship	96	83.45	45.08	45	25	42.8	53.84	36
Pradhan Mantri Jan Vikas Karyakaram (PMJVK)	600	189	910.9	908.9	203.35	1913.9	1665	200
PM Vikas	540	209.42	500	230	955.23	517	312	303.2

Source: Compiled by IPSA from Union Budget documents various years

The National Minorities Development and Finance Corporation (NMDFC), established in 1994, aims to promote access to credit among the most backward sections of minority communities. Through non-governmental organizations, NMDFC provides educational loans and microfinance to the poorest sections, facilitates vocational training programs, and

supports market access for goods produced by artisans. However, the implementation of these schemes remains weak, and their reach among minority communities is limited, although a marginal increase has been made in the current budget.

For regional development, ₹2,000 crore has been allocated this year to the Pradhan Mantri Jan Vikas Karyakram, compared to ₹1,914 crore in the previous year. However, this allocation was reduced to ₹1,565 crore in the revised estimates for 2025–26. The scheme has a wide geographical coverage and is being implemented in minority-concentration areas characterized by low workforce participation, low literacy rates, and inadequate basic infrastructure.

At present, minorities are benefiting to some extent from the budget of the MoMA, but the Prime Minister's 15-Point Programme—which is crucial for the holistic development of minorities—is not being effectively implemented. In sum, the total budget allocation for MoMA should be increased significantly given the level of deprivation in the educational and economic attainment of minorities. All scholarship schemes should be given approval with immediate effect and should be made demand driven, and additional financial resources should be provided to enhance unit costs along with a revision in the eligibility criterion related to parental income. Schemes that have been discontinued should be revived. Under the 15 Point Programme, resource allocation should be made in line with the diverse needs of minority communities across different sectors.

Christians

The Situation of Christians in India in 2025: Normalising of macabre and morbid hate, weaponising of PESA

Intro: Testimonies revealed that ordinary acts of faith—house fellowships, charitable work—continued to invite legal scrutiny, reinforcing the normalisation of hostility diffused across society rather than limited to organised actors.

For India's approximately 28 to 30 million Christians—predominantly Dalit and tribal—the year 2025 represented a deepening contradiction between constitutional promise and daily reality.

The Religious Liberty Commission of the Evangelical Fellowship of India (EFI-RLC) documented 747 verified incidents of hostility, intimidation, violence, and discrimination against Christians across India in 2025, drawn from more than 915 reported cases, and based on field assessments, victim and witness interviews, documentation review, and follow-up with authorities, where feasible. These figures, while significant, represent only a fraction of the actual scale, as many cases in rural and tribal areas go unreported due to fear of retaliation, social pressure, or limited access to remedies. Reports from the United Christian Forum (UCF), *The Wire*, *Scroll*, *UCAN*, *Indian Currents*, *Maktoob*, *USCIRF*, Human Rights Watch, and Amnesty International align with this data, pointing to nearly 900 incidents nationwide and a continued multi-year escalation.

The Evangelical Fellowship of India's long-term documentation, spanning nearly three decades, reveals that these incidents form part of a profound environmental shift. What has changed is not merely the volume but the normalisation of attitudes that question the legitimacy of Christian presence and practice. Narratives framing Christians as agents of foreign influence or cultural threats have diffused into village life, local administration, and public discourse. This normalisation, accelerated over the past decade, marks a transition from episodic violence to the routine criminalisation of ordinary Christian life.

Monthly trends showed clear patterns, with the highest incidents in December (85 cases) during the Christmas season, followed by March (78) and October (73). Elevated numbers also occurred in June (68), September (67), and July (66). The second half of the year saw sustained escalation. Christmas-related spikes involved disruptions of worship services, intimidation of congregations, police interventions on conversion allegations, and vandalism of decorations—highlighting how periods of heightened religious visibility increased vulnerability.

Regional hotspots underscored the geographic spread. In Uttar Pradesh, a large share of incidents involved allegations of unlawful religious conversion leading to police action during prayer meetings or gatherings. Pastors and believers were frequently detained or questioned under the Uttar Pradesh Unlawful Religious Conversion Prohibition Act, often following complaints by local groups. Mobs assembled outside venues, issued threats, and pressured authorities, with physical assaults documented in several districts.

In Chhattisgarh, particularly in tribal and rural districts like Bastar, incidents included large village gatherings disrupting prayers, threats, physical assaults—including a severe beating of a pregnant Christian woman resulting in miscarriage—vandalism, church burnings, and social boycotts. Families faced expulsion threats if they continued practising their faith. These patterns often arose at the intersection of local tensions, conversion allegations, and pressure group mobilisation, compounded by delayed or inconsistent administrative responses.

Prayer meetings, Bible studies, and charitable activities increasingly triggered accusations of “forced conversion,” leading to police intervention even without credible evidence. In Uttar Pradesh and Chhattisgarh, which together accounted for a majority of cases, pastors faced repeated arrests under expanded anti-conversion laws active in twelve states. These statutes were weaponised aggressively in 2025, with vague definitions of “inducement” turning routine worship into potential criminal acts. The result was prolonged detentions, legal harassment, and a chilling effect on faith practice, directly undermining Article 25’s guarantees. Many incidents began with complaints rather than violence, shifting the burden onto Christians and imposing heavy costs through investigations and court proceedings.

This shift from organised campaigns to socially embedded hostility is evident in the diffusion of prejudice beyond “formal” Hindutva groups. In tribal and rural areas, Christian families encountered social ostracisation as a daily reality. Entire hamlets faced economic boycotts, denial of access to water sources, ration distribution, and forest produce. In Chhattisgarh and Odisha, refusal to participate in “Ghar Wapsi” reconversion ceremonies led to exclusion from village councils and government schemes. Denial of jobs became widespread, with Christians reporting discrimination in both public and private sectors despite higher literacy rates in some segments.

Dehumanising Burials

Burial issues emerged as particularly dehumanising. The UCF recorded over 20 such incidents, mostly in Chhattisgarh, where grieving families were blocked from using village graveyards, forced to carry bodies long distances, or compelled to seek external sites. These acts violated basic dignity and Article 51A’s call for common brotherhood, reflecting deeper contests over whether Christian identity holds legitimate space in local communities.

The weaponisation of laws and administrative tools further entrenched marginalisation. Anti-conversion legislation saw heightened enforcement, with false FIRs often filed by local activists. In Uttar Pradesh, amendments stiffened penalties and broadened complaint rights, enabling any individual to trigger investigations into worship gatherings. The misuse of the Panchayats Extension to Scheduled Areas (PESA) Act in tribal regions was especially insidious. Village assemblies invoked PESA to bar Christian pastors, prohibit home churches, and declare converts as outsiders, turning a law meant for tribal empowerment into an instrument of exclusion. Demolitions of churches and prayer halls continued, particularly in Maharashtra and central states, where small structures serving Dalit and tribal congregations were labelled “illegal encroachments” despite Article 30 protections for minority institutions. Social ostracisation extended to educational and employment denial, compounding economic vulnerability for already marginalised groups.

These patterns represent a move from episodic violence—such as the historical attacks in Dangs Christmas 1998, the Staines murders in 1999, Karnataka violence, and Kandhamal pogrom 2007-8—to systemic criminalisation. Physical assaults persisted, with EFI-RLC and UCF noting beatings and disruptions, but many incidents now began with accusations rather than outright attacks. Victims often became the subjects of investigation, inverting justice.

This criminalisation carries the veneer of legality, transferring the burden of proof onto Christians. Observers noted that the process itself deters free exercise of faith.

The People's Tribunal in June 2026, which heard testimonies from affected communities, highlighted how these mechanisms erode equal citizenship. What was once exceptional—disruption of worship or denial of burial—has become routine, attracting less public scrutiny. This normalisation weakens not only minority rights but the broader constitutional order, raising questions about institutional impartiality and access to justice for vulnerable groups.

The cumulative effect in 2025 was a narrowing of civic space. Christians, deeply embedded in local societies yet often among the most socially marginalised, experienced pressures that tested constitutional freedoms. While Article 25 permits reasonable restrictions, the selective and disproportionate application against one community—evident in data from EFI, UCF, and USCIRF—suggested targeting of propagation and practice rather than genuine threats to public order.

Cultural rights under Articles 29-30 were strained as institutions faced surveillance and demolition. The gradual erosion, through small accommodations and unchallenged prejudices, signals deeper challenges to India's plural democracy. The treatment of Christians thus transcends a minority issue; it reflects the health of constitutional values, where the security of the vulnerable tests the integrity of protections for all.

First Five Months of 2026: Intensified Pressures

The first five months of 2026 showed no abatement, with EFI-RLC and UCF reports indicating sustained high levels of harassment across 20 states. Anti-conversion cases remained the primary tool, with pastors and believers in Uttar Pradesh and Chhattisgarh facing routine arrests during prayer meetings or pastoral visits. The June 2026 People's Tribunal in New Delhi amplified grassroots voices, documenting how criminalisation had become embedded, shifting burdens onto communities already strained by prior years. Testimonies revealed that ordinary acts of faith—house fellowships, charitable work—continued to invite legal scrutiny, reinforcing the normalisation of hostility diffused across society rather than limited to organised actors.

Burial denials and social ostracisation worsened in tribal belts, with families obstructed from funerals and denied civic amenities like water and welfare access. PESA misuse persisted, alongside threats to church structures. These developments underscored the transition from episodic events to systemic narrowing of space, where constitutional guarantees of practice and propagation faced daily contestation. Hate speech and local exclusions attracted minimal pushback, highlighting how assumptions once marginal have become socially accepted.

By May 2026, the patterns affirmed broader constitutional concerns. Incidents of violence, arrests, and exclusion were not merely anti-Christian but indicators of uneven application of rights, challenging institutional impartiality and equal citizenship. As Rev. Vijayesh Lal emphasised in submissions, the future of minorities and constitutional democracy are intertwined. The gradual normalisation documented over decades calls for renewed commitment to the secular framework that underpins India's republic, ensuring that freedoms enshrined in Articles 25-30 and 51A remain meaningful for all citizens, especially the vulnerable.

Endnotes

101. Amnesty International. India 2025: Human Rights Report. London: Amnesty International, 2025.
102. Dayal, John. "Rising Persecution and the Institutional Silence." Indian Currents, December 2025.
103. Evangelical Fellowship of India (EFI). Religious Liberty Commission Annual Report 2025. New Delhi: EFI-RLC, January 2026.
104. Human Rights Watch. World Report 2026: Events of 2025. New York: Human Rights Watch, 2026.
105. Lal, Vijayesh. "Testimony Submitted to the People's Tribunal on Violence Against Christians." New Delhi, June 1, 2026.
106. Maktoob Media. "Christians Face Surge in Anti-Conversion Cases in Uttar Pradesh." April 12, 2025.
107. Scroll.in. "Burial Rights Denied: Christian Families in Chhattisgarh Face Social Boycott." November 2025.
108. The Telegraph. "PESA Act Being Misused Against Tribal Christians." Guwahati, March 2025.
109. United Christian Forum (UCF). Annual Report on Hate Crimes Against Christians in India, 2025. New Delhi: UCF, December 2025.
110. United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF). Annual Report 2025: India Chapter. Washington, DC: USCIRF, April 2025.
111. The Wire. "Weaponising Anti-Conversion Laws: A 2025 Overview." October 18, 2025.
112. UCAN India. "Demolitions and Harassment Continue in Central India." February 2025.
113. India. "Demolitions and Harassment Continue in Central India." February 2025.

**FEDERALISM &
FRATERNITY**

Federal Distribution of Power

The Unravelling Compact: India's Ongoing Federal Crisis

Intro: What connects Ladakh, J&K, and Manipur across their very different histories and grievances is a single federal pathology: the Centre's repeated preference for administrative control over political resolution, denying their citizens their democratic aspirations through rulers appointed from Delhi.

India's quasi-federal structure has always been, in constitutional theory, a Union of States — not a federation of equals in the classical sense, but a negotiated compact between a strong Centre and constitutionally recognised states. For much of its post-independence history, that compact held through a combination of political management, periodic institutional recalibration, and the sheer necessity of governing a vast, diverse subcontinent. During the last few years, however, several long-deferred structural contradictions emerged simultaneously, producing what some analysts are now calling India's most acute federal stress since the Emergency.

Indian federalism is now facing growing strain due to delimitation concerns, fiscal asymmetry, centralisation, and weakening Centre-State consultation, creating tensions between national unity and regional autonomy. The past year has seen these tensions crystallise around four specific flashpoints — the language question, the delimitation of parliamentary constituencies, the Special Intensive Revision (SIR) of electoral rolls, and the evolving architecture of GST and fiscal devolution. Additionally, there is ever worsening situation in the sensitive border areas of Kashmir, Ladakh, Manipur and now Arunachal Pradesh. Taken individually, each is a serious policy dispute. Taken together, they form a pattern: a systematic reconfiguration of political, cultural, and financial power away from the states and toward the Centre, raising fundamental questions about whether India's federal compact requires not mere reform but a structural response.

The Language Wars: More Than Words

The language controversy that re-erupted in early 2025 is perhaps the most emotionally charged dimension of the federal crisis, precisely because it touches the deepest registers of regional identity. The Hindu nationalists' aim to make Hindi India's "connecting language" hit an old roadblock, as the Modi government found itself locked in a bitter language dispute with the Tamil Nadu government over accusations that New Delhi was trying to impose Hindi on schools in the southern state.¹ The flashpoint was the National Education Policy's three-language formula and the Centre's withholding of funds tied to its implementation. Then Tamil Nadu Chief Minister M.K. Stalin led the charge against the imposition of Hindi, drawing comparisons to the 1937 and 1965 protests that successfully blocked attempts to make Hindi the sole national language, publicly challenging the BJP to push Hindi imposition in Tamil Nadu in 2026.²

What is significant is how quickly the Tamil Nadu resistance galvanised a broader southern and eastern coalition. Karnataka, Kerala, West Bengal, and Telangana all signalled opposition to the NEP's language provisions. India's language policy debate, reignited by the NEP's implementation, reveals deeper tensions between the country's state and central governments, with southern states opposing a perceived push to impose Hindi through a three-language formula.³ Shashi Tharoor, writing in September 2025, offered a nuanced

articulation of the opposition position: resistance in India is not to Hindi as a language but against its forced declaration as a national identity, with Indians pragmatically adopting languages for utility while cherishing their rich linguistic diversity over any single-language dominance.⁴

The language dispute connects directly to the broader federal question because it implicates how states govern their own educational systems — a constitutionally concurrent subject that the Centre has increasingly sought to shape through funding conditionalities. When the Centre links education grants to NEP compliance, including language provisions, it effectively transforms a policy recommendation into a fiscal blackmail. The refusal of Tamil Nadu to comply, and the Centre's response of withholding funds, reflects the coercive logic that critics describe as "combative federalism" rather than cooperative federalism. The latest language war is not restricted to Tamil Nadu alone; it extends across Maharashtra, where voices have risen against the BJP's imposition of Hindi, with calls for unity among the Marathi populace.⁵

Delimitation: The Penalty Paradox

If language is the most emotive federal dispute, delimitation is structurally the most consequential. The debate over delimitation is also shaped by its linkage with the Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam (Women's Reservation Act), which provides for 33 per cent reservation for women in Parliament but ties its implementation to the completion of delimitation, raising questions if women's representation could not have been operationalised independently.⁶

India stands at the threshold of a defining moment as it approaches the 2026 delimitation exercise. Based on current demographic trends, a population-based delimitation will redistribute Lok Sabha seats from southern to northern states. Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, and Madhya Pradesh would gain substantial representation, while Tamil Nadu, Kerala, and Karnataka would lose seats proportionally, concentrating more political influence in the Hindi heartland.⁷ The projections are stark: a Lok Sabha expanded to approximately 848 seats on 2026 population figures would see Uttar Pradesh alone gaining 63 seats and Bihar 39, while the five southern states of Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh and Telangana would see their collective share of the House fall from roughly 24 per cent to under 20 per cent.⁸

The core injustice, as southern states articulate it, is a "success paradox": states that invested in healthcare, education, and demographic transition are being politically penalised for that very success. States that led on every development metric would practically be penalised for having done so. The structural implications are further complicated by the fact that the projected pattern of seat-gains falls almost entirely within the governing party's strongholds, and the projected pattern of seat-losses almost entirely within states where the governing party has struggled to establish itself.⁹

The rationale driving the pushback by the states threatened is obvious: political representation should be separated from pure population figures to safeguard the federal structure of the country. Southern stakeholders are pushing the 16th Finance Commission and the Delimitation Commission to consider factors like governance outcomes and human development.¹⁰ The demand for a "weighted formula" — one that incorporates developmental performance alongside raw population — represents a principled federalist argument: that the democratic principle of "one person, one vote" cannot, in a federal polity, operate without counterweights that protect the voice of its diverse constituent units.

SIR: Electoral Rolls as a Federal Battleground

The most explosive new front opened in June 2025, when the Election Commission of India, empowered under Article 324, ordered a Special Intensive Revision of electoral rolls in 12 States/UTs including Tamil Nadu, Kerala, and West Bengal. The decision, taken months before major Assembly elections, triggered political protests and legal challenges before the Supreme Court regarding legality, timing, and citizenship verification. Opposition parties argued the timing was questionable since a Summary Revision was already completed in 2024.¹¹

The protest vocabulary it generated — "vote chori," "vote bandi," "Stealing Indian Rights" — entered the political lexicon and reflected widespread anxiety about the exercise's actual intent. West Bengal in the most recent state elections, became the epicentre of controversy, where fears spread among undocumented migrants and even among sections of Hindu refugees, with rumours connecting the SIR process to larger citizenship verification exercises, creating panic in many border districts, eventually leading to millions of people excluded from the voting rights.¹²

The SIR controversy cuts to the heart of federalism because electoral rolls are central to how states exercise democratic self-governance. When an unelected constitutional body undertakes a massive revision of who counts as a voter — months before state elections, with inadequate consultation with state governments — it is experienced by opposition-ruled states not as routine administrative exercise but as partisan interference. The fact that the exercise coincided with the Bihar elections, a state of crucial importance to the ruling coalition, made its neutrality almost impossible to argue credibly.

GST, Fiscal Devolution, and the 16th Finance Commission

The fiscal dimension of the federal crisis has been playing out across a longer arc, but 2025–26 brought it to a head with the 16th Finance Commission's final report. The 16th Finance Commission submitted its report to the President of India on November 17, 2025, covering the five-year period from April 1, 2026, to March 31, 2031, with its recommendations tabled in Parliament on February 1, 2026.¹³

The 16th Finance Commission introduced a 10 per cent weight for "Contribution to GDP," replacing older tax effort criteria. While this attempts to reward industrialised states, the Commission simultaneously reduced the weight of redistributive metrics like Income Distance (from 45 per cent to 42.5 per cent) and Area (from 15 per cent to 10 per cent). This sparked intense friction, as poorer states argued it erodes fiscal equity, while contributor states argued they still subsidise the underperformance of others.¹⁴

The GST architecture, now eight years old, continues to generate structural grievances. Several opposition-ruled states, particularly in southern India, have accused the Centre of not providing a fair share of transfers under the current financial devolution scheme. States like Karnataka, Kerala, and Tamil Nadu have repeatedly voiced dissatisfaction over the allocation of tax revenues, and experts have questioned the Finance Commission's formula, arguing it incentivises states that have not controlled population growth or achieved rapid economic growth. The share of southern states in the divisible pool has declined over the last six Finance Commissions.¹⁵

The imposition of stringent off-budget borrowing caps and the tying of additional fiscal space to mandatory structural reforms, such as power sector privatisation, are viewed by states as an infringement on their constitutionally guaranteed fiscal autonomy. This "fiscal conditionality" model — where states receive money from the Centre but only on terms set by the Centre — is increasingly seen as a form of administrative colonialism, converting

what the Constitution presents as shared governance into something closer to supervised subordination.

The Broader Pattern: Governors, Concurrent List, and Democratic Erosion

Beyond these four specific axes, the federal crisis of 2025–26 reflects a more pervasive erosion of institutional checks. The Governor controversies in Tamil Nadu, Kerala, and Punjab between 2022 and 2025 were ultimately resolved through a combination of Supreme Court intervention and political change. The Supreme Court's 2025 Tamil Nadu judgment reinforced that Governors who act as partisan agents of the Centre violate constitutional norms.¹⁶

Increasing unilateral Centre decisions have weakened consultation and cooperative federalism, eroding trust between Centre and states, with combative federalism exemplified by the 2020 farm laws — legislation on agriculture, a state subject under the Seventh Schedule. The Inter-State Council, constitutionally designed as the principal forum for Centre-state dialogue, has met infrequently and without the urgency that the current moment demands.

The India-Pakistan military conflict of May 2025, following the Pahalgam attack, added a further dimension: security crises historically strengthen Centre-State centralisation tendencies in India, and the post-Operation Sindoor political climate made it harder for opposition-ruled states to voice federal grievances without being accused of weakening national unity at a moment of external threat. This dynamic, too, is part of the federal story — the way nationalist security narratives can silence legitimate constitutional dissent.

Territorial Hotspots: Ladakh, Kashmir, and Manipur as Federal Laboratories

If the disputes over language, delimitation, SIR, and fiscal devolution represent federalism under stress within the normal constitutional framework, the three territories of Ladakh, Jammu & Kashmir, and Manipur represent something more acute: federalism in rupture. Each, in different ways, exposes what happens when the Centre's security or political logic overrides the constitutional compact with its constituent units — when the promise of self-governance becomes indefinitely deferred, democratically hollowed out, or simply overwhelmed by ethnic collapse that central administration cannot resolve. Together, they form the most dramatic evidence that India's federal crisis is not merely a technocratic dispute about seat-sharing formulas or tax devolution weights, but a deep question about who belongs in the Indian Union, on what terms, and with what democratic rights.

Ladakh: Democracy Withdrawn

Of all the federal wounds opened in this period, Ladakh's is perhaps the most constitutionally stark. Since the abrogation of Article 370 in August 2019 and the bifurcation of the erstwhile state of Jammu and Kashmir, Ladakh has existed as a Union Territory without a legislature — a rare constitutional anomaly in which nearly 300,000 people are governed entirely through the office of a Lieutenant Governor appointed by New Delhi, with no elected assembly through which they can shape their own laws or budgets.

In 2025, protests intensified over fears of demographic change, land alienation, unemployment, and cultural erosion. The Leh Apex Body (LAB) and the Kargil Democratic Alliance (KDA) — representing the Buddhist-majority Leh district and the Muslim-majority Kargil district respectively, two communities with historically divergent political identities —

found themselves united in a single demand: statehood and inclusion in the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution. Their goals included statehood for Ladakh, inclusion in the Sixth Schedule, formation of the Ladakh Public Service Commission, and two parliamentary seats for Ladakh, alongside demands related to local land rights, identity, languages, ecology, and employment.¹⁷

The protests turned violent in September 2025. Four people were killed in the violence in Leh town. Climate activist Sonam Wangchuk — who had led hunger strikes and protests since 2023 — was detained under the National Security Act, accused by the government of inciting unrest.¹⁸ The use of the NSA against a climate and democracy activist in a region that has been described as a "strategic frontier" became an emblem of how 'security imperatives' are deployed to silence democratic dissent.

High-Powered Committee talks resumed in early 2026, with Ladakh leaders submitting a 40-page proposal, but core demands remained unmet amid youth frustration. The Centre's preference has been to offer Article 240 regulations — presidential orders with parliamentary force — over Sixth Schedule extension beyond the Northeast.¹⁹

While Wangchuk was released under immense pressure after spending long months inside prison, the federal dimension of Ladakh's agitation is foundational: it is a demand to be brought back inside the democratic compact. Statehood promises local recruitment bodies and job creation, preventing the alienation and migration of educated Ladakhi youth, and fulfilling a government pledge strengthens democratic credibility and trust between the Centre and Ladakhi people. The Centre's hesitation is framed in security terms — Ladakh shares borders with both China and Pakistan — but critics note that democratic governance and border security are not mutually exclusive, and that the sustained denial of legislative representation is itself generating the youth radicalisation it purports to prevent.

Jammu & Kashmir: Statehood Deferred

Ladakh's crisis is inseparable from its sibling question: the fate of Jammu & Kashmir. Following the National Conference–Congress alliance's victory in the September–October 2024 Assembly elections, an elected government led by Omar Abdullah has been in office — but governing with critically circumscribed powers. Shortly before the assembly elections, the Modi government reassigned significant powers held by the elected government in Jammu and Kashmir — including matters of police, public order, and bureaucratic appointments — to the lieutenant governor, a New Delhi appointee. The central government did not provide a timeline for restoring full statehood to Jammu and Kashmir, despite a 2023 directive from the Supreme Court.²⁰

The Supreme Court's 2023 judgment upholding the abrogation of Article 370 had, in the same breath, directed that statehood be restored "at the earliest." Through 2025, that promise remained unfulfilled. In October 2025, the Supreme Court gave the Centre four weeks to respond to petitions seeking timely restoration of statehood. Petitioners argued that delay in restoration would cause a serious reduction of the democratically elected government in Jammu and Kashmir, causing a grave violation of the idea of federalism, which forms part of the basic structure of the Constitution. The Centre's response, through the Solicitor General, cited ongoing security concerns following the Pahalgam terror attack of May 2025 as grounds for further delay.

The Pahalgam attack — and the subsequent India-Pakistan military confrontation of May 2025 — thus functioned simultaneously as a security crisis and a federal one: it provided the Centre with a rationale for prolonging direct administrative control over J&K at the precise

moment when the elected government was demanding the return of real executive powers. The elected Assembly's own resolution calling for the restoration of special status — passed in November 2024 — was dismissed by Prime Minister Modi, underscoring a pattern in which J&K's democratic institutions are permitted to function as symbols of normalcy while the substance of self-governance remains suspended.

The Centre also linked the restoration of statehood to delimitation and elections — delimitation that, critics noted, mainly benefited the Jammu region, a BJP stronghold.²¹ The political arithmetic of this arrangement — elections held, but powers withheld — encapsulates the contradictions of India's "managed federalism" at its most exposed.

Manipur: Federalism's Ethical Failure

If Ladakh represents democracy withdrawn and J&K represents democracy hollowed, Manipur represents the federal state's most catastrophic ethical failure: a government that not only failed to prevent mass ethnic violence but was credibly accused of enabling it, while the Centre looked away for nearly two years before acting.

The conflict's proximate cause — a High Court ruling that appeared to recommend Scheduled Tribe status for the Meitei community — triggered a broader conflagration rooted in decades of land alienation, demographic anxiety, drug economy disputes, and political manipulation.

Chief Minister N. Biren Singh resigned on February 9, 2025, after 20 months of intermittent violence, facing the threat of a no-confidence motion. President's Rule was declared on February 13, 2025, whereby the Union government took direct control of the state administration through its appointed Governor, Ajay Kumar Bhalla, a former Interior Ministry bureaucrat. India's Supreme Court had expressed concerns over what it termed the "absolute breakdown of law and order" in Manipur.²² In all this, Human Rights Watch, concluded that Singh's government had, through multiple deliberate acts, including limiting internet access, endorsing polarising narratives, and patronising armed groups, created conditions that actively inflamed the conflict rather than containing it.²³

The federal dimensions of the Manipur crisis are multiple. First, there is the question of Centre complicity: critics argue that the BJP-led government in Delhi protected Biren Singh long after it was evident that his administration had failed, because the political cost of admitting failure in a BJP-governed state outweighed the humanitarian cost borne by Manipur's citizens. The fact that Manipur does not have the same voice in Parliament as many other states is a reason the Union government was able to ignore the crisis in the state. Second, there is the question of ethno-federal demands that the crisis has now made unavoidable. The Kuki-Zo Council declared that its community "cannot and shall not" participate in the formation of the state government, reiterating their demand for a separate administrative arrangement — specifically, a Union Territory under the Constitution of India — asserting that the Kuki-Zo people can no longer live together with the Meitei community.²⁴ Ethno-federal demands in Manipur, whether in the form of Scheduled Tribe status claims, the Kuki demand for a separate administration, or Naga calls for territorial integration, reflect how ethnicity and territoriality have become intertwined in ways that cannot be addressed through conventional centre-state administrative frameworks.²⁵

The structural conditions that produced the crisis — ethnic buffer zones, an armed landscape, 60,000 displaced people, a Kuki-Zo community that has declared itself outside the governing compact — remain unaddressed.

What connects Ladakh, J&K, and Manipur across their very different histories and grievances is a single federal pathology: the Centre's repeated preference for administrative control over political resolution, denying their citizens their democratic aspirations through rulers appointed from Delhi.

Recommendations: Towards a Federal Renewal

The federal crisis documented across the preceding sections is not, at its root, a constitutional failure — India's constitutional architecture, for all its centralising tendencies, contains within it the instruments of federal renewal. The First Schedule's recognition of linguistic and territorial diversity, the Seventh Schedule's enumeration of legislative domains, the Sixth Schedule's tradition of asymmetric autonomy for tribal regions, the Finance Commission's redistributive mandate, the Inter-State Council's consultative design — these are not merely empty letters. They are, rather, an unfinished programme. What has failed is not the Constitution but the political will to honour its federal spirit in practice. The recommendations below are organised around the five axes of the current crisis — institutions, fiscal architecture, electoral and territorial integrity, cultural pluralism, and conflict resolution — and are offered towards comprehensive structural reform, not just rhetorical reassurance.

1. Revive and Constitutionalise the Inter-State Council

The Inter-State Council, established under Article 263, was designed as the premier deliberative forum for Centre-state relations. It has met infrequently and has functioned, when it has met at all, as a ceremonial body rather than a genuine site of negotiation. The first and most urgent institutional recommendation is to constitutionalise the Inter-State Council's meeting schedule — mandating at minimum two substantive sessions per year — and to expand its agenda to include binding referral authority on contested concurrent-list legislation before such legislation is tabled in Parliament.

The model here is the German Bundesrat, which gives the constituent Länder formal legislative power over matters that affect them directly.²⁶ India need not replicate this model wholesale, but the principle — that states must have a structured, binding voice in Central legislation on concurrent subjects — is compatible with India's own constitutional design and would address the core grievance that farm law-style impositions, education policy revisions, and electoral roll exercises are made without genuine consultation.

2. Reform the Finance Commission's Horizontal Devolution Formula

The 16th Finance Commission's introduction of "Contribution to GDP" as a horizontal distribution criterion, alongside the reduction in the weight of Income Distance metrics, represents a fundamental retreat from the redistributive federalism that earlier Commissions embodied. The recommendation here is two-fold.

First, the horizontal devolution formula should incorporate a "Governance Performance Index" as a weighted criterion — one that measures states not by population size alone, nor by raw economic output, but by their performance on human development indicators: literacy, maternal mortality, gender equity in public employment, land titling, and environmental sustainability. This would reward states that have invested in their populations — a principle more consistent with developmental federalism than either raw population headcount or GDP contribution. Second, the off-budget borrowing restrictions and the tying of Fiscally Responsible Borrowing to structural reform conditionalities (such as power sector

privatisation) should be replaced by a transparent, consultatively designed fiscal compact that gives states genuine flexibility in their capital expenditure priorities.

3. Delink Delimitation from Pure Population: A Developmental Weighting Model

The 2026 delimitation exercise is constitutionally mandated and cannot be avoided, but its formula is not constitutionally fixed. The Delimitation Commission has the interpretive space to develop a weighted model that incorporates multiple parameters alongside population. A national consensus — brokered through the Inter-State Council before the Delimitation Commission finalises its methodology — should establish the principle that parliamentary representation in a federal democracy must balance the one-person-one-vote norm with the federal norm of protecting diverse constituent units from disproportionate political marginalisation.

Concretely, this could involve a two-component formula: a population base combined with a developmental performance index (drawing on Finance Commission metrics) and a geographic-cultural diversity factor (reflecting the principle that diverse regional identities must retain meaningful parliamentary presence). The expanded House size — projected at approximately 848 seats — actually creates room for this kind of weighted distribution without any state losing its current absolute seat count: gains can be distributed on developmental criteria, not losses enforced on demographic ones. This approach would require a constitutional amendment to the representation formula, but the political groundwork is precisely what a revitalised Inter-State Council could provide.

4. Establish a Language Rights Commission and a Plurilingual Public Culture

The language controversy is ultimately about cultural recognition, not administrative efficiency. A statutory Language Rights Commission — modelled on the Commissioner for Linguistic Minorities but with enforcement powers and a broader mandate — should be established to hear state grievances about Central language policy, review NEP implementation, and recommend adjustments that respect the constitutionally guaranteed right of linguistic communities to their own educational and cultural institutions.

More fundamentally, the Centre should signal — symbolically and substantively — that India's linguistic diversity is a constitutional asset, not a security concern. This means public-facing Central government communications in all Eighth Schedule languages on equal terms, a genuinely multilingual Parliament (with real-time translation infrastructure rather than the current inadequate provision), and a National Language Policy that explicitly rejects the equation of Hindi with national identity while affirming Hindi's legitimate status as one among many of India's recognised languages. The political compact that created modern India was premised on linguistic plurality as the organising principle of the state system; honouring that compact is not appeasement of regional sentiment — it is constitutional obligation.

5. Reform the Electoral Commission's Constitutional Insulation

The Special Intensive Revision controversy has exposed a structural vulnerability: the Election Commission of India, while nominally independent, has no formal mechanism obliging it to consult state governments before undertaking large-scale revisions of electoral rolls. The 2023 amendments to the Chief Election Commissioner appointment process — which reduced judicial oversight — have further weakened institutional confidence in the Commission's autonomy.

The recommendation is to restore a transparent, tripartite appointment process for Election Commissioners — involving the Chief Justice, the Speaker of the Lok Sabha, and the Leader of the Opposition, as originally proposed — and to require the ECI to formally notify and consult state Chief Electoral Officers and state governments at least 90 days before undertaking any Special Intensive Revision or equivalent exercise within six months of a scheduled state election. A statutory time-lock provision — prohibiting SIR exercises in the six months preceding any scheduled state or national election — would remove the structural conflict of interest that the Bihar (and later Bengal) timing created. These are modest reforms that require no constitutional amendment, only legislative and regulatory will.

6. A Federal Compact for the Northeast and Border Territories

The crises in Ladakh, Jammu & Kashmir, and Manipur call for a differentiated federal response that the current administrative architecture cannot provide. The recommendation is a framework of "asymmetric federalism with rights floors" — recognising that the Constitution already contains the instruments (the Fifth and Sixth Schedules, Article 371's special provisions, the tribal advisory councils) for granting calibrated autonomy to communities with distinct territorial, cultural, and security profiles, without requiring uniform statehood.

For Ladakh specifically, the immediate step is to grant the region legislative assembly status — a UT with legislature, as J&K now has — while developing a bespoke Sixth Schedule framework for its predominantly tribal population that protects land rights, cultural identity, and local employment without sacrificing security coordination with the Centre. The NSA's use against peaceful democratic activists must cease; detention without trial is incompatible with any serious claim to cooperative federalism.

For Jammu & Kashmir, the Centre must honour its Supreme Court-directed commitment to restore full statehood within a defined timeline — ideally before the end of 2026 — and must begin the genuine transfer of police and public order functions to the elected government. The Lieutenant Governor's superseding powers over elected ministers must be rolled back to align with standard UT-with-legislature constitutional norms. Statehood is not a reward for good behaviour; it is a constitutional right, and its continued deferral after an election has been peacefully conducted is indefensible on any principled basis.

For Manipur, the federal prescription is the most complex but also the most urgent. The demand for a separate administrative arrangement for the Kuki-Zo people — whether framed as a new UT, an autonomous territorial council, or an empowered Autonomous District Council under the Sixth Schedule — must be placed on the formal negotiating table. The current approach of treating the demand as a security problem rather than a federal question has failed at catastrophic human cost. A time-bound Constitutional Commission on Manipur's Territorial Future — including Meitei, Kuki-Zo, Naga, and Pangal representatives, with independent facilitation — should be constituted before the end of 2026 to design, through negotiation rather than imposition, a new governance architecture for the state.

7. Restore the Doctrine of Cooperative Federalism Through Political Culture, Not Just Legal Reform

The final and perhaps most important recommendation is the hardest to institutionalise: the restoration of a political culture in which the Centre treats states as constitutional partners rather than administrative subordinates. The legal reforms proposed above are necessary but not sufficient. India's federal compact was always held together not only by constitutional text but by political norms — of consultation, of restraint in the use of gubernatorial discretion, of respect for mandates delivered in state elections, of recognition that a

government rejected in Tamil Nadu or Kerala or West Bengal has nonetheless been legitimately elected by tens of millions of citizens who are no less Indian for having voted differently.

The erosion of these norms — through partisan Governors, through ordinance-route legislation on concurrent-list subjects, through the instrumentalisation of Central agencies in opposition-governed states, through the equation of regional assertion with anti-national sentiment — is not a constitutional violation in any single instance easily adjudicated by a court. It is a cumulative cultural shift that courts alone cannot reverse. It requires political leadership that recognises, as the makers of the Constitution did, that India's unity is guaranteed not by uniformity but by the constitutional accommodation of its plurality.

The spirit of federalism, as it lives in India's Constitution, is ultimately the spirit of the democratic compact itself: that power is shared, that difference is legitimate, that the margin has an equal claim on the Republic's resources and recognition. Its revival is not a technical challenge. It is a test of whether India's democratic project remains committed, across the inevitable pressures of governance and the temptations of majoritarian power—towards a constitutional obligation.

Endnotes

114. The Diplomat. (2025, February 14). *Modi government's language policy reignites old conflict in southern India*.
<https://thediplomat.com/2025/02/modi-governments-language-policy-reignites-old-conflict-in-southern-india/>
115. South Asia Times. (2025). *The language battle: South and East India resist BJP's Hindi imposition*.
<https://southasiatimes.org/the-language-battle-south-and-east-india-resist-bjps-hindi-imposition/>
116. East Asia Forum. (2025, July 1). *India's state and central governments still aren't speaking the same language*.
<https://eastasiaforum.org/2025/07/01/indias-state-and-central-governments-still-arent-speaking-the-same-language/>
117. Tharoor, S. (2025, September 13). *Hindi imposition: National language debate India*. *The Week*.
<https://www.theweek.in/columns/shashi-tharoor/2025/09/13/hindi-imposition-national-language-debate-india.html>
118. The Pioneer. (2025). *The great Indian language debate*.
<https://www.dailypioneer.com/2025/sunday-edition/the-great-indian-language-debate.html>
119. Ganaie, A. (2026, April 30). *Delimitation 2026: Political reset that could test India's federal balance*. *NewsClick*. <https://www.newsclick.in/>
120. International Journal of Research and Innovation in Social Science. (2026). *North-South divide: Constitutional challenges and federal implications of India's 2026 delimitation exercise*.
<https://rsisinternational.org/journals/ijriss/articles/north-south-divide-constitutional-challenges-and-federal-implications-of-indias-2026-delimitation-exercise/>
121. The Pioneer. (2026). *Counted, not weighed: What delimitation asks*.
<https://dailypioneer.com/news/slug-lite/counted-not-weighed-what-delimitation-asks?year=2026>
122. The Asian Affairs. (2026). *South India political pulse on delimitation 2026*.
<https://www.theasianaffairs.com/south-india-political-pulse-on-delimitation-2026/>
123. Deccan Herald. (2025). *From 'vote chori' to 'ghuspetiyan': Controversial terms that fueled 2025 political slugfest*.
<https://www.deccanherald.com/amp/story/india/from-vote-chori-to-ghuspetiyan-controversial-terms-that-fueled-2025-political-slugfest-3848226>
124. The Legal Hubb. (2026). *Special Intensive Revision (SIR): India's largest electoral roll clean-up*.
<https://thelegalhubb.com/special-intensive-revision-sir-indias-largest-electoral-roll-clean-up/>
125. Press Information Bureau. (2025). *Press release page (PRID: 2190975)*. Ministry of Finance, Government of India. <https://www.pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=2190975®=3&lang=2>

126. PRS Legislative Research. (2026). *Report summary: Report of the 16th Finance Commission for 2026-31*.
<https://prsindia.org/policy/report-summaries/report-of-the-16th-finance-commission-for-2026-31>
127. Policy Circle. (2025). *Centre-state GST tax row*.
<https://www.policycircle.org/policy/centre-state-gst-tax-row/>
128. Indian Republic. (2026, May). *How federalism works: India in practice*.
<https://www.indianrepublic.in/2026/05/how-federalism-works-india-in-practice.html>
129. Wikipedia. (2026). *Ladakh protests*. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ladakh_protests
130. The Federal. (2026). *Ladakh seeks statehood, sixth schedule status in new proposal*.
<https://thefederal.com/ladakh/ladakh-seeks-statehood-sixth-schedule-status-in-new-proposal-216802>
131. The Telegraph India. (2025). *Government offers constitutional safeguards under Article 371 for Ladakh; no sixth schedule, say activists*.
<https://www.telegraphindia.com/india/government-offers-constitutional-safeguards-under-article-371-for-or-ladakh-no-sixth-schedule-activists/cid/2162040>
132. Freedom House. (2025). *Indian Kashmir: Freedom in the World 2025 country report*.
<https://freedomhouse.org/country/indian-kashmir/freedom-world/2025>
133. The Week. (2025, October 10). *Supreme Court gives Centre four weeks to respond to pleas on restoration of J&K statehood*.
<https://www.theweek.in/news/india/2025/10/10/supreme-court-gives-centre-four-weeks-to-respond-to-pleas-on-restoration-of-jandk-statehood.html>
134. Wikipedia. (2026). *2023–2026 Manipur conflict*.
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2023–2026_Maniipur_conflict
135. Human Rights Watch. (2025, March 27). *India: Ethnic clashes restart in Manipur*.
<https://www.hrw.org/news/2025/03/27/india-ethnic-clashes-restart-manipur>
136. Deccan Herald. (2025). *Kuki group says community members will not participate in govt formation*.
<https://www.deccanherald.com/amp/story/india/manipur/kuki-group-says-community-members-will-not-participate-in-govt-formation-3853667>
137. Haokip, T. (2009). *Ethno-federalism and the crisis of state authority: Ethnic territoriality in Manipur*. *ResearchGate*.
https://www.researchgate.net/publication/402991193_Ethno-federalism_and_the_Crisis_of_State_Authority_Ethnic_Territoriality_in_Manipur
138. Wikipedia. (2026). *German Bundesrat*. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/German_Bundesrat

Parliamentary Processes

The 18th Lok Sabha in Year 2: Alliance Pressures, Institutional Atrophy, and the Delimitation Defeat

Intro: Legislative developments suggest that the policy trajectory of 2025–26 was shaped by a consistent governing impulse: the pursuit of administrative consolidation and policy efficiency, often accompanied by debates over institutional autonomy, federal balance, and the adequacy of parliamentary scrutiny.

India's Parliament, established under Article 79 of the Constitution, constitutes the President, the Rajya Sabha (Council of States), and the Lok Sabha (House of the People), serving as the central institution of representative democracy and legislative authority (Constitution of India, 1950). Beyond law-making, Parliament performs deliberative, financial, and accountability functions, mediating relations between the executive and the federal polity. The 18th Lok Sabha, constituted following the 2024 general elections, marked an important political transition. While the ruling coalition retained power, the reduced parliamentary majority and expanded opposition presence altered legislative negotiations and institutional dynamics, creating a more contested parliamentary environment (PRS Legislative Research, 2024a).

Here we examine the functioning of Parliament during 2025–26 through three interconnected lenses: major legislative and policy decisions, floor-level institutional crises and parliamentary dynamics, and unresolved democratic concerns relating to representation, electoral inclusion, and committee oversight. Together, these developments reveal both the resilience and emerging strains within India's parliamentary democracy.

Specific Policy Decisions & Legislative Action in 2025–26

The legislative agenda of 2025–26 reflected more than routine policy reform; it revealed the governing logic of the 18th Lok Sabha itself. Across domains ranging from taxation and security administration to regulatory reform and economic governance, legislative initiatives reflected a recurring tension between administrative efficiency and democratic scrutiny. While the government framed several measures as modernisation and governance rationalisation, parliamentary debate repeatedly exposed concerns relating to centralisation, oversight, and distributive consequences.

The Income Tax (No. 2) Bill, 2025, effective from April 1, 2026, is being presented as India's most significant direct tax reform since 1961. Yet the politics surrounding its passage deserve as much attention as its technical changes. After withdrawing an earlier draft, the government reintroduced the revised bill and secured parliamentary approval within days. That speed may suggest administrative confidence, but it also appears to have narrowed the space for broader scrutiny (Press Information Bureau [PIB], 2025).

A key reform is the replacement of the "Previous Year" and "Assessment Year" framework with a single "Tax Year." While easier terminology may reduce filing confusion, the change is largely administrative rather than redistributive. The more contested issue lies in the

rationalisation of exemptions. Civil society concerns around the default new tax regime point to the removal of deductions tied to savings, housing, and insurance, potentially weakening financial cushions relied upon by lower- and middle-income households (Income Tax Department, n.d.; Mint, 2024). Critics further point to expanded state oversight and tighter compliance expectations accompanying the reform (PIB, 2025).

The broader significance of the tax reform lies not only in fiscal restructuring but also in the governing philosophy it signals. Similar tensions between efficiency and institutional autonomy became visible in administrative legislation.

The Central Armed Police Forces (General Administration) Bill, 2026, reflects a continuing preference for centralised administrative authority. By reserving senior leadership positions for IPS officers on deputation, the bill reinforces the Centre's control over CAPFs despite sustained opposition criticism (PRS Legislative Research, 2026b; PIB, 2026a).

Supporters argue that uniform leadership ensures coordination and national security coherence. Yet opponents see something more consequential. The legislation appears to sidestep earlier debates around cadre progression and internal promotion systems. Concerns over morale and institutional stagnation have followed, particularly among officers who view deputation-heavy leadership as limiting mobility (The Hindu, 2026; The New Indian Express, 2026). Parliamentary objections and walkouts underscored a wider debate over administrative efficiency and federal balance (PIB, 2026a).

Questions surrounding state authority and regulatory reach similarly shaped debates over economic legislation. The Jan Vishwas (Amendment) Bill, 2026, sits at an uneasy intersection between deregulation and accountability. By decriminalising minor offences across several laws, the government frames the legislation as a practical measure to reduce compliance burdens and improve ease of doing business (PIB, 2026c; PRS Legislative Research, 2025a).

There is some merit to that argument. Procedural lapses need not always attract criminal prosecution. Still, critics caution against treating all violations as merely technical. Replacing imprisonment with fines in sectors involving food safety and pharmaceuticals may weaken deterrence and convert regulatory breaches into manageable business expenses (Times of India, 2026). The shift from courts to administrative adjudication also raises concerns regarding oversight and transparency.

These debates over deregulation and administrative discretion extended into emerging digital and infrastructure sectors, where modernisation increasingly intersected with questions of market concentration and centralised governance.

The Promotion and Regulation of Online Gaming framework and the Indian Ports Bill, 2025, reveal a broader pattern of economic centralisation. Both are framed as modernisation efforts, yet their effects may extend beyond efficiency (PRS Legislative Research, 2025b; PRS Legislative Research, 2025c).

Restrictions on real-money gaming have been justified through public welfare concerns, though critics argue the approach risks pushing users toward offshore platforms while narrowing space for domestic innovation (The Hindu, 2025; Times of India, 2025). Likewise, the Indian Ports Bill centralises planning and regulatory authority in ways that appear

favourable to large logistics and port operators. Coastal governance and smaller stakeholders may find themselves negotiating within increasingly centralised systems where public utility competes with corporate priorities (PRS Legislative Research, 2025c; Government of India, 2025).

Taken together, these legislative developments suggest that the policy trajectory of 2025–26 was shaped by a consistent governing impulse: the pursuit of administrative consolidation and policy efficiency, often accompanied by debates over institutional autonomy, federal balance, and the adequacy of parliamentary scrutiny. These tensions became even more visible not merely within legislation itself, but in the everyday functioning of Parliament.

Floor Dynamics & Institutional Crises: News from the Ground

If legislative debates revealed the substantive priorities of the 18th Lok Sabha, parliamentary floor dynamics exposed the institutional conditions under which those priorities were negotiated. The second year of the 18th Lok Sabha witnessed a deepening crisis in parliamentary functioning, marked by procedural confrontation, declining deliberative standards, and growing mistrust between institutional actors. These developments reflected a broader “interregnum”, in which executive majoritarian tendencies confronted coalition constraints, producing uneven patterns of dominance and resistance within Parliament.

The most significant episode illustrating these tensions was the introduction and eventual defeat of the Constitution (131st Amendment) Bill, 2026. The proposal sought large-scale delimitation and expansion of the Lok Sabha, increasing seats from 543 to nearly 850 and redrawing constituencies on the basis of the 2011 Census rather than updated demographic data (PRS Legislative Research, 2026a; Hindustan Times, 2026). The executive defended this reliance on outdated data by citing administrative necessity, given the continued delay in conducting a fresh census, now expected only around 2027 (The Hindu, 2026a).

The proposal, however, generated intense parliamentary opposition. Opposition parties and regional blocs argued that delimitation based on the 2011 Census contradicted the constitutional spirit of Article 82, which envisages constituency revision following the most recent census. The government ultimately failed to secure the required two-thirds majority, resulting in the amendment’s defeat. This marked one of the few occasions in recent parliamentary history where a constitutional amendment was blocked through coordinated opposition, reflecting altered power dynamics within a numerically constrained House.

Figure 1:

Legislative Deadlock: The 131st Amendment

LEGISLATIVE DEFEAT MATRIX



298 to 230: The Coalition's Mathematical Vulnerability

The failure of the Constitution (131st Amendment) Bill marks a rare moment in recent history where a ruling coalition could not secure the required two-thirds majority for a constitutional change.

The Delimitation Setback

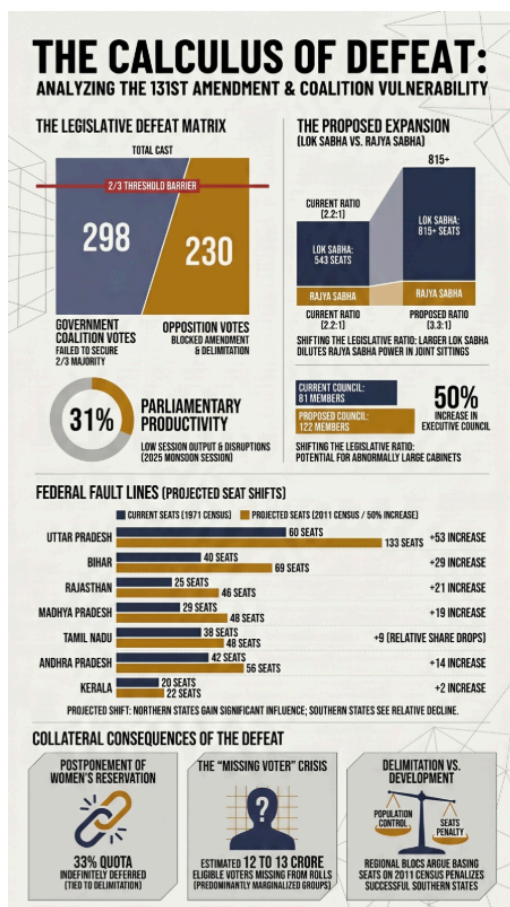
The bill was defeated due to coordinated opposition against redrawing constituencies based on outdated 2011 Census data, which was perceived as a threat to federal balance.



Source: Based on PRS Legislative Research (2026); Hindustan Times (2026); The Hindu (2026a). Visualization and compilation: Generated by the authors.

Figure 2

Review of the 18th Lok Sabha: Institutional Strains and Structural Shifts



Source: Based on data from PRS Legislative Research (2025-2026) and Press Information Bureau (2025-2026). Visualisation and compilation: Generated by the authors.

Beyond the legislative setback, the delimitation debate revealed deeper anxieties regarding India's federal balance. Redistribution based on outdated population data was widely perceived as disproportionately benefiting northern states with higher demographic growth while reducing the relative influence of southern states that had achieved population stabilisation (Business Standard, 2026; NDTV, 2026). Consequently, parliamentary debate evolved into a broader federal contestation, with regional parties framing the issue as one of democratic fairness rather than routine legislative negotiation.

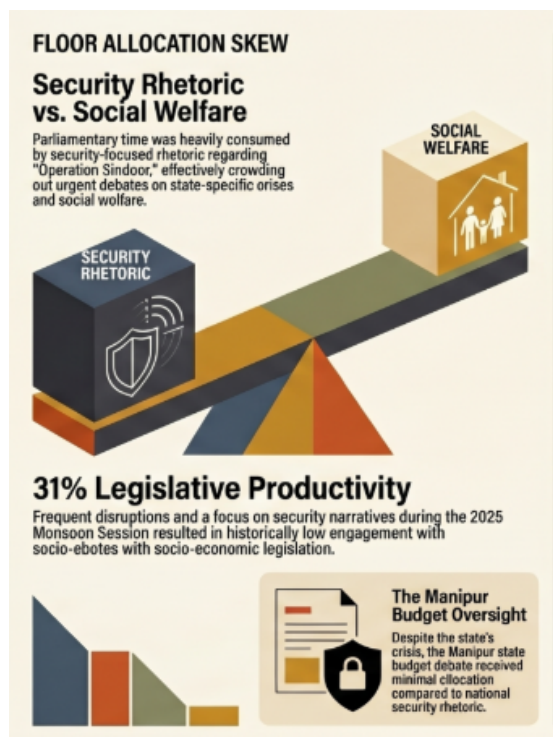
Institutional strain became further visible through the opposition's attempt to move a resolution against the Speaker, a rare procedural escalation rooted in declining confidence in the neutrality of presiding officers (Hebbar, 2026). Such developments suggest erosion of parliamentary conventions that depend not only on constitutional provisions but also on shared norms of impartiality and institutional trust.

Routine legislative functioning also reflected systemic deterioration. The Monsoon Session of 2025 recorded only about 31 per cent productivity in the Lok Sabha owing to repeated disruptions (Jain, 2025), while broader assessments highlighted frequent interruptions and rapid passage of bills with limited debate (The Hindu, 2026b). Simultaneously, debates

surrounding Operation Sindoor dominated parliamentary time during the Monsoon Session (PRS Legislative Research, 2025d), limiting sustained engagement with socio-economic legislation and regional concerns.

Figure 3

Parliamentary Time Allocation and Productivity



Source: Based on PRS Legislative Research (2025); Jain (2025); NDTV (2025).

Visualization and compilation: Generated by the author.

Taken together, the parliamentary dynamics of 2025–26 reveal a paradoxical institutional trajectory. Coalition arithmetic preserved important parliamentary checks, as demonstrated by the defeat of a major constitutional amendment, yet declining deliberative quality, procedural mistrust, and repeated disruptions weakened Parliament’s ability to function as a forum of sustained democratic negotiation. Consequently, institutional contestation moved beyond legislative disagreement to raise broader questions regarding federal trust, procedural legitimacy, and the resilience of parliamentary norms.

Overview of Unaddressed Policy Gaps & Marginalized Exclusion

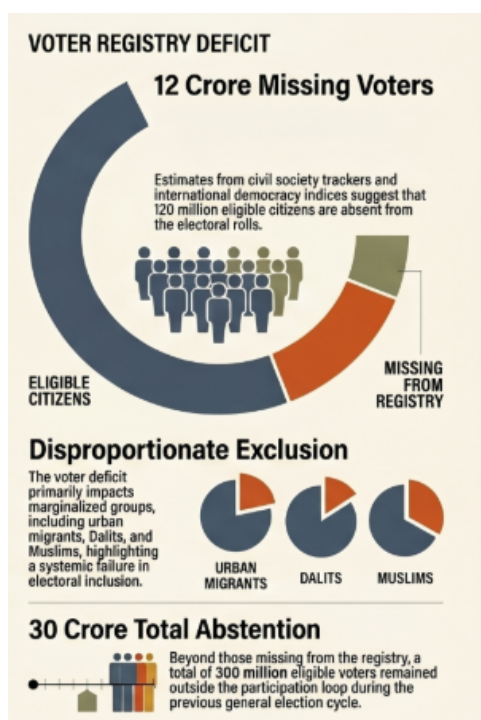
The institutional tensions visible on the parliamentary floor also shaped what Parliament failed to address. While debates in 2025–26 centred on constitutional confrontation and high-profile legislative disputes, several long-standing questions of representation, inclusion, and democratic accountability remained unresolved. These omissions highlight not only policy delay but also the uneven priorities of legislative engagement within the 18th Lok Sabha.

The continued delay in implementing the Women’s Reservation Act (2023), which guarantees 33 per cent reservation in legislatures, remains a key concern. Since its

enforcement is linked to delimitation based on the 2011 Census, the defeat of the delimitation package and lack of updated census data have postponed women’s representation indefinitely (PRS Legislative Research, 2026a). Critics argue that this conditionality converts a constitutional guarantee into a deferred commitment, sustaining women’s underrepresentation (Free Press Journal, 2026).

Electoral participation also remains uneven. Around 30 crore eligible voters abstained from the 2019 general elections, with migrants, urban residents, and marginalised communities disproportionately excluded (The Hindu, 2023). Independent estimates further suggest that nearly 13 crore people may be missing from electoral rolls, many from vulnerable groups such as Dalits and Muslims (SabrangIndia, 2023). Allegations of large-scale voter deletions during West Bengal’s 2026 electoral roll revisions intensified concerns over disenfranchisement and weaknesses in voter registration systems (The Guardian, 2026).

Figure 4
Electoral Inclusion and Registry Disparities



Source: Based on Sabrang India (2023); The Guardian (2026); The Hindu (2023).
Visualization and compilation: Generated by the author.

Institutional oversight has similarly weakened. Fewer than one-third of bills in the 17th Lok Sabha were referred to standing committees, reducing opportunities for scrutiny, consultation, and expert review (PRS Legislative Research, 2024b). This decline risks weakening legislative quality, particularly for complex socio-economic reforms. Viewed alongside unresolved questions of representation and electoral inclusion, the experience of

2025–26 reflected not merely procedural conflict but a broader pattern of selective democratic engagement, where legislative energy concentrated around political confrontation while structural reforms affecting participation and accountability remained deferred.

Way Forward

To navigate the structural frictions of the 18th Lok Sabha, India requires a concerted, multi-stakeholder pivot toward institutional renewal and federal equity. For public policy architects, the primary focus could be restoring legislative rigor by making parliamentary standing committee scrutiny standard for major bills, which would allow more time for comprehensive evaluation.

Furthermore, policymakers might consider decoupling the implementation of the Women's Reservation Act from the delimitation exercise, ensuring that gender representation is not delayed by demographic adjustments. To address the complexities surrounding future delimitation, a consensus-based framework could be designed to balance democratic representation with the interests of states that have achieved population stabilization.

Simultaneously, civil society and grassroots stakeholders have a constructive role to play in supporting institutional oversight. Civic groups and independent research bodies can assist by conducting data-driven reviews of electoral rolls to ensure the comprehensive inclusion of migrants and marginalized communities. Additionally, civil society can monitor the implementation of deregulatory frameworks like the Jan Vishwas Act to verify that administrative fines maintain adequate deterrence for public safety compliance. Ultimately, the evolving dynamic of the current Parliament provides an opportunity for collaborative reform, creating a space where institutional trust can be strengthened, federal balances maintained, and the legislative process utilized as a forum for inclusive deliberation.

Endnotes

139. Anand, U. (2026, April 14). "Blinded due to impending elections": Supreme Court flags "logical discrepancy" in Bengal voter roll revision | India News. Hindustan Times.
<https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/top-court-flags-logical-discrepancy-in-west-bengal-voter-roll-revision-101776109450967.html>
140. Business Standard. (2026, April 16). Delimitation and proportionality: Why southern states are raising concerns. Retrieved from
https://www.business-standard.com/india-news/delimitation-india-bill-population-south-states-tamil-nadu-dmk-lok-sabha-126041600117_1.html
141. Dahiya, H. (2026, April 7). 27 Lakh Deleted: Bengal's Voter Purge is Clustered In Minority & TMC Bastions. TheQuint; The Quint.
<https://www.thequint.com/news/politics/west-bengal-final-voter-list-deletions-2026-elections-muslims-and-tmc-voters-targeted>
142. Devdiscourse News Desk. (2025, December 5). Changes and Challenges: Electoral Roll Revision in West Bengal | Association for Democratic Reforms. Adrindia.org.
<https://adrindia.org/content/changes-and-challenges-electoral-roll-revision-in-west-bengal>
143. Free Press Journal. (2026, April 17). Women's reservation and delimitation: Reform or political recalibration? Retrieved from

- <https://www.freepressjournal.in/analysis/womens-reservation-and-delimitation-reform-or-political-recalibration>
144. Government of India. (2025). The Indian Ports Bill, 2025.
https://prsindia.org/files/bills_acts/bills_parliament/2025/Text_Indian_Ports_Bill_2025.pdf
 145. Hebbar, S. P. (2026, March 10). Lok Sabha takes up resolution seeking removal of Speaker Om Birla. The Hindu.
<https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/lok-sabha-takes-up-resolution-seeking-removal-of-speaker-om-birla/article70727164.ece>
 146. Hindustan Times. (2026, April 16). What is delimitation bill, concerns over north vs south divide. Retrieved from
<https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/what-delimitation-exercise-concerns-over-north-vs-south-divide-and-why-is-oppn-protesting-it-explained-101776252030612.html>
 147. Income Tax Department. (n.d.). New tax regime vs old tax regime FAQs.
<https://www.incometax.gov.in/iec/foportal/help/new-tax-vs-old-tax-regime-faqs>
 148. Jain, A. (2025). Monsoon Session Ends Amid Disruptions, Just 31% Productivity In Lok Sabha. NDTV.
<https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/monsoon-session-ends-amid-disruptions-just-31-productivity-in-lok-sabha-9132040>
 149. Jain, B. (2026, April 12). With 10.9% net voter deletions, Bengal 5th among 12 states, UTs. The Times of India; The Times Of India.
<https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/with-10-9-net-voter-deletions-bengal-5th-among-12-states-uts/articleshow/130219874.cms>
 150. Jeelani, G. (2026a, April 10). 91 lakh voters deleted in SIR: Hindus hit in numbers, Muslims in proportion — What’s happening in West Bengal? Mint.
<https://www.livemint.com/elections/assembly-elections/91-lakh-voters-deleted-in-sir-hindus-hit-in-numbers-muslims-in-proportion-what-s-happening-in-west-bengal-mamata-11775796829202.html>
 151. Jeelani, G. (2026b, April 15). “Math isn’t mathing”: IIM Calcutta Prof shares shocking SIR voter deletion story ahead of West Bengal elections. Mint.
<https://www.livemint.com/elections/assembly-elections/math-isn-t-mathing-iim-calcutta-professor-shares-shocking-sir-voter-deletion-story-ahead-of-west-bengal-elections-bjp-ec-11776217200454.html>
 152. Mathur, A. (2026, April 16). Deleted Bengal voters can vote if tribunals clear their appeals: Supreme Court. India Today.
<https://www.indiatoday.in/india/law-news/story/supreme-court-allows-west-bengal-voters-to-appeal-exclusions-2897216-2026-04-16>
 153. Mint. (2024). Income tax return: What is your default tax regime—new or old?
<https://www.livemint.com/money/personal-finance/income-tax-return-what-is-your-default-tax-regime-new-or-old-key-things-you-should-know-before-filing-itr-11720103992339.html>
 154. Mitra, R. (2026, April 16). Muslims the target? Fury as millions lose voting rights in India’s Bengal. Al Jazeera.
<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2026/4/16/muslims-the-target-fury-as-millions-lose-voting-rights-in-indias-bengal>
 155. NDTV. (2025, August 21). Monsoon session ends amid disruptions, just 31% productivity in Lok Sabha. Retrieved from
<https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/monsoon-session-ends-amid-disruptions-just-31-productivity-in-lok-sabha-9132040>
 156. NDTV. (2026, April 15). Why delimitation has become a flashpoint between Centre and southern states. Retrieved from
<https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/why-delimitation-has-become-flashpoint-between-centre-and-southern-states-11360369>
 157. PIB Delhi. (2025). ECI Revises Schedule for Special Intensive Revision (SIR) of Electoral Rolls in 6 States/UT. Pib.gov.in. <https://www.pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=2202341&lang=2>
 158. PIB Kolkata. (2026). Chief Electoral Officer briefs media on Preparedness for General Election to the West Bengal Legislative Assembly, 2026. Pib.gov.in.
<https://www.pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=2240988&lang=2>
 159. Press Information Bureau. (2025). Press release on Income Tax Bill reforms.
<https://www.pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=2157621>
 160. Press Information Bureau. (2026a). Central Armed Police Forces Bill press release.
<https://www.pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=2248925>

161. Press Information Bureau. (2026b). CAPF Bill parliamentary updates.
<https://www.pib.gov.in/PressReleaseDetail.aspx?PRID=2248925®=3&lang=1>
162. Press Information Bureau. (2026c). Jan Vishwas Amendment Bill press release.
<https://www.pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=2254606>
163. Press Information Bureau. (2026d). Legislative update.
<https://www.pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=2248831>
164. Press Information Bureau. (2026e). Legislative note.
<https://www.pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=2246226®=3&lang=1>
165. Press Information Bureau. (2026f). Legislative update.
<https://www.pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=2256973®=3&lang=2>
166. Press Information Bureau. (2026g). Press note.
<https://www.pib.gov.in/PressNoteDetails.aspx?NoteId=158002&ModuleId=3®=3&lang=1>
167. PRS Legislative Research. (2024a). Parliamentary performance reviews and session summaries.
<https://prsindia.org>
168. PRS Legislative Research. (2024b). Vital Stats: Functioning of the 17th Lok Sabha.
<https://prsindia.org/parliamenttrack/vital-stats/functioning-of-the-17th-lok-sabha>
169. PRS Legislative Research. (2025a). Legislative brief: Jan Vishwas (Amendment) Bill.
<https://prsindia.org/billtrack/prs-products/prs-legislative-brief-1753419839>
170. PRS Legislative Research. (2025b). PRS bill summary
<https://prsindia.org/billtrack/prs-products/prs-bill-summary-1743681406>
171. PRS Legislative Research. (2025c). The Indian Ports Bill, 2025.
<https://prsindia.org/billtrack/the-indian-ports-bill-2025>
172. PRS Legislative Research. (2025d). Operation Sindoor, disruptions, limited discussion on bills: How Parliament spent Monsoon '25 - The Wire. The Wire.
<https://thewire.in/politics/how-parliament-spent-monsoon-session-2025>
173. PRS Legislative Research. (2026a). The Delimitation Bill, 2026. Retrieved from
<https://prsindia.org/billtrack/the-delimitation-bill-2026>
174. PRS Legislative Research. (2026b). The Central Armed Police Forces (General Administration) Bill, 2026. <https://prsindia.org/billtrack/the-central-armed-police-forces-general-administration-bill-2026>
175. Rajpurohit, S. (2026, April 14). "Bid to move us to Bangladesh": At the Bengal poll booths where every second voter is gone. Newslandry.
<https://www.newslandry.com/amp/story/2026%2F04%2F14%2Fbid-to-move-us-to-bangladesh-at-the-bengal-poll-booths-where-every-second-voter-is-gone>
176. Sabrang India. (2023). The missing Indian voter. Retrieved from
<https://sabrangindia.in/the-missing-indian-voter-how-many-crores-of-indians-are-missing-from-the-electoral-rolls/>
177. Sarfaraz, K. (2026, April 12). "We are Chitragupta of the Bengal SIR": Meet the SABAR team tracking deleted voters. Newslandry.
<https://www.newslandry.com/2026/04/12/we-are-chitragupta-of-the-bengal-sir-meet-the-sabar-team-tracking-deleted-voters>
178. Supreme Court Observer. (2026, February 4). Challenge to the ECI's Revision of Electoral Rolls in Bihar - Supreme Court Observer. Supreme Court Observer.
<https://www.scobserver.in/cases/challenge-to-the-ecis-revision-of-electoral-rolls-in-bihar-sir-association-for-democratic-reforms-v-election-commission-of-india/>
179. The Guardian. (2026, April 22). Millions in India stripped of vote before election. Retrieved from
<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2026/apr/22/india-west-bengal-state-elections-millions-stripped-of-vote>
180. The Hindu. (2023, February 11). 30 crore missing voters in India. Retrieved from
<https://www.thehindu.com/data/data-30-crore-missing-voters-in-india-mostly-young-urban-or-migrants/article66485421.ece>
181. The Hindu. (2025, August 11). Real-money games firms quietly assess bill banning their industry; video game firms welcome move.
<https://www.thehindu.com/business/Industry/real-money-games-firms-quietly-assess-bill-banning-their-industry-video-game-firms-welcome-move/article69956318.ece>
182. The Hindu. (2026a). Opposition MPs say Bill intends to demoralise CAPF; BJP defends the proposed legislation.
<https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/opposition-mps-say-bill-intends-to-demoralise-capf-bjp-defends-the-proposed-legislation/article70803581.ece>

183. The Hindu. (2026b). Understanding the delimitation exercise. Retrieved from <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/understanding-the-delimitation-exercise-explained/article67819203.ece>
184. The Hindu. (2026c). How did Parliament fare in 2025? Retrieved from <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/parliament-sessions-2025-productivity-bills-laws-passed-disruptions/article70449784.ece>
185. The New Indian Express. (2026, March 25). Centre introduces CAPF Administration Bill in Rajya Sabha rejecting opposition notices. <https://www.newindianexpress.com/india/2026/Mar/25/centre-introduces-capf-administration-bill-in-rajya-sabha-rejecting-opposition-notice>
186. Times of India. (2025, August). Online Gaming Bill 2025: BCCI breaks tie with Dream11. <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/sports/cricket/news/online-gaming-bill-2025-bcci-breaks-tie-with-dream11-says-will-not-indulge-with-such-organisations-in-future/articleshow/123495398.cms>
187. Times of India. (2026, April). Jan Vishwas Bill 2026: Replacing fear with trust, but deterrence must endure. <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/legal/news/jan-vishwas-bill-2026-replacing-fear-with-trust-but-deterrence-must-endure/articleshow/130164006.cms>
188. TOI News Desk. (2026, April 7). "List stands frozen": Nearly 91 lakh voters deleted from Bengal rolls after SIR. The Times of India; The Times Of India. <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/list-stands-frozen-nearly-91-lakh-voters-deleted-from-bengal-rolls-after-sir/articleshow/130078141.cms>

Budget and Financial Accountability

Viksit Bharat: The Key Reflection on the Union Budget 2026-27

Intro: The budget must not be seen by headline growth figures, but by its capacity to address structural employment deficits, revive household incomes, and strengthen public provisioning.

The Union Budget for 2026-27 was presented in the context of the government narratives of high economic growth and strong economic fundamentals alongside persistent unemployment, informalisation of work, and shrinking social sector spending. While official headline indicators show macroeconomic stability, however, the lived economic realities of workers in the unorganized sector, tell a more troubling story. The budget must therefore not be seen by headline growth figures, but by its capacity to address structural employment deficits, revive household incomes, and strengthen public provisioning.

It is found that India's recent growth trajectory has not translated into adequate employment generation opportunities. The organised-sector expansion, which often gets reflected in GDP growth and stock market performance, only captures the small contribution of a narrow segment of the economy. At the same time, nearly 90 per cent of India's workforce remains concentrated in the unorganised sector. The cumulative impact of a series of economic shocks, including demonetisation, faulty GST implementation, the COVID-19 pandemic, and financial sector stress, has eroded livelihoods of informal sector, small producers, and self-employed workers. Policy responses have disproportionately favoured capital-intensive sectors, leaving employment creation largely incidental rather than central to economic planning. Amidst this, concerns are being raised about unemployment and the growing disconnect between policy narratives and budgetary allocation.

Additionally, there is a decline in policy attention towards the social and economic sector (education, health, agriculture and farmers welfare). There is a gradual shift away from right based MGNREGA towards discretionary rural employment initiatives like Viksit Bharat-Guarantee for Rozgar and Ajeevika Mission (Gramin) type schemes, signalling a retreat from guaranteed employment as a state obligation. Further, the rapid growth in the number of educated youths without commensurate employment opportunities poses a serious risk to social and economic stability. Recently, the government introduced new labour codes aimed at improving workers' conditions by ensuring better wages, improved working environments, and social security.

However, another important issue is that current economic growth has failed to generate sufficient employment opportunities. Since technology is increasingly replacing labour,

unemployment remains high. Although production is increasing, employment is not growing at the same pace. Economic growth of 6–7 per cent should ideally create at least 8 million jobs annually.

Key Fiscal Indicators

The government has reiterated its commitment to reforms across multiple sectors, including agriculture, land governance, taxation, trade expansion, incentives for private sector investment, welfare delivery, research and development, capital expenditure enhancement, and fiscal deficit reduction. The Union Budget, 2026-27 demonstrate the low fiscal space in ongoing fiscal consolidation process.

Total expenditure as a share of GDP has declined from 17.7 per cent in 2020–21 to 13.6 per cent in 2026–27 (BE), reflecting post-pandemic expenditure compression. Revenue expenditure has similarly fallen from 15.5 per cent of GDP in 2020–21 to 10.5 per cent in 2026–27 (BE), largely due to reduced subsidies and tighter control over social sector spending. In contrast, capital expenditure has increased significantly from 2.1 per cent of GDP in 2020–21 to 3.2 per cent in 2024–25, before marginally declining to 3.1 per cent in 2026–27 (BE). Despite this slight reduction, capital expenditure remains at historically high levels, highlighting the government's emphasis on infrastructure-led growth led by private sector companies.

The government's debt position also shows gradual improvement. Outstanding liabilities are projected at ₹214.8 lakh crore in 2026–27 (BE), while the debt-to-GDP ratio is expected to decline from 60.7 per cent in 2020–21 to 54.7 per cent in 2026–27 (BE). This aligns with the medium-term target of reducing debt to 50 ± 1 per cent of GDP by 2030. However, interest payments continue to impose a significant burden on public finances. Interest payments are estimated at ₹14.04 lakh crore in 2026–27 (BE), accounting for 26 per cent of total expenditure and nearly 40 per cent of revenue receipts. This indicates that debt servicing continues to exert considerable pressure on the government's fiscal space and limits the scope for developmental expenditure.

The Union Government's fiscal indicators for budget 2026–27 reflect a continued commitment to fiscal consolidation under the framework of the Fiscal Responsibility and Budget Management Act of 2003. The fiscal deficit for 2026–27 (BE) is targeted at 4.3 per cent of GDP, showing a marginal improvement from 4.4 per cent in 2025–26 (RE). This marks a significant reduction from the pandemic-induced peak of 9.2 per cent of GDP in 2020–21, indicating the government's gradual return to fiscal discipline. Similarly, the revenue deficit for 2026–27 is estimated at 1.5 per cent of GDP, unchanged from the previous year, with an absolute value of ₹5.92 lakh crore. The persistence of the revenue deficit suggests that the government still relies on borrowings to finance a portion of its revenue expenditure.

The ratio of total receipts to GDP has steadily declined from 17.7 per cent in 2020–21 to an estimated 13.6 per cent in 2026–27 (BE), reflecting the withdrawal of pandemic-related borrowings and relatively slower revenue growth. Revenue receipts remain below 10 per cent of GDP, increasing from 8.2 per cent in 2020–21 to 9.4 per cent in 2025–26 (RE), but are projected to decline slightly to 9.0 per cent in 2026–27 (BE), indicating weakening tax buoyancy. Capital receipts, which had surged during the pandemic due to heavy borrowing, are estimated at 4.6 per cent of GDP in 2026–27, highlighting reduced dependence on borrowings as part of the consolidation strategy. On the taxation front, gross tax revenue is projected at 11.2 per cent of GDP in 2026–27 (BE). Although this reflects gradual improvement over time, India's tax-to-GDP ratio remains comparatively low relative to peer economies. Tax buoyancy, which remained strong at around 1.3 between 2020–21 and 2024–25, is expected to decline to 0.9 in 2025–26 (RE) and further to 0.8 in 2026–27 (BE). This suggests that tax revenue growth is lagging behind nominal GDP growth, raising concerns regarding revenue mobilization efficiency.

Social Sector Spending

Poor revenue mobilisation leads to inadequate fiscal space for social and economic sector spending in the country. In 2026-27, the Department of Rural Development has been allocated Rs 194368.81 crore, which is only 3.40 per cent lower than the budget estimates of 2025-26. However, the increased allocation was made towards a newly enacted law/programme called Viksit Bharat-Guarantee for Rozgar and Ajeevika Mission (Gramin)-VB-G RAM G Scheme and National Rural Livelihood Mission. The MGNREGA has been replaced with VB-G RAM G Scheme and it will work as a Centrally Sponsored Scheme. Now, the states have to pay more matching contributions to the programme (40 per cent of the total allocation) except 11 specific states (90:10). Under MGNREGA, the central government paid the entire wage and 75 per cent of material and administrative cost. The Sub rule4(1) of the draft rules of the VB-G RAM G scheme says that “for the purpose of determining allocation for each financial year, the central government shall adopt objective parameters used for horizontal devolution among states as recommended by the Sixteen Finance Commission and adopted by the government of India. The parameters include population, with a weight of 17.5 per cent, demographic performance, area, forest cover and contribution to GDP (10 per cent for each) and per capita GSDP (42.5 percent). The additional criteria of performance-based budget allocation will be evolved in future taking into consideration of timely wage payment, social audit compliance and percentage of completion of work within the financial year.

As MGNREGS was a demand driven scheme; the expenditure rises and falls in response to demand for work in rural areas. The National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, 2005 provides for 100 days of guaranteed wage employment in a financial year for adults of rural households. Any individual who demands work through the scheme is entitled to a daily unemployment allowance if work is not provided within 15 days. The projects taken up under the scheme include those related to digging canals for irrigation, construction of Anganwadi

centres, plantation drives, water supply and sanitation. Under VB-G RAM G Scheme, the nature of work and timing of the work will be decided by Union government. For 2026-27, the MGNREGA scheme has been allocated Rs 30,000 crore, Rs.95692.31 crore for VB-G RAM G Scheme.

PMAY (G) was launched in 2016 to address gaps in the demand and supply of rural housing. It aimed to ensure housing for all by 2022. Based on the Socio Economic and Caste Census (SECC), 2011, the housing shortage in rural areas was estimated to be 4.03 crore. For 2026-27, the scheme has been allocated Rs 54,916 crore and it is same as budget estimate of 2025-26. However, as per revised estimate for 2025-26, the budget has reduced to Rs.32500 crore and it shows funds allocated to the scheme might not be utilised. The Ministry in a reply to the Standing Committee (2024), had given reasons for unspent balances, such as: (i) states releasing both central and their own share simultaneously towards end of the financial year, and (ii) expenditure being affected by seasonal factors such as prolonged monsoon.

Table 1: Allocation and Expenditure by Major Schemes under Department of Rural Development

Select Schemes of DoRD	2021-22 (A)	2022-23 (A)	2023-24 A	2024-25 (A)	2025-26 BE	2025-26 RE	2026-27(BE)
MGNREGA	98468	90806	89154	85834	86000	86000	30000
VB-G RAM G Scheme							95692.31
NRLM	9383	11536	13934	14705.30	9005	16000	19200
PMAY-G	30057	44962	21770	32326.5	54832	32500	54916.70
PMGSY	13992	18783	15380	17870.9	19000	11000	19000

Source: Data compiled from union budget document various years.

The National Social Assistance Programme was introduced in 1995, to extend support to citizens who are destitute, aged, sick, or disabled. It comprises of five sub-schemes, (i) Indira Gandhi National Old Age Pension Scheme (IGNOAPS), (ii) Indira Gandhi National Widow Pension Scheme (IGNWPS), (iii) Indira Gandhi National Disability Pension Scheme (IGNDPS), (iv) National Family Benefit Scheme, and the (v) Annapurna scheme. The scheme extends across rural and urban areas, and is implemented by states. The scheme has been allocated Rs 9,671 crore in 2026-27, almost similar to the budget allocation for the

previous fiscal year. The allocation includes Rs 6904.90 crore for the old age pension scheme, Rs 400 crore for the National Family Benefit Scheme, Rs 2026.99 crore for the widow pension scheme, Rs 290 crore for the disability pension scheme, and Rs 10 crore for the Annapurna scheme.

Currently, NSAP consists of five sub-schemes. Under the **Indira Gandhi National Old Age Pension Scheme (IGNOAPS)**, individuals aged 60 years and above from households living below the poverty line are eligible for assistance. Beneficiaries aged 60–79 years receive a central pension of **₹200 per month**, while those aged 80 years and above receive **₹500 per month**.

Considering inflation and the rising cost of living, the real value of this assistance has been significantly eroded. Prices of essential goods and services have increased substantially over the years, making these pension amounts inadequate. A research study commissioned by the Ministry of Rural Development suggested that, after adjusting for inflation, the pension amounts should be increased from ₹200 and ₹500 to approximately **₹389 and ₹955**, respectively. Similarly, under the **Indira Gandhi National Widow Pension Scheme (IGNWPS)**, widows aged 40–79 years belonging to below-poverty-line households receive **₹300 per month**, while beneficiaries aged 80 years and above receive **₹500 per month**. Taking inflation into account, these amounts should ideally be increased to approximately **₹550 and ₹955**, respectively.

Spending on Education and Health

The current spending on education and health constitute only around 3 per cent and 2 per cent of GDP. With rising economic growth, both the central and state governments should increase public investment in the social sector, especially education, so that spending on education reaches 6 per cent of GDP or 20 per cent of the total budget expenditure. Compared to other developing countries, government expenditure on education in India remains very low.

To achieve a Gross Enrollment Ratio (GER) of 100 per cent by 2030, around 32.2 million children between the ages of 6 and 17 will need to be brought back to school. To improve educational quality, the student-teacher ratio should be maintained at 30:1, as specified in the Right to Education Act, 2009. The National Education Policy 2020 also emphasizes increasing the education budget and improving educational standards. Leaders of the ruling party often promote the slogan “*Sabka Saath, Sabka Vikas, Sabka Vishwas*” and the vision of making India a developed nation by 2047. Achieving this goal will require special attention to education and skill development.

The educational and economic advancement of Dalits, Adivasis, and minorities is essential for achieving the goal of a developed India. However, the large section of SC, ST and religious minority population of the country faces discrimination in government policies and

budget allocations related to education and economic development. Among minorities, Muslims remain the most educationally backward social group. Dropout rates among Muslim children rise significantly after primary and secondary education, which is why Muslim students lag far behind in higher education. To support minorities, the central government had approved schemes such as Pre-Matric Scholarships, Post-Matric Scholarships, Merit-cum-Means Scholarships, and the Maulana Azad Fellowship in January 2008. These schemes were implemented in recognized private and government schools. However, from the financial year 2022–23 onward, most of these schemes are not being implemented properly.

Beyond GDP Growth Alone

Achieving the vision of a developed India by 2047 requires a broader development strategy that goes beyond GDP growth and private-sector-led expansion. Sustainable and inclusive development depends on strong state intervention, public investment in human capital, employment generation, and balanced growth across agriculture, industry, and services. The government must focus on creating productive jobs for youth, strengthening household incomes, encouraging savings and investment, and improving productivity and competitiveness, particularly in the face of rising global trade challenges such as higher US tariffs.

Public investment in education, healthcare, and skill development is essential. Given the increasing cost of privately provided services, public expenditure on education should be raised to 6 per cent of GDP and healthcare spending to 3 per cent of GDP to ensure wider access and social equity. Strengthening social infrastructure can generate higher economic returns while improving human development outcomes.

The replacement of MGNREGA with The Viksit Bharat-Guarantee for Rozgar and Ajeevika Mission (Gramin) (VB-G RAM G) Act, 2025, are presented as part of a broader institutional restructuring effort. However, the introduction of an urban employment guarantee scheme, increased public investment in education and Research & Development, and a rethinking of development indicators beyond GDP.

The government should address the concerns regarding capital outflows, declining export competitiveness, currency depreciation, and the need for transparent tax reforms and fiscal discipline. Exporters should be supported through market diversification, value addition, and targeted incentives. Furthermore, policy formulation and budget consultations should become more democratic by involving civil society organizations, grassroots practitioners, and independent experts. While economic reforms are important, the state's role in ensuring inclusive, equitable, and sustainable development remains indispensable. Future development planning should therefore prioritize employment, social protection, public investment, and broader indicators of well-being beyond GDP growth alone.

WADA NA TODO ABHIYAN (WNTA)

is a national campaign focused on promoting government accountability to end poverty, social exclusion, and discrimination. We monitor government performance at national and international levels to ensure that promises and commitments are fulfilled.

WNTA emerged from a consensus amongst human rights activists and social action groups at the World Social Forum in 2004, driven by a desire for focused and concerted efforts to try making a difference in India. As home to one-fourth of the world's poor, India faces significant challenges in providing opportunities for all to learn, live and work with dignity.

To advocate for citizen concerns, WNTA annually reviews the government's performance against electoral promises and constitutional mandates. WNTA also develops a People's Manifesto before elections to ensure that citizen aspirations are reflected in party agendas. Additionally, WNTA works to ensure India's commitment to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development Goals and the "Leave No One Behind" principle.

Email: info.wadanatodo@gmail.com, secretariat.wnta@gmail.com wadanatodo.net