# Promises & Reality

Citizen Review of
Year 1 of
NDA III Government
2024-2025

Coordinated by
**Wada Na Todo Abhiyan**

# PROMISES & REALITY 2025

## CITIZEN REVIEW OF THE YEAR 1 OF THE NDA III GOVERNMENT

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# Note from Convenors

Wada Na Todo Abhiyan is a campaign formed by 3000+ Civil Society Organisations in 2004 to promote governance accountability while reflecting the needs and voices of marginalised communities. One of our key, consistent contributions has been this collaborative report that annually reviews the elected union government's performance across sectors, issues, and communities, assessing it against electoral promises and Constitutional mandates.

The first such review was conducted in 2005 of the UPA-I, followed by annual reviews in subsequent years. Over time, we have also published consolidated reviews of 9 years of UPA (I & II), 4 years of NDA-I, 4 years of NDA-II. Most recently, in October 2024, we released '100 days of NDA-III'.

Continuing this effort, we now present **Promises & Reality: Citizen Review of Year 1 of NDA III government**, an independent citizens' review of the current government's first year in office. This year's report spans nearly 30 chapters, organised across four broad themes: the status of democracy, development, governance, and marginalised communities. It seeks to offer a comprehensive, inclusive, and grounded analysis of governance during this period, with a sharp focus on how public policy and institutional actions are shaping the lives of India's most vulnerable citizens.

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

Each edition of this report has reaffirmed the imperative to uphold economic, social, and civil rights - including the freedom of expression, right to life, and personal liberty - at a time when civic space continues to shrink and new challenges emerge across sectors and communities.

These same challenges have also impacted the production of this report, which has grown increasingly difficult in recent years. Yet, it remains a sincere labour of commitment to ensuring that citizen voices are included in governance and policy dialogue.

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

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

*Convenors,*
*Wada Na Todo Abhiyan*

# Executive Summary

This report is a collaborative civil society effort to present an assessment of the first year of the NDA 3 Government. The government has claimed that the past 11 years, where an NDA-led government has been in power at the centre, have resulted in transformative development and established new standards of good governance. During the press briefing marking the government completing the first year of its third term, the period since 2014 was characterised as a 'shift from negativism to optimism', emphasizing the government's work towards good governance and welfare of the poor. This review offers a critical assessment of the government's achievements and attempts to highlight persistent challenges in effective democracy, governance, socio-economic development, and the well-being of marginalized communities.

*STATUS OF DEVELOPMENT*

*The government announced the launch of ₹3 lakh crore projects, including a ₹49,000 crore scheme for rural road connectivity, in the first 100 days. This is in line with its continuing achievements in infrastructure development like the metro network expanding beyond 1,000 km in the past 11 years. Government estimates also tout India as a global economic powerhouse – leading in real-time digital transactions globally, improved in ease of doing business, and projected as the fastest-growing major economy.*

There are concerns, though, about the government's low priority for R&D investments and consistent support to a chosen few who receive the works to develop ports, airports, mines and real estate, and its detrimental impact on productive manufacturing and technological innovation *(An urgent need to shift gears: State of our Economy & Finance)*. There is also ample precedent depicting that such projects lead to forced evictions without adequate rehabilitation, revealing that large infrastructure projects may not adequately address the needs of vulnerable populations *(When Inducing Homelessness (and Hopelessness) is a Policy)*.

There is a call for a more community-centric evaluation, to achieve effective and efficient implementation frameworks for rural road schemes *(Tribal Communities Face Land Rights, Education, Poverty, and Employment Challenges)*. Caution is also advised against campaigns such as the Dharti Aaba Janjatiya Gram Utkarsh Abhiyan, which undermine the Forest Rights Act's (FRA) primary legislative intent of rectifying historical injustice and risks turning forest rights data into a tool for land commodification by enabling faster infrastructure clearances and private sector investments at the cost of community control *(Restore the Principles of Justice, Participatory Governance, and Community Sovereignty)*.

Claims of surpassing Japan in GDP ignore India's low per capita income, which, when accounted for, places it in the lower-middle-income bracket. There is weakening demand and slowing urban consumption, indicating that the consumer class is not widening sufficiently, with luxury sales increasing while mass consumption remains mute. While corporate profits reached a 15-year high in 2023-24, wage growth has not kept pace, and employment expanded by a mere 1.5%, signifying a 'job-loss' growth model and stagnant incomes. Even as the government contests the Global Multidimensional Poverty Index, where India tops with 23.4 crore citizens below an already low poverty line, the economic trends observed from multiple sources reveal plummeting household savings and rising indebtedness *(An urgent need to shift gears: State of our Economy & Finance)*, *(Decimation of Labour Rights is Reflective of the 'Backsliding' of India)*.

Despite these pressing challenges and persistent historical inequities preventing development, there is a dip observed in social sector spending. Education's share of the Union Budget dropped from 3.3% to 2.5% of GDP, and health allocations remain stagnant at 0.3% of GDP, indicating a dwindling commitment to human resource development *(Union Budget 2025–26 Analysis: Insights into Social and Economic Sector Priorities)*. The Union government is transferring a lesser share of resources to states for health and continuously cutting the budget for the National Health Mission, despite its crucial role in saving lives *(Modi-care: Standing on the shoulders of states)*.

*The government noted expanded welfare outreach as an achievement, citing 81 crore people receiving free food grains under PM Garib Kalyan Anna Yojana.* While that is the mandate under the National Food Security Act, 2013, nearly 13 crore eligible individuals are excluded from food benefits due to outdated census data. Budgetary allocations for nutrition schemes show nominal increases that fall short when adjusted for inflation. Furthermore, food grains are diverted for ethanol production, raising concerns about prioritizing fuel over food security *(Need to Tackle Hunger and Malnutrition with Urgency, Equity, and Empathy).* Despite progress under the Jal Jeevan Mission, which reached almost 80% rural households with tap water, and the Swachh Bharat Mission's success in achieving ODF Plus status in many villages, infrastructure vulnerability persists and there is a continued lack of a comprehensive life cycle approach in addressing sanitation issues which require a shift to safer decentralized options *(A Life Cycle Approach in Sanitation and Waste Water Management is Missing).*

While *the government lists crossing 1 billion tonnes of coal production in FY 2024-25 as a major achievement towards enhancing energy security and reducing dependence on imports*, the report discusses how this presents a paradox in India's climate governance where progressive rhetoric collides with regressive actions. These advancements reveal troubling contradictions to India existing climate commitments. Recent policies have resulted in the dilution of environmental laws citing the Forest (Conservation) Rules, 2022, and the Forest Conservation (Amendment) Act, 2023, which permit private entities to acquire forest land for projects without community consent. Further, there are critical implementation shortcomings faced in addressing air and water pollution which have resulted in limited improvement despite significant investments. *(Environmental Enforcement doesn't Match Ambitions).*

*There has been an increase in seismic observatories from 80 in 2014 to 168 by February 2025, which has been noted by the government as an achievement for making India more disaster-reliant.* However, noting that there have been nearly three thousand (2936) disaster-related deaths in 2024-25 *(India Still Far from the Goals of Equality, Inclusion and Justice)*, the report critiques how financial policies remain ill-equipped for routine climate extremes and inadequate in addressing the multidimensional impacts faced by vulnerable communities *(An urgent need to shift gears: State of our Economy & Finance).*

While the government is continuing steadily on its trend of infrastructure push for economic development set in the past decade, the findings of this report emphasize that these achievements are accompanied by unaddressed structural issues, insufficient equitable impact, and implementation shortcomings, raising concerns about the true beneficiaries of growth and the potential for increased marginalization.

*STATUS OF MARGINALISED COMMUNITIES*

*The government claims extensive welfare outreach, with achievements like completing over 4 crore homes under Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana (PMAY).* However, this progress is hindered by outdated 2011 census data, risks of eviction, and housing models misaligned with residents' needs. Migrant workers remain especially marginalized with limited access to basic services like decent housing, sanitation, and healthcare *(When Inducing Homelessness (and Hopelessness) is a Policy).*

While *52 crore Mudra Yojana loans and support for 68 lakh street vendors under PM SVANidhi are cited as achievements*, street vendors still face rampant pan-India eviction despite existing schemes in the face of inadequate social security for all informal workers *(Enhance Financial Allocations for Schemes Benefiting Workers).* Moreover, increased self-employment isn't a sign of rising entrepreneurship but rather stems from necessity, coupled with falling real wages and an increasing gendered wage gap *(Decimation of Labour Rights is Reflective of the 'Backsliding' of India).*

*The government highlights ₹18,593 crore distributed to pregnant and lactating women under PMMVY and the extension of paid maternity leave as key advancements towards women's empowerment.* There is, however, a persistent gender disparity in unpaid caregiving activities and

domestic work, which interferes with women's work participation. Substantial investments were not made for the flagship Mission Shakti umbrella scheme to improve care infrastructure and facilities in the current budget, which reported a 37% rise in gender allocations – but only largely due to inclusion of general, non-exclusive schemes. While safety issues remain a consistent challenge for women, the Nirbhaya Fund is often underspent, and One Stop Centres and police lack proper, sensitive and responsive infrastructure and training *(The Road Towards 70% Women in the Workforce)*. While maternal outcomes have improved, major gaps remain in cancer screening, contraception access, and reach of schemes – especially for women lacking ID or facing discrimination, including Dalit, Adivasi, Muslim women, and sex *workers (Much Remains to be Done to Ensure Women's Health and Well Being)*.

*The government emphasizes nurturing youth through the National Education Policy (NEP), skill development via PM Kaushal Vikas Yojana, and entrepreneurship support, backed by a ₹2 lakh crore package.* The NEP's implementation, however, faces opposition from several states. There are also concerns about the quality of education and a significant drop in school enrolment observed. *(Rationalisation or Consolidation at the Cost of a Generation)*. Despite training, PM Kaushal Vikas Yojana's placement rates remain low, with many youths lacking employable skills and youth-focused budgetary allocations often remaining unutilized. The draft National Youth Policy focuses heavily on individual responsibility, overlooking structural and systemic issues affecting well-being and employment of diverse youth identities *(Individual Responsibility Overlooks Structural and Systemic Issues)*. Policy commitments for young children also remain unfulfilled due to inadequate public provisioning and meagre budgets *(Convergence, or Merging of Services?)*.

*Listed as a key initiative by the government for tribal empowerment, PM Janjati Unnat Gram Abhiyan aims to benefit approximately 5 crore people in 63,000 villages.* The success of this initiative though would need to rely on departing from the implementation gaps of past initiatives launched for the community. Despite defined targets for connections under PM-JANMAN, only 2,450 of the 7,370 approved rural housing units have been completed, and many targeted habitations still lack piped water connections. More broadly, indicating significant gaps between policy aspirations and ground realities, 40.6% of the Scheduled Tribe population remains below the poverty line and the impacts of FRA continue to be limited due to uneven implementation *(Tribal Communities Face Land Rights, Education, Poverty, and Employment Challenges)*.

The agrarian crisis is also evident in rural India, with real wage growth being negative for rural workers, and demands for a legal guarantee on Minimum Support Price (MSP) and debt waivers remaining unfulfilled. The government's policy direction is seen as favouring the corporatization of agriculture, which could make farming unsustainable for small and marginal farmers *(Agrarian crisis writ large on the body politic of rural India)*.

Challenges of implementation gaps and unaddressed structural issues can be observed persisting in the case of nearly all marginalised communities. Over 77% of sewer and septic tank workers are Dalits, despite government denial of a caste link, and 339 deaths of manual scavengers were recorded in 2022-23 *(India Still Far from the Goals of Equality, Inclusion and Justice)*.

The Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act, 2019, faces challenges such as contradictions with self-identification principles, delays in certificate issuance, and lenient penalties for offenses. Most states have not established safe houses or Garima Grehs for queer individuals facing violence *(Half-hearted Attempts to Include LGBTQIA+ People)*. In addition to budgetary allocations for targeted schemes for Denotified and Nomadic Tribes (DNTs) consistently falls short, recent directive in Madhya Pradesh ordered heightened a nation-wide surveillance and search operations specifically targeting 'wanderers, nomadic, and hunting communities', perpetuating colonial-era criminalization and unconstitutional discrimination. *(Perpetuating the Historical Marginalization of Nomadic Communities)*.

Significant judiciary-driven advancements in rights for Persons with Disabilities (PwDs), such as mandating accessibility in films and public infrastructure, were achieved recently. However, chronic

underfunding and underutilization of disability allocations persist, with the budget for the Department of Empowerment of PwDs stagnating or declining in real terms. Major gaps include political participation, reliance on outdated data, and continued accessibility deficits in public spaces *(From Legislation to Realisation: Assessing Disability Inclusion and Governance)*.

Christians experienced a traumatic period in 2024 with over 840 reported cases of violence fuelled by pro-Hindu religious nationalism, including attacks on clergy, church vandalism, social boycotts, denial of burial rights, and unjust arrests due to fabricated FIRs under anti-conversion laws *(An organised refusal to bury Christian dead).* With unlawful demolitions of properties as extrajudicial punishment, exclusion from voter lists, and targeted political advertisements, discrimination against Muslims is also increasingly prevalent *(Muslims in India: Persisting Challenges and Systemic Concerns).*

The decision to conduct a nationwide caste census has the potential to aid evaluation of unequal access to resources and limited political representation for marginalized groups, though the clarity of its influence on future affirmative action policies remains to be seen.

*STATUS OF DEMOCRACY AND GOVERNANCE*

While **the government projects its continuation of a third term as a marker of political stability**, the 18th Lok Sabha marks a shift where the BJP, for the first time since 2014, governs through alliances, leading to a more accountable Parliament with increased negotiation and dissent. Its legislative output, though, has been the lowest since 1999, characterized by debates and scrutiny rather than swift lawmaking *(The 18th Lok Sabha: A Year of Paradoxes in India's Parliamentary Democracy).*

**The NDA-led government has reiterated its commitment to moving towards 'One Nation One Election' on grounds of governance efficiency, cost reduction, and political stability.** This though is tainted with concerns about it resulting in a weaponization of India's electoral system, potentially leading to electoral autocracies and the selective disenfranchisement of certain denominations. These concerns are especially relevant amid flaring doubts over the integrity of the election system, including claims of a 5 crore vote gap between preliminary and final 2024 turnout which the Election Commission of India (ECI) is yet to respond to. Additionally, there are also concerns about approximately 12 crore Indians, including 4 crore Muslims and 3 crore Dalits, missing from voter lists *(There is a Clear and Present Danger to India's Democracy).*

**Government's progress claims commend decisive reforms and strong responses to national security threats.** However, the government also tightened its grip through digital censorship and legal actions against journalists, under the guise of national security, seemingly weaponizing central agencies against critics. A significant shrinking of civic space can be observed further with repression of peaceful protests and persistent discrimination against religious minorities, including unlawful property demolitions. Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) are facing immense pressure and restrictions under the Foreign Contribution (Regulation) Act (FCRA), with new directives prohibiting foreign-funded NGOs from publishing newsletters without specific government clearance *(Continued Pressure on Civic Space Through Restrictive Regulations).*

The media, intended as a democratic watchdog, is increasingly compromised by corporate-political co-option, transforming into a tool for agendas or sensationalism. Digital censorship has intensified, with government orders to withhold access to accounts of foreign media and journalists, banning channels, and imposing penalties for 'anti-national' content. Legal actions and arrests against independent digital journalists, along with surveillance and censorship of independent content creators critical of the government are reflected in India's ranking of 151 out of 180 countries on the World Press Freedom Index *(Media or Mockery: The Status of Media in the World's Largest Democracy).*

Citing concerns about impartiality, appointments, and its failure to address the shrinking civic space and targeting of human rights defenders and journalists, the National Human Rights Commission is facing a historic downgrade by the UN-linked Global Alliance of National Human Rights Institutions (GANHRI).

*The government narratives present the new criminal codes as reforms designed to overhaul colonial-era laws.* However, these laws continue to retain problematic provisions, akin to sedition, characterized by broad and vague definitions. These measures could criminalize dissent and negatively impact fundamental rights such as freedom of expression, association, and peaceful assembly, thus potentially undermining the rule of law *(Challenges persist for Human Rights, Peace, Security and Access to Justice)*.

A weakening of transparency mechanisms has also been observed, with the effectiveness of the Right to Information (RTI) Act hampered by vacancies and over 4 lakh pending cases. Amendments to the RTI and Digital Personal Data Protection (DPDP) Acts may restrict access to key data, and the Whistle Blowers Act remains unimplemented *(Undermining the anti-corruption framework)*.

The judiciary has provided meaningful, albeit reactive, protections for vulnerable communities, with the Supreme Court emphasizing bail for undertrials and striking down measures like the fact-checking unit. The justice system is though impaired by significant structural deficits, including high judicial vacancies (33% in High Courts, 21% in district courts) and understaffed police and prison systems. Gender and caste representation remain critically low in the judiciary and police forces, and budget allocations are skewed, with per capita legal aid spending struggling to reach ₹7 annually while police expenditure has grown significantly *(Progressive judicial pronouncements should not remain mere promises)*.

*Conclusion*

The government's third term highlights major initiatives in development, welfare, and reform. However, the report underscores key gaps between policy intent and ground realities. Persistent structural challenges continue to affect marginalised communities, and democratic institutions face strains due to reduced transparency and civic space. Economic growth has not translated into widespread employment or equity, and social sector investments remain limited. Without a stronger focus on inclusive implementation and institutional accountability, the broader goals of equitable and sustainable development may continue to remain unfulfilled.

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# OF
# DEVELOPMENT

# An urgent need to shift gears: State of our Economy & Finance

One of the biggest difficulties in evaluating the real health of the economy is to differentiate the wheat from the chaff. While no government is fond of unfavourable data, to suppress the same and peddle only selective and misleading estimates is severely counterproductive to the country's interest. Such distortions only end up obfuscating the reality. And if we do not even acknowledge our problems, there is no question of correct diagnosis. And without a correct diagnosis, our policy prescriptions will only be skewed. The most recent example of such selective and misleading statistics is that of our GDP overtaking that of Japan that led to the claim of us overtaking Japan in terms of the size of our economy. It was parroted immediately by the paid pipers in the media, and an alternative reality was being created. It is the same media that hardly reports on our ranking in the Global Hunger Index, Press Freedom Express, Human Freedom Index or the Democracy Index.

There are only very few who actually question such claims. Only a few who ask what is the meaning of this "achievement" when India's per capita income is one-thirteenth of Japan's in nominal dollars. Our GDP is a reflection of our sheer size being the most populated country in the world. But if we divide the GDP by the population our per capita GDP places us at the lower end of the list of "lower middle-income countries", even behind Sri Lanka, Vietnam or Bhutan. GDP says little about how people actually live. Hence we need to always sit with a pinch of salt or more when it comes to separating the fantastic claims of the government and the reality. We must read between the lines.

## Reading between the lines

At a time when Kumbh was the preferred suffix to anything that the government took part in we saw the gala event called Start Up Mahakumbh. And its high point was Minister Piyush Goyal commenting on the lack of innovation and its over-reliance on cheap labour for delivery apps. This moment said a lot about the state of the Indian economy today. While a debate ensued on the comments of the Minister, but to be frank, this is precisely the kind of footloose labour and informalisation of work that the government seems to have encouraged over the years. In the absence of serious manufacturing, this is precisely the kind of low paying and precarious service sector jobs that the government seems to have encouraged. The last Economic Survey for instance not only recognizes that regular salaried jobs are falling and self-employment is growing by leaps, it in fact celebrates it as a virtue. "This shift reflects growing entrepreneurial activity and a preference for flexible work arrangements", it says.

The recent Economic Review in the RBI's Annual Report also attests to the same crisis. Though otherwise sprinkled with rather positive adjectives, if one reads closely, the concerns reveal themselves. It recognises that urban demand, which so far has been the driver of post-pandemic consumption, has lost pace "as reflected in indicators such as consumer non-durables, retail passenger vehicle sales and FMCG volumes in urban areas." It acknowledges that the manufacturing sector (which accounts for 80% of the industrial sector) moderated to 4.3% in 2024-25 which was mirrored in a slowdown of profitability in the corporate manufacturing sector. Industrial output, as measured by the index of industrial production (IIP), moderated also during 2024-25. While industrial activity slowed and services sector growth moderated, it was agriculture that came to the rescue to some extent. Consequently, it is the proportion of self-employed people in the workforce that has been increasing consistently since 2018-19 while the share of regular wage/salaried employees still remains lower than pre-pandemic level. No doubt that we are

witnessing an abundance of low paying precarious gig workers willing to exploit themselves and deliver in ten minutes.

So, much of Piyush Goyal's diatribe was also a reflection of his own government's failure. It is also a reflection of the government's low priority for R&D investments and its cronyism wherein its brazen support to a chosen few it seems is also killing innovation. The chosen few are happy to receive ports, airports, mines and real estate on a platter, productive manufacturing and technological innovation has taken a backseat. No doubt that though we have produced a record number of billionaires in the last few years, those at the top still don't come from tech. What we have witnessed is a lost decade in manufacturing which is attested by the increasing reliance on agriculture (now employing 46.1% of workers). No one in the government speaks of Make in India anymore.

### Dwindling demand: Warning signs for the economy

One may ask why do Indian industrialists and big corporations not invest in manufacturing despite getting corporate tax breaks and production linked incentives etc. Because unlike the public sector, the private corporations do not invest in "national interest", they invest if they see scope for profit. And sadly the reality is that out of our 1.4 billion population around a billion lack money to spend on any discretionary goods or services. A recent report has shown that our consuming class "is not *widening* as much as it is *deepening*" meaning while the rich are consuming, the basket of consumers is not really increasing. This was reflected in the higher sales of luxury products in the years following the pandemic while mass consumption stayed muted. From Reliance to Unilever, the corporations have of late expressed concerns regarding the falling purchasing power of India's consumer class, that is, our urban middle classes. Now, finally with the global uncertainties and the trade wars looming, even the upper class has paused. Luxury car sales in India grew just 3.3% in FY25, a sharp drop from 16.7% in FY24 and 55.2% in FY23—the slowest pace in three years. Despite deep discounts industry leaders expect only 2–3% growth ahead, suggesting the luxury boom may be cooling.

While the tax breaks to the middle classes in the last budget was a much belated acknowledgement on the part of the government that there is a demand problem in the country, the remedy lies only in widening  of the consumer class in India which is the only way to achieve scale in production in the domestic market. Instead, the segment who would ultimately bear the burden of the middle class tax relief would be the bottom half of the population, either through indirect taxes or through inadequate social sector spending – be it on education, or health or social pension. Government expenditure in the social sector, though presented as increasing, remains grossly inadequate, poorly targeted, and unresponsive to inflationary pressures. Going beyond the marginal increases in decimals in some books and the disturbing falls in the others, suffice it is to say that none of them match the real needs of the people. We are still really far from doubling our expenditure on health, or spending 6% of the GDP on education. We refuse to spend substantially higher on social protection.

It's a shame that the central government pays a paltry sum of Rs 200 per month to the elderly as a social pension — a figure unchanged for over 15 years, despite cumulative inflation exceeding 100% over the same period. Its share in the total budget in fact has fallen from its 2019 levels (0.33%). Similarly, the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), a critical safety net for rural workers—75% of whom are women—has received Rs 86,000 crore, unchanged from last year. Its share of the total budget has dropped from 1.78% to 1.69%. The budget for food subsidies has also been reduced from Rs 2.05 lakh crore Rs 2.03 lakh crore precisely at a time when we are slipping into an abyss in the global hunger index. It goes without saying that it is the historically marginalized - the Dalits, the minorities and women - who suffer the most with every penny denied in social welfare.

### "Fiscal Prudence" for the poor and Write Offs for the rich

While demands for enhancing any of the social welfare policies is immediately frowned upon as antithetical "fiscal prudence" the same yardstick does not operate when it comes to corporate tax rebates, production linked incentive schemes or the lakhs of crores of worth of corporate bad loans that are written off. In fact the government touts these subsidies for the rich as "incentives". And yet, none of these are able to incentivize the private sector to invest in capacities or production. Because, like we discussed above, they would invest, not in "national interest", but only when they see profits. And the demand slump in the economy is far from conducive for them to part with their money. After all, despite all the tall talks of "nation building" what moves them to invest is profit alone.

The Economic Survey in fact underlines how the "disproportionate" surge in corporate profits (which is on a fifteen year high) has hardly been matched by salaries/wage increments. So, we are in a situation where the corporations were given huge tax rebates with the misplaced notion that it would boost the economy. But neither has it shored up private investments, nor have shared the rising profits with the workers.

According to the government's own data presented in the Parliament, from 2014 till date the Indian commercial banks have written off more than Rs. 16 lakh crores. These are the *revdis* for subsidising the rich with our money, the taxpayers' dimes. They would argue that such write-offs at the end of the day are simply an account book exercise that has no real bearing on the lives of the people. But if we look at key sectors like agriculture, rural infrastructure, and MSMEs - crucial for inclusive growth - they all continue to face limited access to credit. And partly this has to do with the massive provisioning that the banks have to make to address the corporate write offs. The Provisioning Coverage Ratio (PCR) in fact reached 77% in September 2024, with a significant portion (₹89,000 crore) allocated to cover bad loans. This in turn affects the profitability of the banks and limits the banks' ability to supply credits to marginalised sections and priority sectors like farmers and MSMEs. So, ultimately these *revdis* for the rich come back to hurt the poor while wilful defaulters remain scot free.

Whenever the government claims to have engineered a banking miracle by making the NPA crisis disappear, we ought to repeat, highlight and underline the fact that this has been "achieved" simply by indulging in write offs. Technically while the write-off loans can still be recovered, the past record of recovery of such loans is less than 20%. None of these are seen in our business papers and media as fiscally irresponsible or unjustified, while it is the labouring poor of the country who are constantly given lessons of fiscal prudence, called lazy or advised to work overtime.

### Falling Incomes, Shrinking Savings and Rising Indebtedness

A few weeks back billionaire Harsh Goenka advised on his social media handle that we should make such small habits like saving 600 rupees per day as that can accumulate a saving of 2,19,000 rupees per year. The likes of Mr Goenka live in another India. India where those with 1000 crores and above have seen a phenomenal 76% rise in five years. Meanwhile in other India our bottom half is barely earning 250 rupees per day. This further underlines the grotesque inequality that plagues the country today, and the apathy and oblivion in which the super rich dwell.

The reality is that our household savings have been plummeting at an alarming rate. In the year 2000, household savings accounted for 84% of the total savings in the economy, but this share dropped to just 61% in 2023. Recent study shows that household financial savings have been declining sharply due to a surge in financial liabilities, primarily unsecured personal loans. While the Finance Minister has been trying to downplay it, the household debt situation is alarming. The stock of household debt has increased from 36.6% of GDP in June 2021 to 41% in March 2024 and to 42.9% in June 2024. What is most concerning is the fact that the debt is not a result of building assets. The stock of household assets has fallen from 110.4% of GDP in June 2021 to 108.3% by March 2024. Which means people are borrowing for their consumption. This is not a

sign of a healthy economy. One needs to see this in the context of dwindling incomes and increasing prices.

First the criminal demonetisation, then the GST shock and finally the COVID lockdown has broken the back of the country's poor and the unorganised sector that employs nearly 90% of our workers. Rising inflation, particularly in the food basket in recent times, the fuel prices deliberately kept high, joblessness and stagnating wages have broken the back of ordinary Indians. India's wage trends over the past two decades in fact reveal two contrasting periods: a period of growth from 2004 to 2014, followed by stagnation and decline after 2014. In the second term of Modi's Amrit Kaal, agricultural labourers' wages dropped by -1.3% annually in rural areas, and non-farm rural wages fell by -1.4% annually. Compared to this we witnessed a 8.6% and 6% annual growth rates during UPA 2 despite criticism of it being a period of jobless growth. From there we have reached a period of jobless and penniless growth.

### Praying fields for the loan sharks

With dwindling savings and stagnating wages, ordinary Indians today are cash starved and are desperate for loans to make their ends meet. It is rather unfortunate that at a time when the labouring poor and the marginalised sections are most vulnerable, our credit apparatus and banking system seem to have forsaken them. We have reduced formal bank branches particularly in rural areas and like we discussed above the astronomical write-offs came at the cost of public sector banks' ability to service the credit needs of the poor. With that effectively we have left the vast section of our vulnerable population as a praying field for digital loan sharks luring them for easy loans and charging exorbitant rates. Digital loan apps mushroomed as Non Banking financial Companies have emerged as the modern day money lenders that use shadowy practices of breaching privacy, threatening and harassing people to the extent that many are forced to commit suicide. As per a survey 45% of users said that the rate of interest charged was over 25 per cent per annum; 10 per cent got it at a 50-100 per cent interest rate; and 20 per cent at a higher interest rate of 100-200 per cent. The latest survey also found 61 per cent complaining about extortion threats or data misuse.

Sadly apart from perfunctory warnings, this ecosystem has the full patronage of the RBI and the government and theory have received many accolades for their supposed role in "financial inclusion". The RBI, for instance, had raised concerns regarding unsecured lending by NBFCs that can pose instability in the ecosystem. But at the same time the RBI a few days back reduced the risk weightage in bank lending to NBFCs and MFIs. Similarly in the Conference yet again the RBI instructed the NBFCs to "proactively adopt fairness in lending and recovery" supported by a robust grievance redress mechanism. But effectively on ground we see NBFCs continuing to charge exorbitant rates as the interest rate cap has been removed. Former general secretary of the All India Bank Officers' Confederation, Thomas Franco, also warned that if public banks do not expand their presence, India's poor and unorganised sectors will remain dependent on NBFCs, micro-finance institutions (MFIs), and unreliable loan apps, resulting in rising suicide rates.

### The new Monsters, Climate and Trade Wars

While several of the old evils like unemployment, falling wages, dwindling demand and inflation seem to be crossing paths together, the state of economy and finance today face newer challenges and we are finding our economic and banking policies inadequately equipped to meet them. Just to give a few demonstrative instances, let's talk about the plight of the onion farmers in Maharashtra this summer. While the extreme heat delayed their harvest as labourers would either fall sick or refuse to work given the life threatening heat wave, this was immediately followed by abnormal rains. Maharashtra for instance received 1007% of normal rainfall in May creating financial havoc for the farmers. Such climate extreme events are going to be routine in the coming years, the question remains if our banking and financial policies are tuned to cater to these vulnerabilities. Similarly, climate extreme events like the Wayanad landslide and the crumbling Himalayas have become routine in this day and age. The fact that loan recovery agents were found

demanding pay back in the refugee camps in Kerala after the devastating landslide last year created an outrage. In the face of civil society involvement and community protests the Kerala government gave a loan waiver for those affected. But soon after, far from adapting our banking practices to be sensitive to such needs in future, we saw our central government doing quite the opposite. Through an amendment, it removed the clause that allowed for such write offs in the disaster management legislation. Finally, despite the many chronicles of disasters foretold, we refuse to learn the lessons of climate responsible investment standards. In Sikkim we witnessed how despite decades of warnings, the public sector banks invested in doom and the dam collapsed due to climate induced Glacial Lake outburst. Similarly the town of Joshimath has been sinking which as per many experts is under the pressure of relentless development activities in the Himalayas that has been exacerbated under the shadow of climate extreme events.

The other evil that has started showing its fangs is the geopolitical shifts, tensions, wars and tariff strikes. The world seems to be going through a convulsion. While on the one hand a genocidal war rages on amid both outrage and apathy, there is also uncertainty and whispers of recession as far as the economy is concerned. For decades the empire invested in "restructuring" the world with its neoliberal whims. It remained on top of the food chain as finance capital reshaped the world. It minted astronomical dollars riding on globalization and by offshoring its production to harness cheap labour in the global South. At long last the empire now seems to be anxious looking at its own reflection. It seems in the need to re-calibrate, to assert its might, and suddenly the so-called "leader of the free world" is using protectionist rhetoric.

We have somehow mastered the art of turning every adversity into an opportunity to further oppress the ones at the bottom. This time too we are being told that as the current global situation will have adverse impact on investments materialising from abroad, we are being told that we need to look inward, that we need to unleash the potential of domestic-led growth. So far so good, but how? Thirty years back when the "winds of change" were blowing towards open markets and free trade, we were told that we must deregulate and ease rules for businesses to flourish, for foreign direct investments to find our shores habitable. It is rather amusing that in today's context, when there are talks of higher tariff walls and protectionist moves, the prescription remains the same – more deregulation. The economic survey says that in the absence of export-driven growth and given the apprehensions about falling foreign direct investments, we need to concentrate more on the "efficiency" of investments. That is the only way, it says, of maintaining the levels of high GDP required to achieve the status of 'Viksit Bharat' by 2047. How can efficiency be improved? "By reducing the time taken for investment to generate output and by generating more output per unit of investment," it says. That is what deregulation is expected to achieve by easing clearances and eroding compliances related to labour protection, workers' well being and the environment. In other words, we need to attain the 'Viksit Bharat' status by following a growth path that squeezes labour.

## Challenges & Opportunities

While some may simply call Trump a Mad King, there seems to be a method in Trump's madness as he doubles down, for instance, on China. The world is still trying to grapple with the unfolding tariff war and many like India seem to be in a hurry to "make a deal". As the US pushes sweeping demands under a proposed trade deal, India faces pressure to dilute its minimum support price (MSP) schemes, lower farm tariffs, and open doors to genetically modified crops and dairy. These moves threaten rural livelihoods and food sovereignty. American firms also seek entry into India's protected e-commerce and retail spaces, potentially crushing small traders. Further demands target India's industrial safeguards, such as curbs on secondhand imports and remanufactured goods, which exist to protect local industry. While India asserts regulatory autonomy, its muted resistance may undermine long-standing protections for its most vulnerable sectors. The price of surrendering policy space to American interests could be steep. We are one of the first countries to have kneeled begging for a trade deal with Trump. Why? We have already given up on the digital services tax or Google tax of 6% on American Big Tech to appease Trump. Why are we not talking back to such bullying tactics?

In a webinar series co-organised by Centre for Financial Accountability, Wire, Sambhavana Institute and Progressive International, Prof Prabhat Patnaik asserted that while there is lamentation in the mainstream understanding about the end of the rule-based order, in such a context it is imperative that countries like India exit this so called rule-based regime which has always been unfair for Global South and particularly for our poor. He urged that we must expand our home market. "That means increasing public expenditure, especially on welfare and financing it by taxing the rich… Of course, global finance won't like this. It will flee the country. So we need capital controls. But if we have capital controls, then to manage our trade deficit, we also need trade controls." Each of these are possible alternatives in a different imagination and they are all worthwhile instead of sacrificing our financial sovereignty.

*"The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear."*

Probably these words of Gramsci best capture the moment today. On one side it shows a toxic amalgamation of racist, Islamophobic, homophobic and neo-fascist elements along with pro-fossil, anti-environment and crony capitalist oligopolies. On the other side, it seems to have bared the crude reality of US belligerence by stripping it off the liberal veneer. It's a troubling time, but it is also a moment that is pregnant with opportunities and possibilities for a global realignment of democratic and progressive forces.

The choice is upon us as to whether we give in, or do we stand with others, with an alternative vision that is just and equitable for all. The choice is ours as to whether we gloat in false pride of overtaking Japan to become the 4th largest in terms of GDP, or do we recognize that we are 144th (out of 196) in per capita GDP. If we do the former, we can carry on with business as usual opiated in the narrative of hate and jingoism served daily in our TV debates and social media feeds. If we choose the latter, then we can, like a true patriot, recognize our weaknesses and strengths, diagnose what makes only a few benefit from our policies at the expense of the many, and look for alternatives that can truly take it towards an India that is truly sovereign financially, that is just, equitable and sustainable for everybody.

# Decimation of Labour Rights is Reflective of the 'Backsliding' of India

*The Economic Survey of 2025 has pointed out that while corporate profits touched a 15-year high in 2023-24 growing by 22.3 per cent, wage growth has failed to keep pace and employment expanded by a mere 1.5 per cent. India today tops the Global Multidimensional Poverty Index with 23.4 crore of its citizens below an already low 'poverty line'.*

India is touted as having the fifth largest GDP size, although it had already attained the third position in 2011 if calculated in constant prices. The central issue is whether this 'fast-growing' economy has led to improving the share of GDP per capita, which today has fallen to rank at 143 of 181 nations.

The Economic Survey of 2025 has pointed out that while corporate profits touched a 15-year high in 2023-24 growing by 22.3 per cent, wage growth has failed to keep pace and employment expanded by a mere 1.5 per cent. It is thus obvious that the paradigm of growth-with-jobs has been replaced by one that pitches one against the other, leading to 'job-loss' growth, with stagnant if not declining incomes especially in the context of a more than 10 per cent overall inflation rate, and, that for agricultural labour and industrial workers being significantly higher. Consequently, India today tops the Global Multidimensional Poverty Index with 23.4 crore of its citizens below an already low 'poverty line'.

### Employment Trends

It would be instructive to capture a 25-year trend in employment shares (see Graph 1: Employment Status Shares 1999-2000 to 2023-24), as per the three major categories.

*Graph 1: 15+ Employment Status Shares: 1999-2000 to 2023-24*
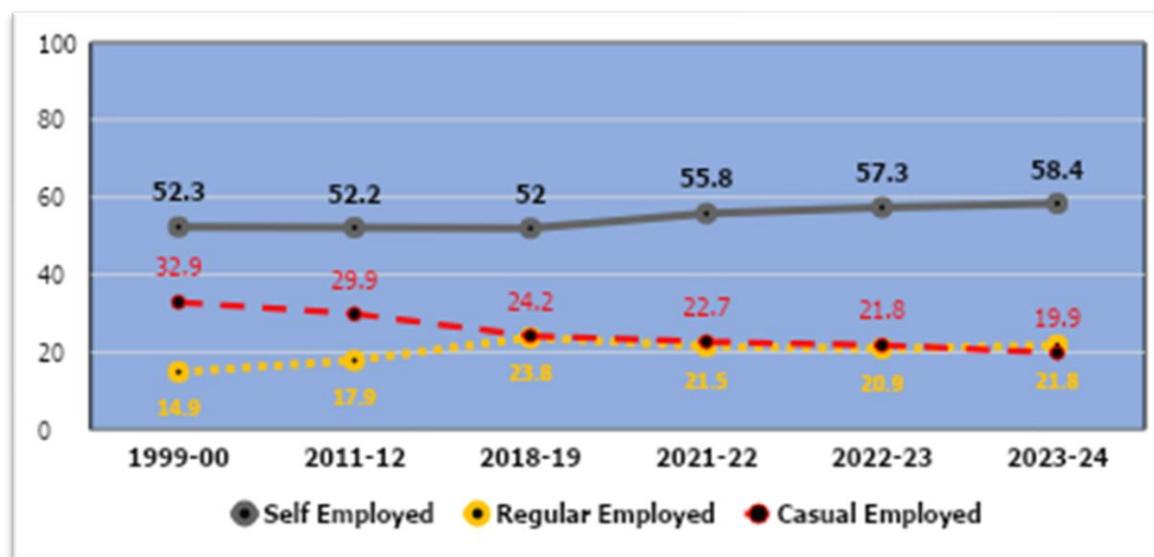


It is immediately apparent that Casual Work has fallen sharply after the double whammy of the 2016 demonetisation combined with the unplanned and confused implementation of GST. While Regular Work too appears to have increased though by less than a percentage point over the last year, it must be remembered that this sub-category includes a large number of workers who are not recognised by law as such: these include apprentices, gig and platform workers, domestic

workers, Anganwadi and ASHA workers, and the many absurdly named *Sakhis, Didis, Sahelis, Matas* etc.

*Graph 2: Gendered Sub-categories of Total Self-Employed: 2023-24*
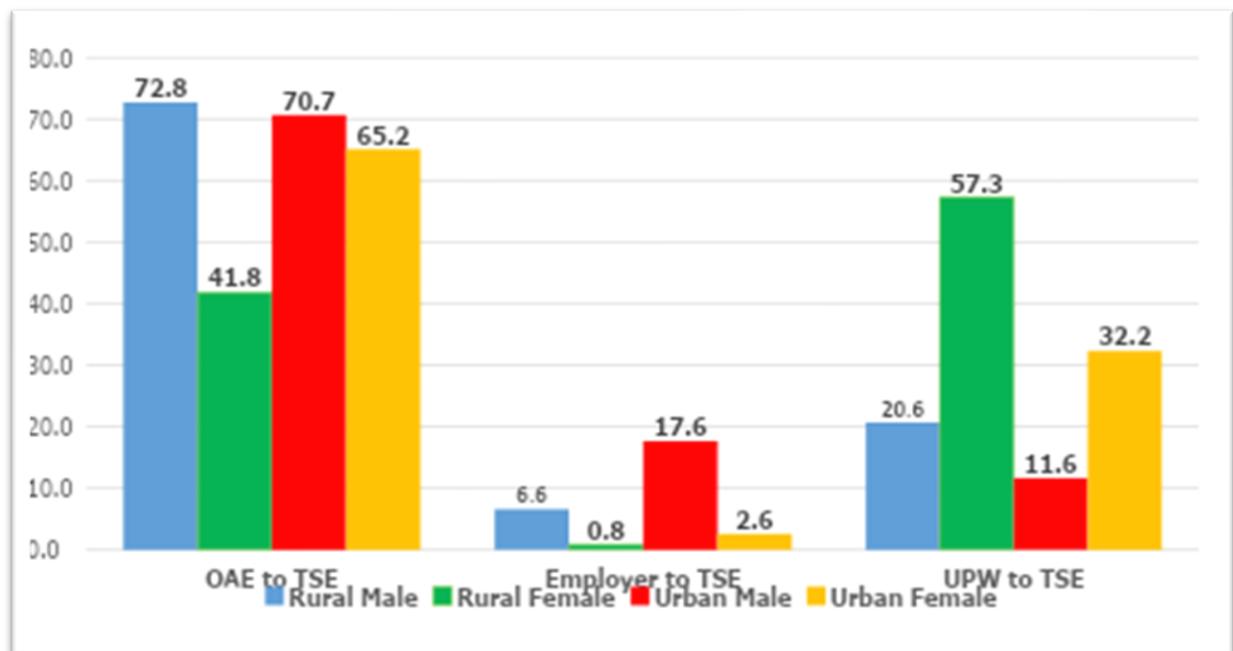


The one percentage point rise in Total Self-Employed (TSE) between 2022-23 and 2023-24 is primarily due to increase in the category of unpaid family workers: up from 18.5 to 20.6 per cent for rural men, and for urban women from 31.5 to 32.5 per cent (see Graph 2: Gendered Sub-categories of Total Self-Employed: 2023-24). Not even one per cent of rural women are employers, all the remaining being Own Account single worker enterprises and of course Unpaid Family Workers.

Self-Employment, which has emerged as the refuge of last resort for those who cannot get any employment, is certainly not a sign of 'entrepreneurship': more than 92 per cent of women-owned enterprises are necessity-driven, eternally on the brink of collapse. India today ranks among the lowest in Entrepreneurial Activity at 63 of 65 nations, at 57 of 65 in Entrepreneurship, and at 46 of 65 in Knowledge Assets and Financial Access. The hoopla of 'entrepreneurship-led development' is misleading to say the least. Even the numbers have not been updated. The 'latest' official data on MSMEs relate to the 73rd NSS Round (2015-16), the figures being upgraded based on an unexplained annual growth rate of 4.5 per cent. Of the 633.88 lakh unincorporated MSMEs, 99.5 per cent are micro enterprises, 96 per cent proprietary concerns of which men own 79.6 per cent, female ownership declining as enterprise size increases. Proprietary OAEs and establishments owned by transgenders are a miniscule 0.01 per cent.

### Wages and Earnings

The past year has witnessed the lowest-ever growth in real wages since 2015-16, excluding the pandemic year. Average monthly real wages fell for both regular and casual workers: from Rs 10,925 to Rs 10,790, and from Rs 4,712 to Rs 4,671 respectively. The extremely precarious state of existence of casual workers demands a special focus: nominal daily wages for men rose by a pathetic Rs 20 over the last year to stand at Rs 459, while that of women at Rs 306 reflects a paltry rise of Rs 13: also to be noted that the gendered wage differential has actually increased. Nominal earnings of self-employed men rose from Rs 15,317 to Rs 16,723, and from Rs 5,297 to Rs 5,803

for women, reflecting yet again a sharply rising gender wage gap. Again, predictably, women earn less than one-third of their male counterparts.

The issue of wages and earnings needs to be additionally viewed in the context of the recently released fact sheet on Monthly Per Capita Consumption Expenditure which presents data in nominal terms. Adjusting for 2011-12 prices using CPI rural and urban for 2022-23 and CPI AL and IW before 2011-12, the CAGR (compound annual growth rate) of MPCE shows a steep decline as it averages out at 7.7 per cent for rural and 5.75 per cent for urban between 2009-10 & 2011-12 (if the growth rate for the intervening year i.e. 2010-11 is considered equal), and the same has fallen to 3.5 per cent and 3.47 per cent respectively for the period 2022-23 to 2023-24. Adjusting for 2011-12 prices using CPI for Agriculture Labour & Industrial Workers, CAGR between 2011-12 & 2022-23 has fallen to less than half.

## Social Protection

PLFS 2023-24 reports that the 'best quality' Regular Wage/Salaried jobs have fallen from 22.8 in 2017-18 to 20.9% in 2022-23 rising by less than one percentage point in 2023-24, quality being determined by  social security and a written job contract. The situation of the regular wage/salaried worker – the only category for whom 'quality of jobs' data is collected – has declined in the last five years when seen in terms of provident fund/pension, gratuity, healthcare/maternity benefits etc

The overall working population with 'no access to social security' rose from 49.6 per cent in 2017/18 to 53.4 per cent in 2023/24. The sharpest deterioration in 'quality' is among male rural regular workers whose lack of access to social security benefits rose from an already high 51.9 per cent in 2017-18 to almost 58 per cent in 2023-24, with that of their female counterparts increasing from 55.1 to almost 62 per cent. Women workers with no job contracts fell from 58.5 to 54.6 per cent in rural areas and from 71.4 to 59.0 per cent in urban areas which is a good sign: however, as of today, 58 per cent of all regular workers in India do not have a written job contract, 47.3 per cent of workers do not have access to paid leave; and 53.4 per cent of workers have no access to any social security benefit whatsoever. In total, two-fifth of all regular male workers and one-third of all women regular workers are denied any of the above. Predictably, SC & ST report the lowest at 0.81 and 0.65 in terms of Regular/Salaried jobs with a written contract.

## Structural Exclusion via Caste, Community, Religion

Extra-economic discrimination and inequalities in labour market structures are being consistently reinforced. The share of SC and ST in assets and spending relative to their share in population in 2024 is the lowest: 0.50 for SC and 0.87 for SC, and 0.51 and 0.73 for ST. It needs to be noted that these figures are a gross underestimation as MPCE data records highest monthly levels only up to Rs.1.86 lakh. While it is estimated that more than two-thirds of all MSMEs are owned by all Socially Backward Groups, Other Backward Castes (OBCs) constitute the bulk at almost half, with SC and ST accounting for merely 12.45 per cent and 4.10 per cent respectively. Again predictably, SC and ST ownership declines sharply as enterprise-size increases. The net income gap between SC/ST and non-SC/ST businesses is high at 55 per cent due to discrimination.

According to the 2023-24 PLFS data, the Labour Force Participation Rate by usual status (ps+ss) for all ages for Muslims is much lower (38.2 per cent) than their non-Muslim counterparts (>45 per cent on average). The unemployment rate among Muslims increased significantly from 2.4 per cent in 2022–23 to 3.2 per cent in 2023–24, marking a rise of nearly one percentage point. In contrast, the unemployment rate among Hindus saw a marginal decline, from 3.2 per cent to 3.1 per cent during the same period. Additionally, regular-salaried non-Muslims in urban areas earn an average of Rs. 20,346 per month, almost double of salaried Muslims who receive Rs. 13,672. And despite their overrepresentation in urban self-employment, Muslims earn Rs. 11,421, significantly less than the Rs. 15,878 earned by their non-Muslim counterparts.

## Conclusion:

The past few years epitomise the amalgamation and consolidation of several policies that have massively and negatively altered labour structures: economic slowdown; low value-added growth; centralisation of capital; focus on non-labour intensive sectors; the national lockdown; inadequately planned implementation of GST; demonetisation; a less than empathetic pandemic response policy……the list is long.

The on-going process of labour de-equalisation is being reinforced by increasing employment and wage differentials, accompanied by 'new' forms of discrimination through religious and community divides. The fall in real wages is reflective of India's ranking in the Global Hunger Index at 111 of 125 countries now identified as 'serious'. In the Global Gender Gap ranking India slipped two spots to the 129th place on the index of 146, its score plummeting to 0.641, significantly below its score in 2013.

Of particular concern is the institutionalisation of the inequalities between capital and labour now legitimised and legalised via the four Labour Codes that "seek to improve the business environment in the country largely by reducing the labour compliance burden of industries". These Codes redefine work, worker and workplace; worsen the working conditions by increasing the work day beyond the ratified ILO Convention; replace labour inspectors by web-based inspection schemes and self-certification of compliance by employers; reinforce and create gender stereotyping; exclude Transpersons; do not mandate inclusion of women members; deny representation of workers' organisations and alter rules for formation of trade unions. Rights and protections attained by many long struggles hence become 'non-applicable'. For instance, the historic movement of the beedi workers of Nipani where they obtained bonuses, subsidised housing, cancellation of wrongful deductions by contractors under the guise of 'bad' product, etc.

The decimation of labour rights is reflective of the 'backsliding' of India which is now characterised as a 'flawed democracy' and as 'partly free': combined with this is its extremely low ranking on the Inclusiveness Index at 117 of 129 nations, and 76 of 82 in the Global Social Mobility Index. This onslaught extends to all citizens especially the already marginalised and vulnerable sections, who are being rapidly deprived of the many rights guaranteed in the Constitution of India.

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# Insights into Social and Economic Sector Priorities[1]

The 2025-26 Union Budget was presented against a troubling macroeconomic backdrop of declining growth, falling savings rates, stagnant wages, and rising household debt. While attempting to balance fiscal expansion with consolidation, the budget proposed reforms in taxation, urban development, mining, financial services, power, and regulatory frameworks. Tax revenues are projected at ₹28.37 lakh crore - a 9.82% increase from 2024-25 - yet overall government spending as a percentage of GDP shows a slight decline. The fiscal deficit target has been tightened to 4.4% of GDP (down from 4.9% in 2024-25), continuing a concerning trend of shrinking fiscal space: pre-pandemic spending stood at 13.4% of GDP (FY20), peaked at 17.7% during COVID (FY21), and now settles at just 14.2% for 2025-26 - potentially inadequate for growth revival. Within this constrained budget, revenue expenditure dominates at 78% of total outlay (a 7% rise from 2024-25 Revised Estimates), while capital expenditure has been gradually increasing its share since FY22, reflecting the government's infrastructure focus amid tightening fiscal conditions.

*Figure 1: Trends in Total Union Budget Expenditure as a Proportion of GDP (in %)*
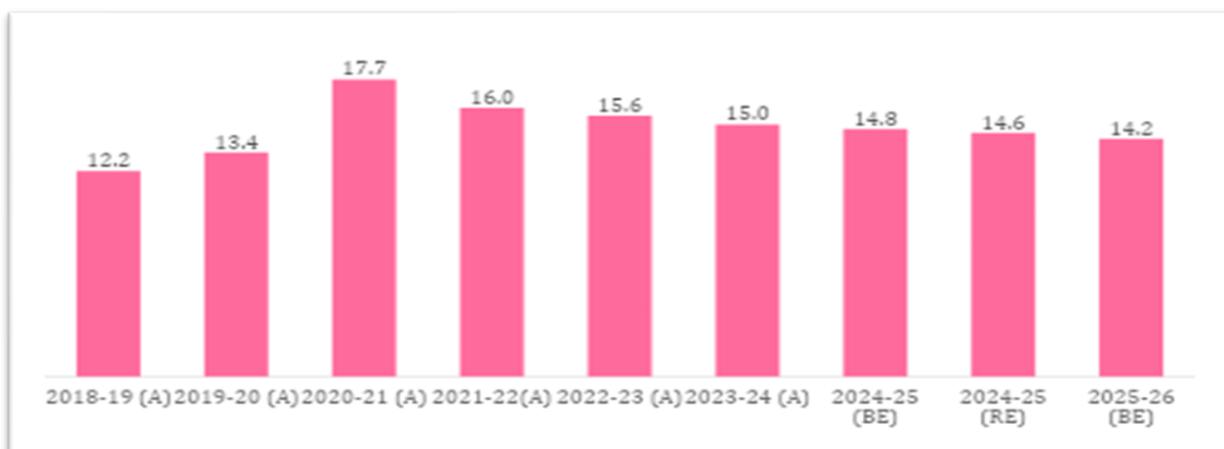


## Social Sector Spending

*Education Sector*

The National Education Policy's (NEP) longstanding recommendation to allocate 6% of GDP to education remains both vital and unmet, as budgetary commitments have stagnated between 3% and 4% of GDP—a chronic shortfall repeatedly underscored in successive Economic Surveys. This persistent underinvestment has exacerbated systemic inequities, with public schools grappling with overcrowded classrooms, underqualified teachers, and insufficient learning resources. While nominal expenditures have risen—evidenced by the Ministry of Education's allocation increasing from ₹99,311.52 crore (2020–21) to ₹1,28,650.05 crore (2025–26)—this masks a troubling decline in prioritization: education's share of the total Union Budget has fallen from 3.3% (2019–20) to just 2.5% (2025–26). Notably, the Higher Education Department's allocation now exceeds ₹50,000 crore, complemented by improved budget utilization rates in 2023. Flagship programs show modest but meaningful increments: Samagra Shiksha crossed ₹40,000 crore for the first time, with a ₹3,750 crore increase over 2024–25; PM-POSHAN and PM-SHRI saw rises of ₹32 crore and ₹1,450 crore, respectively. Yet these marginal adjustments pale against the sector's structural funding crisis, underscoring the gap between policy aspirations and fiscal reality.

*Health Sector*

India's health budget over the past five years presents a paradox of nominal growth overshadowed by stagnation in critical relative terms. While absolute allocations have increased - rising from

₹98,761 crore in 2024-25 to ₹109,120.18 crore in 2025-26 (a 10.4% increase) - these figures mask persistent systemic underinvestment. The health budget remains frozen at just 0.3% of GDP from 2023-24, falling dramatically short of the National Health Policy 2017's 2.5% GDP target for 2025. Similarly, its share of the total Union Budget has plateaued at 2.0% from 2023-24 through 2025-26. This chronic underfunding manifests in severe infrastructure deficits: rural and tribal areas face acute shortages of sub-centers, PHCs and CHCs, while urban areas report a 36.7% deficit in PHCs. Compounding these challenges, India's doctor-to-population ratio stands at 1:1511 - significantly worse than the WHO's recommended 1:1000 standard. Notably, only 15 Finance Commission grants have been directed to health sector development. Such inadequate investment in health and education infrastructure critically undermines human resource development, particularly for marginalized communities who rely most heavily on public health systems. The disconnect between policy targets and budgetary commitments continues to perpetuate India's healthcare accessibility crisis.

*Budgeting for marginalised Communities*

Since 2017-18 key development strategies for marginalised communities such as Scheduled Castes (SC) and Scheduled Tribe (ST) namely Tribal Sub Plan (TSP) and Scheduled Castes Sub Plan have been replaced as the Development Action Plan for SCs and STs (DAPSC & DAPST) respectively. Many development policy strategies have been introduced to channelise a proportionate share of plan benefits and outlays to the SC and ST communities. 41 ministries and departments are allocating funds for DAPSC, as reported in Statement 10 A, showing a marginal increase. Forty ministries and departments have allocated funds under DAPSC in 2024-25. The absolute allocation has marginally gone up to Rs 1,68,475 crore in 2025-26(BE) from Rs 1,65,597.70 crore in 2024-25 (BE). This is a small increase. In the Union Budget 2025-26, the total allocation reported for the Department of Social Justice and Empowerment (DoSJE) is Rs 13,611 crore, which is an increase of Rs 611 crore from Rs 13,000 crore in 2025-26 (BE). Further, expenditure has been reported to Rs. 8561 against 12847 crore in the BE for 2023-24.

In 2024-25, the allocations under DAPST have been made in proportion to the ST population and 46 ministries, departments and UTs have reported allocations under DAPST. However, the funds under DAPST across many ministries/departments are largely for the general sector programmes that are reported notionally with regard to benefits for STs, instead of being allocated based on the actual needs of the community, with its active participation. Eklavya Model Residential School (EMRS) is one of the largest schemes for promoting school education for the tribal community, implemented by Ministry Of Tribal Affairs, which has got a slightly higher allocation of Rs 6,399.00 crore in 2024-25 BE from Rs 5,943.00 crore in 2023-24 (BE). Pradhan Mantri Janjati Adivasi Nyaya Maha Abhiyan (PM-JANMAN) aims to enhance the socio-economic conditions of PVTG communities by providing them with basic facilities. The budget for Pradhan Mantri Janjati Adivasi Nyaya Maha Abhiyan in 2025-25 (RE) and 2025-26 (BE) have been earmarked Rs. 1285.68 crore and Rs.6105 crore respectively.

Since 2017-18, India's approach to development planning for Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs) has undergone significant restructuring, with the Tribal Sub Plan (TSP) and Scheduled Castes Sub Plan being replaced by the Development Action Plan for SCs and STs (DAPSC & DAPST). While these frameworks aim to ensure proportional allocation of benefits, their implementation reveals several critical patterns:

> *Key Allocations*
>
> - Development Action Plan for Scheduled Castes (DAPSC):
> 41 ministries/departments allocated funds in 2025-26 (per Statement 10A)
> Marginal increase from ₹1,65,597.70 crore (2024-25 BE) to ₹1,68,475 crore (2025-26 BE)
> - Department of Social Justice and Empowerment:
> Allocation rose to ₹13,611 crore (2025-26 BE) from ₹13,000 crore

2023-24 expenditure stood at ₹8,561 crore against ₹12,847 crore BE
- Development Action Plan for Scheduled Tribes (DAPST):

46 ministries/departments/UTs allocated funds in 2024-25

Persistent issue: Majority funds allocated to general sector programs with notional ST benefits rather than need-based, participatory planning
- Flagship Schemes

Eklavya Model Residential Schools (EMRS): Allocation increased from ₹5,943 crore (2023-24 BE) to ₹6,399 crore (2024-25 BE)

PM-JANMAN (PVTG Development):

2024-25 (RE): ₹1,285.68 crore

2025-26 (BE): ₹6,105 crore - a substantial planned increase

While the institutional framework for equitable development has expanded, two fundamental challenges persist. There is minimal growth seen in absolute allocations relative to needs of these vulnerable groups and, the schemes are awash with implementation gaps are, particularly in DAPST where funds remain tied to generic programs rather than targeted, community-driven initiatives

The budgetary trajectory of the Ministry of Minority Affairs (MoMA) reveals a concerning pattern of diminishing prioritization and implementation challenges. The Ministry's share of the total Union Budget has sharply declined from 0.12% in 2022-23 (BE) to a mere 0.04% in 2024-25 (BE) - a figure that falls below even the 2012-13 allocation levels. This reduction occurs despite evident funding gaps, as budget outlays consistently fall short of the Ministry's requested amounts; for instance, in 2022-23, only ₹5,020.50 crore was allocated against a demand for ₹8,152 crore. Compounding this under-allocation are severe utilization issues: in 2023-24, a dismal 5% of funds were utilized (₹154 crore spent against ₹3,080 crore allocated), continuing a trend of poor expenditure performance evident in previous years (₹802.69 crore utilized out of ₹5,020.50 crore in 2022-23; ₹3,998.57 crore out of ₹5,029.10 crore in 2020-21; and ₹4,325.24 crore out of ₹4,810.77 crore in 2021-22). The Departmentally Related Standing Committee on Social Justice's 2023-24 report identifies systemic problems in scholarship schemes - including poor fund utilization, inadequate beneficiary coverage due to quota limitations, insufficient per-capita allocations, and the discontinuation of certain programs - all of which collectively undermine the Ministry's capacity to effectively serve minority communities.

The scholarship amounts provided to minority students remain woefully inadequate, failing to keep pace with rising educational costs. The unit costs for Pre-Matric, Post-Matric, and Merit-cum-Means scholarships—unchanged since their inception in 2007-08—no longer meet students' financial needs. Compounding this issue, the schemes have been in limbo since 2021-22, with funds for 2022-23, 2023-24, and 2024-25 remaining unutilized due to pending approval from the Cabinet Committee on Economic Affairs (CCEA). Although the Expenditure Finance Committee (EFC) appraised the matter, the necessary clearance has been delayed. Despite these setbacks, the Ministry of Minority Affairs (MoMA) secured tentative allocations for 2023-24 and 2024-25 in anticipation of approval and remains hopeful that the Competent Authority will sanction the schemes, enabling the utilization of these funds.

The 2025-26 Child Budget allocation stands at ₹1,16,132.5 crore (0.33% of GDP), reflecting a 0.01 percentage point decline from 2024-25 (BE), with revised estimates showing further reductions to 0.31% of GDP. As a share of total Union expenditure, it marginally increased to 2.29% (from 2.28% in 2024-25 BE), but actual spending reveals concerning cuts - dropping to 2.01% in 2023-24 (A) from 2.31% (BE). Sectoral allocations continue historical imbalances: education receives 77.10%, development & nutrition 17.12%, health just 4.11%, and child protection - despite rising crimes (1,62,449 cases in 2022 per NCRB) - remains severely underfunded, highlighting critical protection gaps.

The 2025-26 Union Budget allocates ₹2,477 crore for Persons with Disabilities (PwDs), revealing concerning trends. While India's total budget grew from ₹30 lakh crore (2020-21) to ₹50 lakh crore

(2025-26), funding for the Department of Empowerment of PwDs (DEPwD) decreased from ₹1,325 crore to ₹1,275 crore during this period. Though DEPwD's allocation saw a marginal increase to ₹1,225.27 crore from the previous year, it lacks provisions for new disability-specific initiatives. This nominal hike contrasts starkly with the government's stated commitment to inclusive growth, exposing a policy-implementation gap. Critics highlight how inadequate budgetary support undermines PwDs' rights to self-determination and equal opportunities, with no dedicated provisions for Divyangs despite growing needs.

### Economic Sector Spending

The 2025-26 Union Budget has allocated ₹1,90,406 crore to the Ministry of Rural Development, with ₹1,87,755 crore (an 8% increase over 2024-25 RE) designated for the Department of Rural Development and ₹2,651 crore (35% higher than 2024-25 RE) for the Department of Land Resources. While pandemic-era allocations saw significant boosts between 2020-21 and 2022-23 for MGNREGS and PM Jan Dhan Yojana's women beneficiaries, the 2024-25 revised expenditure is projected to fall 2% below budget estimates due primarily to underutilization in PM Awaas Yojana-Gramin (PMAY-G). Despite maintaining ₹86,000 crore for PMAY-G in 2025-26 (matching 2024-25 RE), implementation challenges persist - the scheme, launched in 2016 to address rural India's 4.03 crore housing shortage (per SECC 2011), saw 41% unutilized funds in 2024-25. The Ministry attributes these shortfalls to states' delayed fund releases (both central and state shares) and seasonal disruptions like extended monsoons, even as 2025-26 allocations show a 69% increase to ₹54,832 crore over 2024-25 RE.

As MGNREGS is a demand driven scheme, the expenditure rises and falls in response to demand for work in rural areas. It jumped 55% in 2020-21 as the demand for work went up during COVID-19 pandemic driven by people migrating back to villages. 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. For 2025-26, the scheme has been allocated Rs 86,000 crore, similar to the revised estimates for 2024-25. As MGNREGS is a demand driven scheme, the expenditure rises and falls in response to demand for work in rural areas.

*Table 1: Allocation and Expenditure by Major Schemes under Department of Rural Development*

| Select Schemes of DoRD | 2020-21 (A) | 2021-22 (A) | 2022-23 (A) | 2023-24 A | 2024-25 BE | 2024-25 RE | 2025-26 BE |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| MGNREGA | 111170 | 98468 | 90806 | 89154 | 86000 | 86000 | 86000 |
| NRLM | 9208 | 9383 | 11536 | 13934 | 15047 | 15047 | 19005 |
| PMAY-G | 19269 | 30057 | 44962 | 21770 | 54500 | 32426 | 54832 |
| PMGSY | 13688 | 13992 | 18783 | 15380 | 12000 | 14500 | 19000 |

*Source: Data compiled from union budget documents for various years.*

Between 2020-21 and 2022-23, the actual expenditure of the Department of Rural Development was higher than the budget estimate mainly due to increased expenditure on MGNREGS, a demand-based scheme which saw higher work demand because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Under the scheme, the amount of work provided is measured in person days. During 2020-21, the total number of work days generated was 389 crores. That saw a decline in the following two years. In 2024-25, the total person days generated as of January 2025 was 221 crores.

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 9,652 crore in 2025-26, similar to the revised allocation for the previous fiscal but lesser than the amount allocated for the program in 2014, displaying the government priorities for pensioners. The allocation includes Rs 6,646 crore for the old age pension scheme, Rs 659 crore for the National Family Benefit Scheme, Rs 2,027 crore for the widow pension scheme, Rs 290 crore for the disability pension scheme, and Rs 10 crore for the Annapurna scheme.

Established in 1995, the National Social Assistance Programme (NSAP) provides critical support to destitute, elderly, disabled, and vulnerable citizens through five core 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 (v) Annapurna Scheme. Implemented nationwide through state governments, the program's 2025-26 allocation of ₹9,652 crore mirrors the previous fiscal's revised outlay but falls below 2014 levels, reflecting shifting welfare priorities. The current budget distributes funds as: ₹6,646 crore for IGNOAPS, ₹659 crore for National Family Benefit Scheme, ₹2,027 crore for IGNWPS, ₹290 crore for IGNDPS, and a nominal ₹10 crore for Annapurna - revealing stark disparities in support across beneficiary categories.

## Conclusion:

The Union government should increase the fiscal space for financing adequately to the social and economic sector. The government spending on education and health must be increased by 6 percent and 3 percent of GDP respectively as per their own promises. The government has consistently prioritized the promotion of the rural economy, as evident from the launch of various flagship schemes aimed at infrastructure development and improving living standards in rural areas. This suggests that funding for these initiatives has generally been sufficient and aligned with their objectives, except in the case of MGNREGS. However, there is an urgent need for a more effective and efficient implementation framework to fully achieve the goals set under these schemes. Strengthening execution mechanisms will not only help offset the losses incurred in recent years due to the severe impact of the Covid-19 pandemic but also support sustained economic growth by creating diverse income opportunities and fostering resilient livelihoods in rural communities.

The issue of notional reporting of allocations should be addressed under the DAPSC and DAPST for maximization of benefits from general sector benefits. The general sector schemes/programmes should prepare the exclusive and need based projects for SCs and STs earmarked under DAPSC and ST and expenditure should not be reported without proper targeting of the actual needs of the community. The delay in utilisation of funds in ERMS needs to be addressed to ensure that the targeted numbers of schools are constructed in a timely manner under this scheme. Fund allocation meant for scholarship for SC and ST should be disbursed to the students on time.

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 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.

*Endnotes*

1. This section has benefited from the document 'Union Budget Analysis - 2025-26' prepared by Institute for Policy Studies and Advocacy (IPSA)

# Modi-care: Standing on the shoulders of states

*The Union Ministry of Health and Family Welfare is transferring a lesser share of resources to states. The Union government is also cutting the budget on the National Health Mission every year which is likely to have adverse effects on the health of the most vulnerable.*

In her budget speech, the Finance Minister emphasised on "access to high-quality, affordable, and comprehensive healthcare" as a major component of Viksit Bharat. Although the statement rightly emphasises on the role of health in overall development, the Union government's financial allocations do not reflect the similar level of priority accorded to health.

Public spending on health in India has historically remained very low. Recently there is a lot of euphoria among Union Government thinktanks that finally India has broken the shackle of 1% of GDP and inching close to 2% (public spending on health as % of GDP). An increase in public spending is much needed and very much welcome. However, some fact checks and clarifications are required, before attributing the credit to the union government for increased public spending.

First, public spending on health in India remains abysmally low compared to most countries. Secondly, public spending on health increased, but much of the increase is contributed by states, not by the union government. Moreover, the Union Ministry of Health and Family Welfare is transferring a lesser share of resources to states. The Union government is also cutting the budget on the National Health Mission every year which is likely to have adverse effects on the health of the most vulnerable. Spending on Government Funded Health Insurance Schemes are increasing disproportionately.

*Figure 1: Public spending on health: Indian in comparison with countries: 2021*
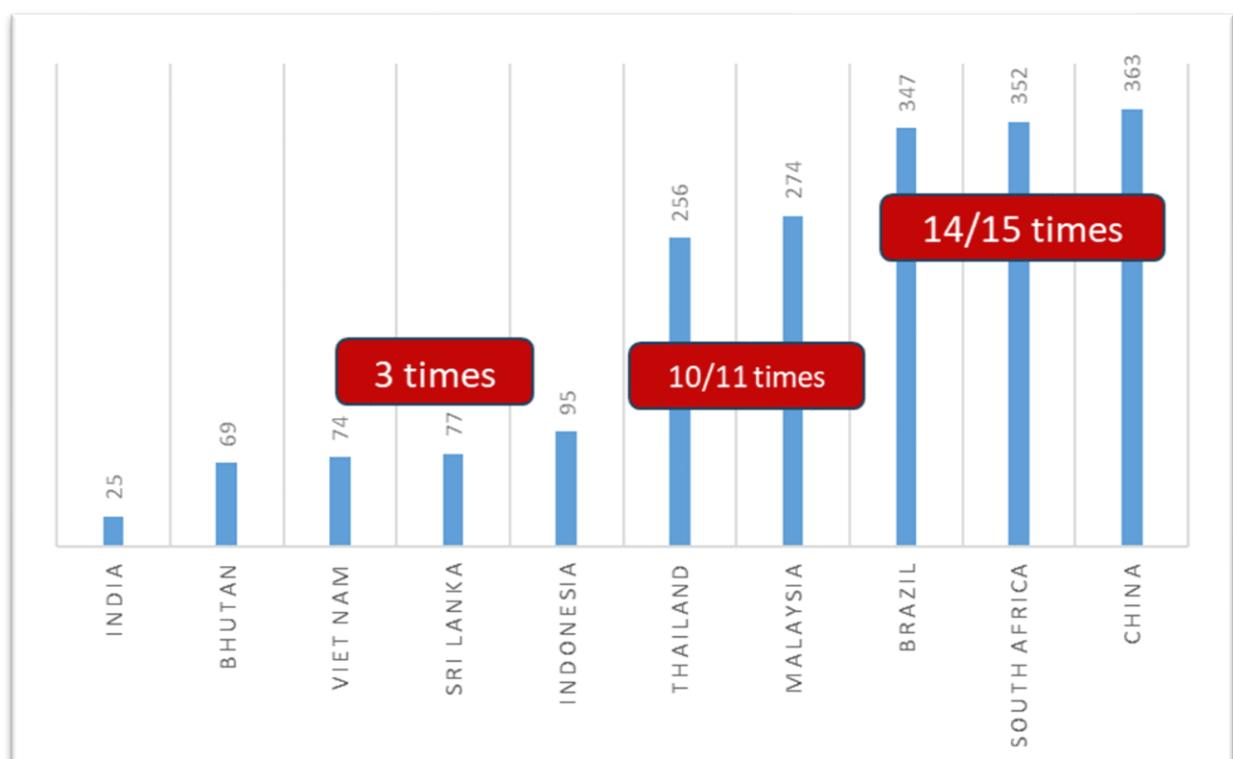


*Source: World Health Organisation: Global Health Expenditure database*

Neighbouring countries Bhutan (2.5 times) and Sri Lanka (three times) spend much more on health in per capita terms in India (Figure 1). Whereas countries like Thailand and Malaysia, which are known to have robust health systems, spend ten times more. India's other counterparts in BRICS- Brazil, South Africa and China spend 14-15 times more compared to India. We are tenth from the bottom among the 55 Low Middle Income Countries (LMICS). We have a long road ahead to catch-up with these countries.

Increased public spending is much needed and a welcome step. However, much of it should be attributed to increased public spending by states and union territories – particularly during the covid time (Indranil 2024). The states have sustained the spending increase post-covid as well. Given the resource constraints states face, this is a welcome step. However, it is deeply concerning to note that the union government has cut its spending on health, as a percentage of GDP, even though there was some moderate increase during the COVID-19 years.

*Figure 2: Union and all state government expenditure on health ministries and departments (as % of GDP)*
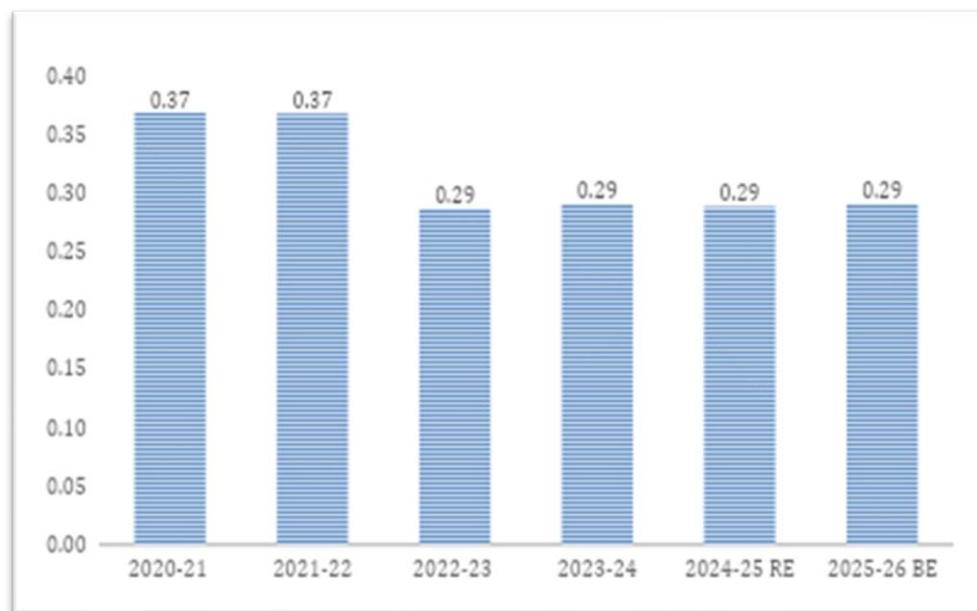


*Source: All state: State Finance: A study of budgets, various years; Union Government: indiabudget.gov.in; Expenditure Budget Vol2, various years; GDP: Economic Survey, various years. (Note: Union government spending includes spending by the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare and Min of AYUSH.)*

Furthermore, a significant part of the increase in investment as a percentage of the GDP during pandemic years needs to be attributed to negative and low growth of GDP, while absolute increase in expenditure remained modest, in real terms (Figure 3). Subsequently, the Union government cut spending in both nominal and real terms.

*Figure 3: Union Government allocation and spending on health (in 2020-21 prices)*
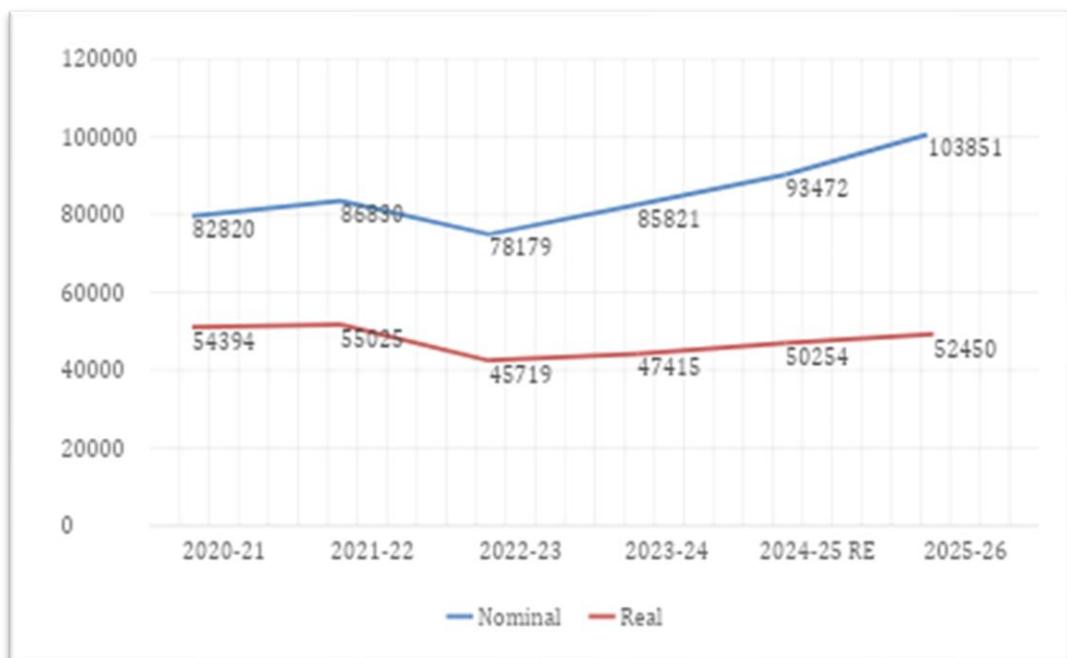


*Sources: Union Government: indiabudget.gov.in; Expenditure Budget Vol2, various years*

More concerning is the decline in share of resources transferred to states by the Union Ministry of Health and Family Welfare. Immediately before the Modi government came to power, more than three fourth (75.9 per cent) of the union spending would go to the states (Fig 4). Within the first three years of Modi rule, the share was brought down to little more than half (53.4 per cent) and has been declining continuously. Some of this decline could be attributed to reduction in central share in central sponsored schemes (CSS) like Nation Health Mission. However, this reflects increased centralisation of financial resources on a subject which largely falls within the domain of states.

*Figure 4: Share of transfer to states in the Union expenditure on health (%)*



Source: Union Government: indiabudget.gov.in; Expenditure Budget Vol 1&2, various years

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The National Health Mission, launched in 2005, was one of the crucial interventions by the Union governments in recent times, saving the lives of crores of women and children. The current regime has undermined the finances of the scheme since the scheme was introduced by the previous UPA government. Barring some increase during 2017-18, expenditure on the scheme is being curtailed continuously, as shown in figure 5. Between 2013-14 and 2018-19 NHM spending grew at 7.4 on average, largely due to a sudden jump in 2017-18. NHM spending declined in real terms at 5.5 per cent on average during the second tenure of the Modi regime. This means the care that could be provided under NHM in 2019-20, cannot be provided anymore, even though the population has grown.

*Figure 5: Union government expenditure on NHM (in constant prices)*
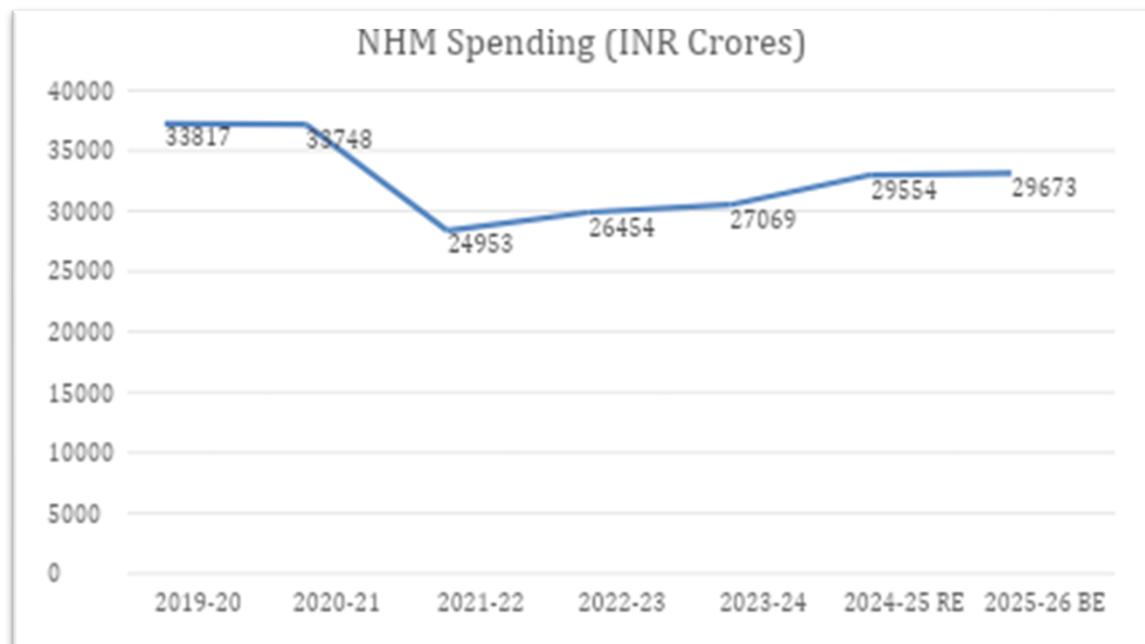


*Source: Union Government: indiabudget.gov.in; Expenditure Budget Vol 2, various years*

The Modi government's priority on Ayushman Bharat and particularly the Prime Minister Jan Arogya Yojana (PMJAY) is clearly visible in its spending priorities. If we study the expenditure on various government funded health insurance schemes (GFHIs) like PMJAY, we observe a steady increase in expenditure. Between 2014-15 and 2019-20, expenditure in real terms have almost doubled, growing at an average of 18 per cent per annum. Even though the Modi government draws a lot of mileage from these schemes, the bigger share of spending is incurred by states. While these schemes are transferring huge amounts of public money to the private sector for profit, the much-promised free care eludes people.

*Figure 6: Union and state spending on government funded health insurance schemes (in constant 2013-14 prices)*
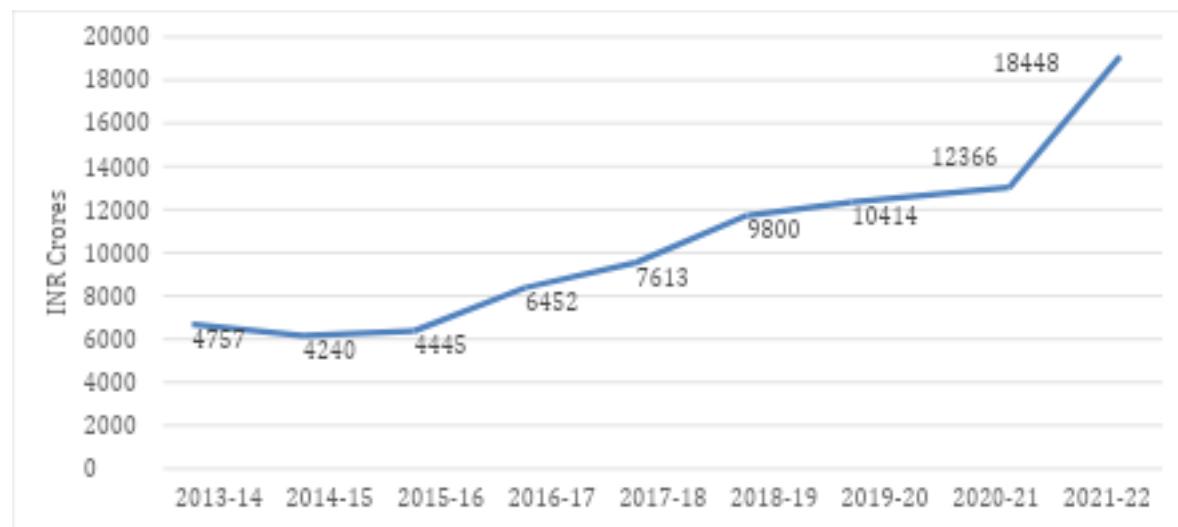


*Source: NHSRC. National Health Accounts of India, various years*

Blind obsessions to promote commercial interest needs serious introspection. A large part of the Dalits, Schedule Tribes and other marginalised sections hardly receive care from the private sector under the government funded insurance scheme like PMJAY. It is a common knowledge that people do not receive free care under PMJAY, they only get partial relief and in this process end up paying a lot from their pocket.

### Removing Customs Duty Does not Make Drugs Affordable!

The Finance Minister announced exemption of some lifesaving drugs from Basic Customs Duty (BCD), especially for patients suffering from cancer, rare diseases and other severe chronic diseases.

However, the reduction of customs duty makes no dent on the prices of drugs. For instance, Risdiplam, a drug to treat the rare disease Spinal Muscular Atrophy, costs INR 6 lakh (approx..) for a month or about INR 72 lakh annually. With a 15 per cent reduction of customs duty the price comes to about INR 61 lakh annually. Risdiplam is produced by Swiss pharma Roche, which has a patent on the drug until 2035. It still remains out of reach for most people in the country. The estimated cost-based price of the generic version of Risdiplam is as low as INR 3024.

What is required in order to make drugs affordable is to encourage generic manufacture of these drugs in the country and using TRIPS flexibilities such as compulsory license for the production of such patented drugs.

The COVID-19 pandemic had brought to open the crack lines of India's health system, highlighting the needs for increased public investment to strengthen publicly provided healthcare. While states have risen up to the challenge, despite financial constraints, the union government has done precious little. This is really a missed opportunity. The government should increase union public spending on health to at least 1 per cent of GDP and transfer much of those resources to states to spend on their priorities. States also need special Finance Commission transfer dedicated to health so that overall spending reaches to 3 per cent in the intermediate.

**Demands for health sector:**

The Union government must immediately initiate legislation on "Right to Health and Healthcare". Health and Healthcare are basic human rights which must be treated as topmost political priority by all governments, whether at central or at the state level, especially in the current situation.

These must be done in larger context of major expansion and strengthening of Public health services, including regular recruitment of staff, filling all vacant posts, upgrading honorarium, urgently paying the pending honorarium and working conditions of ASHAs and frontline health workers, democratic and participatory governance etc. supported by massively expanded public health budget.

The government must undertake special efforts to ensure safe motherhood, universal vaccination and expand various disease control programs, ensure appropriate nutrition to catch up with the loss during the pandemic. NHM budget cuts should be revised immediately and more resources should be devolved towards Non-communicable diseases!

The government should immediately scrap PMJAY and instead use these resources to strengthen the public health system.

Even after many years of its inception of NMHP there remain huge gaps in human resources. Trying to fill those major gaps in services just by relying on a tele-medicine program will invariably mean that a large section of the society would continue to be deprived of quality mental health care.

The government must step up domestic manufacture production of all essential medicines, diagnostics, vaccines and adopt a policy of compulsory licensing.

The government should ensure that price control mechanisms are comprehensive covering all essential medicines.

There is a need to strengthen the death reporting system; ensure rights of their records and certificates; ensure public dissemination of gender, caste disaggregated data on morbidity, mortality and utilization.

The government must urgently regulate the irrational prescriptions and rate by both private and public hospitals for all medicines, curb black marketing and take punitive actions for violations.

 Implementation of Patients' rights charter as advised by the NHRC; ensure with full operationalisation of Clinical Establishments Act (CEA) and ensure implementation of similar legislations in context of states which have not adopted Central CEA.

Central government must unequivocally reject all policy proposals for privatisation of healthcare, including the entire set of recommendations provided by NITI Aayog in its recent document, along with reversing all decisions regarding privatisation and handing over of public health facilities like district hospitals to private providers, at either central or state government levels.

*Endnotes*

Indranil (2024). Rise in public spending due to states, not Centre. Data Point. The Hindu. May 2024, https://www.thehindu.com/data/rise-in-public-health-spending-due-to-states-not-union-government/article68182710.ece

# Rationalisation or Consolidation at the Cost of a Generation

*Ensure that education investments are equitable along geographical, socioeconomic and gender lines and make sure that families living in poverty have the same opportunities as those from privileged backgrounds. Allocations should be increased for pro-equity budget heads like the pre-matric scholarships for the Scheduled Castes, other backwards classes, minorities and students with disabilities.*

This year marked 15 years since the enactment of the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act and four years since the introduction of the National Education Policy (NEP). This was also the first year of the present government. The ruling BJP's manifesto envisaged modern, universalised, quality education and a focus on teacher training, infrastructure enhancement and learning in the mother tongue. [1]However, this first year saw no new major policy changes that could take us drastically closer to realising the right to education or achieving this vision, although some incremental measures were taken in line with the provisions of the NEP.

### The year that was: Relevant policies, schemes, legislations or budget announcements

The government's focus remained on the implementation of the NEP. Thus, the government constituted an Education Advisory Council for its implementation. [2] However, like in previous years, several opposition-ruled states continued to oppose its implementation. This year, the national Education Ministry ordered that SSA funds be withheld from Tamil Nadu, one of the states refusing to implement the same, for not accepting NEP provisions. [3] Tamil Nadu has also disagreed with the centre over the implementation of the PM-SHRI programme. [4] It also finalised its state-specific education policy. [5] The Supreme Court declined to entertain a PIL seeking direction to the TN, WB and Kerala governments to implement the NEP.[6] TN moved the Supreme Court challenging the withholding of funds as "coercion" to "force" it to implement the policy. [7]

A significant barrier to the improvement of the quality of education has been inadequate financing. Union Budget 2025-26 allocated Rs 1.28 trillion to the education sector, a 6.5 per cent hike compared to the previous year, although this was the lowest year-on-year percentage increase in the past four years. The overall spending on education remained below the suggested 6 per cent of GDP committed by consecutive NEPs and global education spending benchmarks. [8] The Parliamentary standing committee on education, women, children, youth and sports noted that India's spending is significantly lower than SAARC countries like Bhutan and Maldives and urged an increase in spending to 6 per cent of GDP.[9]

Amidst this, no significant movement was discernible to address some of the considerable challenges related to equity in education. One of the significant features of the RTE Act was its focus on placing the blame for students' failure to ensure learning on the system and not individual learners. This was reflected in the no-detention policy. The government's decision in 2019 to amend the RTE Act, leaving the decision to implement the latter to the individual states, was heavily criticised by educationists as failing to address the underlying reasons for low quality of education. [10] [11] This year, the Centre scrapped the 'no-detention policy' for students in classes 5 and 8 in schools governed by the central government, further aggravating the problems.[12] Concerningly, classes 6 and 7 detentions have also been reported in Delhi. [13]

Some of the other significant policy measures taken by the national government during the preceding year included

The centre issued an advisory to states to ensure that all children with disability are provided free uniforms, textbooks, midday meals and other entitlements.[14] However, the provision of such basic facilities for children with disabilities continued to lag. Thus, Punjab was reported to have one teacher for every 150 children with disability. [15]

States agreed to equivalence in board exams, which will be implemented from next year. [16]

The Ministry of Education wrote to states asking them to either "authorise" or "take appropriate action" against unrecognised schools in India by March 2025. The UDISE portal lists 22,298 such private schools which have over 24 lakh students enrolled and employ 1.5 lakh teachers. [17]

CBSE ordered international boards and schools affiliated to them to follow the RTE Act in receiving recognition and affiliation and to comply with applicable state and UT regulatory mechanisms, including submission of data to UDISE+ and admission under Section 12-1c of the RTE Act.[18] The government also appealed to four states to implement Section 12-1-c. [19] At the state level, the Rajasthan Coaching Centres (Control and Regulation) Act, 2025 was introduced, mandating the registration of coaching centers, setting standards for infrastructure and faculty, emphasising student welfare through provisions for counselling and mental health support and seeking to prevent exploitative practices by regulating fees and advertising. [20] Similarly, Delhi introduced a fee regulation legislation for private schools. [21]

A reduction in the cost of some NCERT textbooks was announced; new NCERT textbooks in line with the new National Curriculum Framework for classes 9-12 will be rolled out by 2026-27.[22] CBSE prohibited the use of non-NCERT and SCERT books in schools. [23] Tweaks in curricula and textbooks continued with the changes focusing on Classes 3 and 6 this year. [24] One consequence of this revision was that the Preamble to the Constitution was dropped from several Class III and VI NCERT textbooks. [25]

### Unaddressed existing policy and implementation gaps

These measures, however, failed to address the most pressing challenges faced by India's education system. These include

*Availability of schools*: There has been a net decline of over 17,000 schools, including a 7 per cent decline in the number of government schools. It has been reported that 10,000 schools have been closed after the introduction of the school rationalisation policy, particularly in MP, Assam and Odisha.[26] Thus, 1,200 schools are reported to have closed in Himachal Pradesh (over two years)[27], 5632 schools in Odisha (over five years)[28] and 5089 in J&K (over 10 years).[29] This year, 449 schools were merged in Rajasthan[30] and 450 in Punjab.[31] UP and Assam are reported to be planning to merge 27,000 and 11,000 schools, respectively.[32][33] This is taking place in a context where not all habitations still have schools. Thus, over 3000 Telangana habitations continue to lack schools. [34]

*Enrollment:* It is reported that school enrollment decreased by 2.08 crore (8.3 per cent); while the government claims this to be due to a change in methodology adopted under UDISE, a deeper investigation is needed to understand whether this is a result of previous over-reporting or an alarming growth in student attrition. [35] India continues to have high dropout rates beyond primary education; the latest statistics show that only 45.6 per cent of students remain in the system by the time they reach higher secondary education. [36]

*School Infrastructure:* While the number of schools and overall enrolment have decreased, the facilities within the remaining ones have improved. Thus, DISE data suggests that 98.3 per cent of schools have drinking water, 97.12 per cent have girls' toilets, and 89 per cent have a library. [37]91.8 per cent of schools are reported to have electricity, as compared to 53 per cent in 2013-4. [38] 32 per cent of schools have access to functional computers.[39] However, data on the share of schools complying with the full provisions of the RTE Act is not in the public domain. The government has emphasised the improvement of the quality of a small number of elite schools like the PM Shri

Schools. However, despite the political focus on the latter, under 25 per cent of funds under the scheme are reported to have been spent, with Bihar receiving zero funds. [40]

Last year saw improvement in learning and digital literacy, and smartphone access. [41]

Dalit, Adivasi and Muslim students continued to face barriers in accessing quality education, including inadequate infrastructure, discrimination, and insufficient resources. In 2024, the National Commission for Protection of Child Rights (NCPCR) recommended discontinuing state funding to madrasas and dissolving madrasa boards, citing non-compliance with the RTE Act and concerns over educational quality. The Supreme Court subsequently stayed these recommendations, emphasising the need to balance children's educational rights with the constitutional protections afforded to minority institutions.[42]

Despite policy commitments to gender equity in education, recent national-level developments in India reveal persistent structural barriers—underfunded schemes, reduced incentives, and digital divides—that continue to undermine girls' right to free, quality, and inclusive education. Thus, research suggests that school textbooks are gender biased, with Karnataka performing particularly poorly. [43] At the same time, when one considers the status of Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalayas (KGBVs), much more needs to be done to deliver quality education. Of the 5,639 approved KGBVs, a report found 4,260 were fully functional, 799 were partially functional, and 580 were completely non-functional.[44]

Education delivery has been interrupted in the face of climate shocks, including pollution, floods and heat waves. [45][46] [47][48]This year, Operation Sindoor also resulted in the closure of schools across border districts. [49] Some states also introduced specific policy measures to ensure child safety. Thus, Maharashtra introduced new school safety guidelines.[50]

### Comparison of government data and UN data on education

There are notable discrepancies between Indian government data and United Nations and international datasets concerning school education, arising from differences in methodologies, definitions, and data collection practices.

*Public Expenditure on Education:* The Indian government's reports present varying figures for public expenditure on education based on which components are included in the calculations. This creates estimates of 2.7 per cent of GDP or 4.43 per cent, respectively. [51]

*Enrollment,retention and learning:* Systems like UDISE+ report high enrolment rates and significant progress toward universal primary education. For example, government statistics often show near-universal enrolment at the primary level and a steady decline in the number of out-of-school children. Other sources of data often do not align with the more optimistic government figures. Similarly, while government surveys like NAS provide data on learning levels, which paint a fairly optimistic picture, independent assessments (like ASER by Pratham) often highlight a "learning crisis" where many children are not achieving grade-appropriate learning levels. Both analyses, however, fail to capture the true picture of learning, which cannot be conveyed through narrowly defined standardised tests.

*Data Reliability and Timeliness.* The Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation (MoSPI) acknowledges issues with the reliability and timeliness of educational statistics. Data collection often suffers from delays, manual tabulation errors, and inconsistencies due to the lack of a robust validation system. Consequently, national-level educational statistics can have a time lag of 6 to 7 years, and provisional statistics may include outdated figures from certain states. Changes in data collection methods (such as the introduction of student-wise tracking and Aadhaar-based identification) have made year-on-year comparisons difficult, further complicating the reconciliation of government and UN data. Reports on the status of implementation of the RTE Act also appear to

no longer be produced or placed in the public domain, which hampers efforts at social accountability on the realisation of the right to education in the country.

## Recommendations for the way forward

The Central government should

Ensure the complete implementation of the RTE Act, which entails all of India's schools meeting the norms and standards by 2026 and the government notifying clear responsibilities for doing so.

Extend the purview of the RTE Act up to the age of 18 years, in line with the internationally recognised definition of childhood, by including ECCE, secondary, and higher secondary education as legal entitlements.

Enhance expenditure on education to at least 6 per cent of GDP, with 10 per cent of the education budget committed to ECCE to ensure adequate resourcing for the delivery of government schools and publicly provided early childhood care and education, including provision of quality and nutritious supplementary education and midday meals to all children.

Stop the closure and merger of government schools in the name of rationalisation or consolidation.

Invest in ensuring the total eradication of child labour up to the age of 18 years.

Fund bridging mechanisms to bring all dropout and out-of-school children into school and institutionalise processes for the uninterrupted education of children from migrant families, particularly inter-state migrants.

Ensure that education investments are equitable along geographical, socioeconomic and gender lines and make sure that families living in poverty have the same opportunities as those from privileged backgrounds. Allocations should be increased for pro-equity budget heads like the pre-matric scholarships for the Scheduled Castes, other backwards classes, minorities and students with disabilities.

Prioritise allocations to fill teacher vacancies and ensure all teachers and ECCE personnel are professionally qualified and well-trained, have scope for career progression, receive a dignified wage and working conditions and are free from activities that are non-educational or unrelated to core education or ECCE functions.

Strengthen the regulatory capacity of the state to enforce the regulation of private schools and ECCE centres, including strengthening data, monitoring and enforcement capacity.

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# Need to Tackle Hunger and Malnutrition with Urgency, Equity, and Empathy

*Exclusions persist despite an October 2024 Supreme Court order directing that all workers registered on the e-SHRAM portal should be given ration cards. The implementation of this directive has been weak, further entrenching hunger and marginalization among informal and migrant workers.*

Over the past year, India's food security landscape has been marked by exclusionary practices, inadequate budgeting, flawed policy priorities, and a failure to expand coverage despite increasing vulnerability. While the government continues to assert that India is a food surplus country, developments on the ground suggest growing cracks in both access and adequacy of food entitlements, especially for the most vulnerable.

Since the implementation of the National Food Security Act (NFSA) in 2013, over 5.97 crore ration cards have been deleted in the name of streamlining and targeting. Though Aadhaar-based deletions are positioned as anti-duplication efforts, they have often led to the wrongful exclusion of legitimate beneficiaries. Biometric failures disproportionately affect the elderly, manual laborers, and economically weaker groups, denying them food they are legally entitled to.

The state-wise deletions highlight the problem. Odisha removed 3.92 lakh deceased beneficiaries and canceled over 22,000 ineligible cards as of March 2025, but it still has 10 lakh pending applicants who are waiting to be included. Assam canceled over 1.5 lakh cards due to Aadhaar linkage or minor income errors, and Gujarat deleted over 8 lakh cards since 2013, drawing protests from tribal groups.

The exclusions persist despite an October 2024 Supreme Court order directing that all workers registered on the e-SHRAM portal should be given ration cards. The implementation of this directive has been weak, further entrenching hunger and marginalization among informal and migrant workers.

Meanwhile, in stark contrast to these ground realities, Prime Minister Modi, at the 32nd International Conference of Agricultural Economists in December 2024, declared India to be a "food surplus country" and positioned it as a solution to global hunger. Yet, India ranks 105th out of 127 countries on the Global Hunger Index 2024, and FAO estimates indicate over 20 crore undernourished people in the country.

### Gaps in Budgetary Allocations and Implementation

The Union Budget 2025–26 was widely expected to correct course on India's food and nutrition policy. However, its allocations show only nominal increases that fall short of addressing the scale of the crisis.

The Saksham Anganwadi and POSHAN 2.0 scheme received ₹21,960 crore, up from ₹20,070.90 crore in the revised estimates for 2024–25. While this represents a 9.4 per cent nominal increase, the real increase – after adjusting for 5 per cent inflation – is just around 4 per cent. This marginal rise is unlikely to substantially improve coverage or service quality.

Similarly, the PM POSHAN scheme, responsible for school meals, saw only a ₹100 crore increase – from ₹12,400 crore to ₹12,500 crore – equivalent to a 0.8 per cent increase, well below inflation. Per-child allocations under the Supplementary Nutrition Programme remain unchanged at ₹8–₹12

per day, a rate that has remained stagnant since 2017. In the face of rising food prices, this budgetary stagnation severely compromises meal quality and nutritional adequacy.

A March 2025 advisory by the Ministry of Education further complicates the situation. It called for a 10 per cent reduction in cooking oil in school meals, citing concerns about childhood obesity. However, it ignored rising rates of child under nutrition: According to NFHS-5, 35.5% of children under five are stunted, and 32.1% are underweight. There were no corresponding recommendations to increase dietary diversity or nutritional quality, showing a disconnect between policy intent and nutritional realities.

Adding to these challenges is a significant human resource gap: Over 2.13 lakh Anganwadi positions remain vacant nationwide. These shortages directly affect service delivery in health and nutrition, further weakening the last-mile implementation of key schemes.

## Census Delays and the 13-Crore Exclusion

One of the most significant – and underdiscussed – structural issues undermining India's food security framework is the continued use of 2011 Census data to determine NFSA coverage. Based on the last Census, current entitlements cover only 75 per cent of rural and 50 per cent of urban populations. However, civil society groups and economists estimate that this outdated base excludes nearly 13 crore people who should be receiving rations today.

Despite repeated calls to expand coverage using 2021 population projections, the central government has refused, arguing that enumeration and revision can only happen after the next official Census. In May 2025, the government announced that the next Census would begin only in October 2026 and conclude in 2027, marking a seven-year delay from its original schedule. Data processing could delay implementation even further. Effectively, for at least eight years, nearly 13 crore Indians – many of them among the poorest of the poor – will continue to be excluded from the public distribution system.

Eight years is a long time. A child born in 2020 would be eight years old by 2028. This entire period represents the most critical window for physical and cognitive development. Missing out on essential calories and nutrients during these years increases the risk of stunting, wasting, and lifelong cognitive impairments. Is this the food security vision the government claims to champion? Is this what the prime minister means when he says India is a global model for food security?

## The Limits of Calorie-Centric Food Security

For decades, India's public distribution system (PDS) and food security policies have prioritized staple grains such as rice and wheat to prevent starvation. However, calories alone do not equate to good health. According to the World Food Programme, over 21 per cent of India's population lives on less than $1.90 per day, making access to nutrient-dense foods nearly impossible. This has led to a dual crisis – malnutrition among the poor and a surge in non-communicable diseases (NCDs) among urban populations, fueled by the unchecked rise of ultra-processed foods (UPFs).

The Economic Survey explicitly warns against the health risks of UPFs, noting that India's dietary patterns are shifting towards high-calorie but nutrient-deficient foods. This transition exacerbates health risks, reduces workforce productivity, and weakens economic momentum. A country burdened with diabetes, cardiovascular diseases, and cognitive decline cannot sustain long-term growth, let alone claim the status of an emerging superpower.

The government's push for millets, pulses, and superfoods like makhana is commendable but remains inadequate without structural reforms in food policy and distribution. India's agricultural subsidies and procurement mechanisms remain heavily skewed towards rice and wheat, leaving more nutrient-rich crops underfunded and underutilized.

While millets have been declared a nutritious alternative, their integration into public feeding programmes, midday meals, and PDS distribution remains limited. Without direct policy

interventions to mainstream these foods, the millet initiative risks being a symbolic gesture rather than a systemic solution.

## Food Grains for Fuel: The Ethanol Controversy

The Union government has approved an additional 2.8 million tonnes of Food Corporation of India (FCI) rice for ethanol production in 2024–25, raising the total allocation to 5.2 million tonnes, despite growing concerns over the diversion of food grains for fuel instead of ensuring food security. The allocation, which applies to the Ethanol Supply Year (ESY) from December 2024 to October 2025, comes on top of the 2.4 million tonnes sanctioned earlier. Distilleries have already lifted approximately 1 million tonnes at a subsidized rate of ₹22.50/kg.

The Ethanol Blended Petrol (EBP) scheme aims to reduce pollution and cut down on fossil fuel imports. However, critics argue that diverting rice and other staples for industrial use poses grave risks to food security. Rice, sugarcane, and maize – essential for India's food and livestock feed systems – are now being increasingly redirected as ethanol feedstocks.

India would require approximately 1,016 crore liters of ethanol annually to meet the government's 20 per cent ethanol blending target by 2025. Estimates suggest this would necessitate 11–12 million tonnes of grains (mostly maize and rice) and 275 million tonnes of sugarcane, cultivated over 7.1 million hectares. Experts caution that even with high-yielding varieties, this would increase the use of water, the import of chemicals, and land competition, exacerbating environmental and social risks.

Further, reports by the Institute for Energy Economics and Financial Analysis (IEEFA) and IndiaSpend argue that the E20 target may not significantly reduce emissions and will provide only marginal energy security, while severely undermining national food security in a country where hunger remains endemic.

## Recommendations for the Way Forward

India must reimagine its food security paradigm beyond the provisioning of staple grains. True food security encompasses nutritional adequacy, universal access, dignity in delivery, and ecological sustainability. The following recommendations aim to address the systemic gaps identified over the past year and to lay the foundation for a more resilient and inclusive food security architecture:

*Expand NFSA Coverage Using Updated Population Estimates:* The continued use of outdated 2011 Census data excludes nearly 13 crore eligible individuals from the Public Distribution System. Until the 2026 Census data is available, the government must immediately expand NFSA coverage using 2021 population projections. A formal notification for provisional inclusion based on current demographic estimates is crucial.

*Strengthen and Democratize Ration Card Issuance:* State governments must move away from periodic application drives and establish rolling enrollment systems with simplified documentation requirements. A robust, accessible grievance redressal mechanism is needed to address wrongful deletions and ensure timely redress for excluded households.

*Address Biometric Failures and e-KYC Exclusions:* The reliance on Aadhaar-based biometric authentication has disproportionately affected the elderly, manual laborers, and those engaged in informal work. The government should implement alternative authentication methods (e.g., OTPs, offline verification, family-based identification) to ensure these groups are not excluded from their entitlements.

*Increase Budgetary Allocations and Adjust for Inflation:* The recent Union Budget has shown only nominal increases in allocations for critical nutrition schemes like POSHAN 2.0 and PM POSHAN. These must be revised to match actual food inflation rates. The food subsidy budget should be restored to at least 1 per cent of GDP to meet the growing needs of the population. Cost norms for supplementary nutrition should be updated regularly to maintain meal quality and quantity.

*Implement Supreme Court Directives on e-SHRAM Coverage:* Despite a clear directive to include all registered informal workers under NFSA, implementation has been weak. The Centre must allocate dedicated funds, simplify onboarding processes, and direct state governments to fulfill this legal mandate without delay.

*Halt the Diversion of Food Grains for Ethanol Production:* The recent increase in allocation of 5.2 million tonnes of FCI rice for ethanol production under the Ethanol Blended Petrol (EBP) program raises serious ethical and logistical concerns. The government must immediately halt the diversion of food grains for industrial fuel until domestic food security goals are met. Priority must be placed on feeding people, not vehicles.

*Revamp Subsidy Structures and Diversify the PDS Food Basket:* To align food security with nutritional adequacy and ecological resilience, India must move beyond a rice-and-wheat-centric model. This requires a two-pronged approach: Subsidy restructuring to promote the production and consumption of nutrient-dense, climate-resilient crops such as coarse cereals (millets), pulses, and vegetables. Diversification of the Public Distribution System (PDS) to include these food groups, especially in nutritionally vulnerable regions. States should be incentivized to procure and distribute locally appropriate coarse grains and pulses through the PDS. This not only improves dietary diversity but also supports agro-ecological farming systems and local economies. Diversifying the PDS food basket is essential to address hidden hunger, improve diet quality, and build resilience against climate shocks.

*Fill Anganwadi Vacancies and Improve Working Conditions:* With over 2.13 lakh vacancies, the Anganwadi system is severely undermanned. Filling these posts on a priority basis is essential. Furthermore, Anganwadi workers must receive fair wages, regular training, and adequate resources to carry out health and nutrition services effectively.

*Enhance Transparency Through Data Reconciliation and Public Reporting:* There is an urgent need for independent verification of government claims through collaboration with civil society and academic institutions. Public dashboards, real-time grievance tracking, and community audits can build trust and ensure accountability at all levels.

*Establish Independent Monitoring and Social Audits:* A multi-stakeholder monitoring mechanism involving civil society organizations, health professionals, local governments, and community representatives can help track implementation failures, identify exclusion patterns, and recommend timely interventions.

India's food security strategy must shift from a narrow grain-distribution framework to a rights-based, nutrition-sensitive, and inclusive model. If the government truly aspires to position India as a global leader in tackling hunger and malnutrition, it must begin by correcting the structural failures at home, and doing so with *urgency, equity, and empathy*.

# A Life Cycle Approach in Sanitation and Waste Water Management is Missing

*The life cycle approach in the sanitation and waste water management is missing and there is a need to move up on the sanitation technology from twin pit toilets and septic tanks based toilets to safer decentralised options.*

Government of India in partnership with respective state governments, has focused on water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) through initiatives like the Jal Shakti Abhiyan: Catch the Rain, Jal Jeevan Mission (JJM), Swachh Bharat Mission and other such programmes in the period of June 2024 to May 2025. These efforts aim to conserve water, improve sanitation and hygiene, and ensure access to safe drinking water for all.

The specific Initiatives undertaken in this period includes efforts towards water conservation such as

**Jal Shakti Abhiyan (Catch the Rain)** campaign launched by the Ministry of Drinking Water and Sanitation nationally focusing on water conservation, rain water harvesting and afforestation. It includes activities like creating water conservation plans and establishing Jal Shakti Kendras in the districts during months of March to June, 2024

Another campaign *Jal Utsav 2024* was held from 6 to 24 November, 2024, as a flagship 15-day campaign by NITI Aayog along with the Department of Drinking Water and Sanitation, Government of India. It was aimed at promoting water conservation, management, and sustainability. The campaign engaged communities across 20 Aspirational Districts and Blocks through activities like Jal Bandhan ceremonies, educational programmes in schools, tree-planting drives, cleaning of water assets, and the launch of district-specific "Jal Sampada" fact sheets. It also included activities like Jal Sanchay Diwas, skill development under the 'Nal Jal Mitra' programme, and a Jal Utsav Run. The programme fostered community-driven water conservation, creating long-term behavioural changes toward sustainable water practices.

**Jal Jeevan Mission,** implemented in partnership with states , aims to provide potable tap water to every rural household and has progressed with focus on source sustainability and challenges to be addressed on water security in Himalayan Region . In the fiscal year 2024-2025, the Jal Jeevan Mission with respective states provided a total number of  91,81,755 household water supply connections in rural India reaching an overall coverage of almost 80% rural households with a functional household water supply connection. This is a remarkable progress towards access to safe water supply to rural households, though system and source sustainability remains challenges to be resolved. The Ministry of Jal Shakti organized an International WASH Conference in September 2024 as part of the India Water Week. The Department of Drinking Water and Sanitation (DDWS) joined forces with the National STOP Diarrhoea Campaign to promote safe water and sanitation practices in rural areas.

**Swachh Bharat Mission :** Swachh Bharat Mission focuses on improving sanitation, including the elimination of open defecation and the construction of toilets. The Swachh Bharat Mission (SBM) has seen significant progress in the period of June 2024 to May 2025. As of March 17, 2025, 5,64,096 out of 5,86,788 villages have declared themselves Open Defecation Free (ODF) Plus, with 5,03,585 villages covered in Solid Waste Management (SWM) and 5,22,462 in Liquid Waste Management (LWM).

**Hand Washing with Soap and Menstrual Hygiene Management:** In India, from June 2024 to May 2025, there's been progress in hand hygiene and menstrual hygiene management (MHM), with a focus on breaking taboos, increasing access to affordable products, and improving infrastructure. The government has implemented initiatives like Jan Aushadhi Suvidha Sanitary Napkins, and there's a growing movement to create a "Period-Friendly World". However, challenges remain, including inadequate infrastructure in many schools, limited access to hygienic products in certain areas, and the persistence of social stigma.

Niti Aayog in collaboration with ATE Chandra Foundation has started an initiative to rejuvenate water bodies in 500 aspirational blocks of India. In the phase I of the initiative, 113 aspirational districts/blocks across 25 States/UTs have been chosen for implementation. The project focuses on enhancing water storage capacity, improving groundwater recharge, sensitisation of farmers to natural farming and fostering community participation. This large-scale effort aims to create a sustainable impact on water security and resource management at the grassroots level. Further, a water budgeting exercise is initiated in 23 Aspirational Blocks to optimise water resource management and allocation for sustainable drinking water supply. Conducted in collaboration with German Development Agency GIZ, this ongoing initiative employs localised water balance models to enhance water use efficiency, address resource gaps, and empower communities with data-driven insights into water availability and sustainability leading towards water security. States/Districts nodal are entering the data on water usage across various sectors through a dedicated App developed for the purpose.

Overall, the Government of India is actively pursuing various policies and initiatives to address WASH challenges, with a focus on sustainable water management, improved sanitation, and better hygiene practices.

## Challenges and Recommendations

1. Under Jal Jeevan Mission, in line chlorination or disinfection of water, after treatment of chemical contaminants , in Water Supply Schemes should be made mandatory in scheme design and O&M.
2. Roof Top  Rain Water Harvesting and its storage and use as an alternative source of water, based on its water quality, should be made mandatory for all buildings having a roof area of more than 200 sq. meter in all states.
3. Regulation related to groundwater abstraction and use must be followed and implemented more rigorously. Metering must be mandatory for all bore wells and tubewells used for Piped Water Supply and also household meter connections   in all urban households to begin with.
4. Strict regulation and monitoring of treated waste water in cities and towns and its purchase and use by local self governments for use in municipal works should be promoted to encourage a circular economy of water.
5. The life cycle approach in the sanitation and waste water management is missing and there is a need to move up on the sanitation technology from twin pit toilets and septic tanks based toilets to safer decentralised  options such as DRDO developed Bio Toilets in rural and peri urban areas. Similarly, in MHM, there is a need to move away from one time use of sanitary pads to more eco friendly reusable cloth based sanitary napkins, menstrual cups etc. In Hand Hygiene, access barriers to hand washing with soap and water must be removed to enhance the decentralised hand washing facilities in institutions, public places and commercial and industrial areas  in many more spots .
6. Mission Life and movement must be steered away from a consumeristic society to a more WASH Wise society to reduce water and carbon footprints must be promoted more intensively to encourage people to become Pro Planet People.
7. A separate policy and cost norms are required for access to safe water and sanitation services for hilly states as normal conventional solutions and technologies as applied in

plain and coastal areas are not contextual to the situation of hilly and border states where more decentralised solutions needs to be  applied for local water security, sanitation and hygiene .

8.  Policy and Action is needed towards  building climate change resilience in urban and rural WASH . Some good local research by local research organisations and pilots are needed to build gradually the climate change resilience in WASH sector.

9.  Water Audit, Sanitation Audit and Hygiene Audit in Homes and Institutional may be professionalised and standardised  and incentivised through regulatory mechanisms.

# Environmental Enforcement doesn't Match Ambitions

*India's environmental governance is at the crossroads where progressive rhetoric collides with regressive actions. From diluted forest laws to carbon markets, the state is enabling ecological plunder while greenwashing compliance.*

In the last one year of the union government's environmental and climate performance, the negatives far outweigh a few positives. The Environmental Performance Index rank of India, at 176 out of 180 countries assessed and with a very low score of 27.6 out of 100, reflects this reality. Environmental quality is not a priority for the government, as shown by a total budget of Rs. 3413 crores for the Ministry of Environment Forests and Climate Change, or 0.07 per cent of the annual union budget for 2025-26.

As seen in the past few years, environmental laws/rules were diluted, including Forest (conservation) Rules 2022, Forest Conservation (Amendment) Act 2023, continuation of Ex-post facto clearances (later struck down by the Supreme Court). Some improvements were seen in the National Clean Air Action Plan, with 41 of 97 high pollution target cities showing significant reduction in air pollutants, with some increase in the number of air quality monitoring stations. Two of the primary sources of air pollution, coal power plants and vehicles (particularly, Diesel burning ones), still are on a growth path. On river pollution, despite massive investments in "Namami Gange" and Yamuna Action Plans, most rivers including these two remain almost as polluted as they were earlier. Both industrial and agricultural effluents keep flowing into our rivers with little or no treatment. About 46 per cent of India's 605 major rivers are polluted, as per Central Pollution Control Board. Encroaching structures on river floodplains and important catchments continue to be built, by both official and private interests.

On the Climate front, renewable energy installations reached a high of 29.5 GW last year with Solar photovoltaic leading the charge but wind power and other sources falling way behind with low additions. As it's going, India is very unlikely to achieve its stated target of 500 GW by 2030, with a present capacity of 220 GW.

On the adaptation and climate finance fronts, several announcements were made but very little action was taken. Increasingly, the Indian government also is going the tricky (if not fraudulent) market mechanism route. The newly introduced 'Green Credit scheme" is likely to increase this shift away from real verifiable climate actions.

### Climate Governance:

India's climate governance presents a paradox of progressive rhetoric and regressive actions. While committing to net-zero by 2070 with key targets of 500 GW of renewable energy by 2030, and 45 per cent GHG emission reduction, recent policies reveal troubling contradictions. While India is already reliant on dirtier fossil fuel – coal which accounts for 47.4 per cent of all the India installed capacities[1], the government added 4 GW of coal-fired capacity in 2024 and it has unveiled its plans to add almost 90 GW of coal-fired capacity by 2032[2]. The Union Government passed the Energy Conservation (Amendment) Act 2022 where it introduced the carbon credit trading scheme and added a provision on obligations to use a minimum share of energy consumption from non-fossil sources[3]. The Indian Carbon Market launched in 2024 is said to focus on emission intensity and not on absolute emissions caps[4]. Experts warn that this will pave the way to dubious offset projects, including tree plantations on forest rights lands[5].

Meanwhile, climate adaptation remains chronically underfunded with the National Adaptation Fund for Climate Change scheme receiving just ₹160 crore in 2024-25 to meet the cost of adaptation to climate change for the states and union territories of India that are particularly vulnerable to the adverse effects of climate change[6]. This ecosystem of hollow market mechanisms such as carbon market, green credits, etc., creates regulatory escape hatches that sustain business-as-usual and facilitates expansion of fossil fuels and other destructive development.

**Air and Water Pollution Issues:**

The Union Government has articulated ambitious pollution control targets, notably renewing the National Clean Air Programme (NCAP) with a goal of 40 per cent PM2.5 and PM10 reduction by 2026 across 131 non-attainment cities[7] and extending Namami Gange Mission 2.0[8] with a budget of approximately ₹21,400 crore. However, implementation data reveals critical shortcomings. As of 2023, only 37 of 131 non-attainment cities had completed source apportionment studies essential for targeted action[9]. Air quality monitoring remains sparse, with just 1,504 ambient air quality monitoring stations (manual monitoring stations - 963, and continuous monitoring stations - 541) covering vast urban and industrial areas[10]. Additionally, another study revealed that 96 per cent of NCAP cities monitored exceeded for PM10 levels above the National Ambient Air Quality Standards (NAAQS) in 2023, with Delhi's PM2.5 (lower average of 101µg/m³) exceeds NAAQS on 57 per cent of days and WHO standards on 100% of days monitored[11].

Delhi's recent air pollution mitigation plan 2025 emphasizes the discrepancies in the air pollution governance in the country. The plan was unveiled by the chief minister of Delhi on 3rd June 2025, with key focus on stricter vehicle regulations, anti-smog guns and dust control, artificial rain (cloud seeding), green initiatives including planting 70 lakh trees, construction site regulations, and public awareness and health measures[12]. However, it failed to address critical polluting sources - coal-based thermal power plants and diesel generators.

The same situation exists with water governance. Nearly ₹40,000 crore was spent on Namami Gange until January 2025. Of this, a substantial amount of around ₹33,000 crore was spent on sewage infrastructure projects[13]. According to a compliance report submitted by the Uttar Pradesh government on October 30, 2024, Prayagraj city's 128.28 MLD of sewage remains untreated and flows directly into the Ganga. The compliance report also highlighted that there are 35 sewage treatment plants (STPs) operational across 11 Ganga districts and 34 of them failing to meet the prescribed standards for sewage treatment[14]. Additionally, according to an affidavit submitted by CPCB on the status of water quality of River Ganga reveals that the Biological Oxygen Demand (BOD) at the domestic drains from the Prayagraj district ranged from 7.6-135 mg/l (safe limit for waterbodies: 5 mg/L)[15].

**Dilution of Environmental Laws and Framework:**

India's environmental framework has been progressively and systematically dismantled through legislative and procedural shortcuts. The Forest (Conservation) Rules, 2022 is one such erosion of legislation, where it permits private entities to acquire forest land for "developmental" projects without gram sabha consent, violating the Forest (Conservation) Amendment Rules, 2017 (Rule 6(3)(e))[16]. This escalated with the Forest Conservation (Amendment) Act, 2023, which exempted border security and infrastructure projects within 100 km of international boundaries from forest clearances. This puts extensive areas of North Eastern India into existential crisis (because, in India, the north-eastern states have the highest proportion of forest cover with respect to the total geographical area of the state).   The 100 km distance from international borders would cover Mizoram, which has 85 per cent forest cover, followed by Arunachal Pradesh (79 per cent), Meghalaya (76 per cent), Manipur (74 per cent), Nagaland (74 per cent), and Tripura (74 per cent), Sikkim (47 per cent), and Uttarakhand (45 per cent)[17]. The union environment minister Bhupender Yadav, on 8th August 2024, informed Parliament  that India had lost 173,396 hectares (1,733 square kilometres) of forest for development works[18].

The same pattern of dilutions of legal frameworks could be seen in India's petroleum industry. India is on track to increase its exploration acreage to 1 million square kilometers by 2030, with a 16 per cent increase expected at the end of 2025. To facilitate this target and mission, the Union Government has simplified the approval process for exploration and production activities in the petroleum industry from 37 to just 18, of which nine are now available for self-certification. Additionally, it has also amended the Oilfields (Regulation and Development) Act in 2024 to ensure policy stability for the oil and gas producers, and enables a single license for all hydrocarbons[19].

Despite India witnessing one legal advancement where the Supreme Court struck down ex-post facto clearances in Common Cause v. Union of India (2024)[20], in February 2025 the union government exempted white category of industries completely from the consent mechanism and other categories from Consent to Establish if the project or activity has obtained environmental clearance under the Environmental (Protection) Act, 1986. This is exclusively to "streamline and expedite the Environment Clearance process" and also to "promote Ease of Doing Business"[21].

India's environmental governance is at the crossroads where progressive rhetoric collides with regressive actions. From diluted forest laws to carbon markets, the state is enabling ecological plunder while greenwashing compliance. Unless enforcement matches ambition, and communities outweigh corporate interests, these policies will facilitate not a green transition, but a Great Acceleration of India's ecological crisis.

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21. PARLIAMENT QUESTION: Changes in Environmental Clearances Policy

# Restore the Principles of Justice, Participatory Governance, and Community Sovereignty

*The government's techno-bureaucratic, technology-driven approach, including digitisation of FRA records and integration into the PM Gatishakti portal, risks turning forest rights data into a tool for land commodification, enabling faster infrastructure clearances and private sector investments at the cost of community control.*

The recognition and enforcement of forest rights under the Forest Rights Act (FRA), 2006, alongside broader land rights, remain a critical yet neglected issue in India's current development discourse. Despite the FRA's explicit mandate to rectify historical injustices by transferring community forest governance to Gram Sabhas and empowering forest-dwelling communities, government actions have systematically undermined these objectives.

As different reports and analysis suggest, forest rights and associated issues were central to 153 parliamentary constituencies during the 2024 General Elections. A significant population in these areas depend on forests for their identity and livelihoods, making them directly or indirectly affected by governmental forest policies. These constituencies also remained in focus in the 2019 elections and were widely recognised in the Party manifestos of parties during the 2024 elections. As per studies, India has the potential to vest at least 30 million hectares of its forest land, over 40 per cent of the total, as community forest rights (CFRs) with Gram Sabhas, thus securing the rights and livelihoods of at least 20 crore people, including roughly 9 crore tribal individuals. The Forest Rights Act (FRA) recognises approximately 1,75,000 villages, about a quarter of all villages in the country, as eligible for these CFR rights.[1]

FRA recognises as many as thirteen rights for Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (OTFDs), covering rights over land, minor forest produce, grazing, cultural-traditional practices, etc., as well as crucial rights to protect and manage forests as they have been doing for centuries.

Yet the distribution of title deeds to Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers, under the Forest Rights Act 2006, reflects on the magnitude of work and intent that needs to be instilled for the implementation of the FRA in its truest essence. Till now, 21,15,936 title deeds have been distributed (20,15,337 – Individual and 1,00,599 – Community).[2]

The Supreme Court directed state governments (February 2019) to review rejected claims and provide affidavits explaining the grounds and procedures of rejections. Despite this, there were no clear guidelines from the Ministry of Tribal Affairs (MoTA), and states followed inconsistent mechanisms, some of which violated legal procedures for recognising forest rights. Some states used technology (like satellite imagery) that contradicted the legal requirement for Gram Sabha-led verification, undermining FRA's intent.[3]

If one tries to carefully review the rejections, many claims were rejected without proper reasoning or opportunities for appeal. Rule 13 of the Forest Rights Rules, which accepts multiple forms of evidence such as village elder testimonies and Gram Sabha field verification reports, has emerged to have been systematically and repeatedly ignored.

In Gujarat, satellite imagery was incorrectly used as mandatory evidence to reject claims, with flawed data, incorrect mapping, and a lack of ground verification, resulting in wrongful rejections. Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (OTFDs) faced a high rate of rejection.[4]

As of 31 January 2025, according to MoTA, **18,06,890 claims have been rejected.**[5]

Highlights of any significant events with regard to the focus theme/community since June 2024

- There are currently 941 ongoing land conflicts across the country, affecting approximately 1.05 crore people.[6]

- Despite the Forest Rights Act (FRA) of 2006 being in effect for over 25 years, habitat rights have been granted to only 10 Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs) across 14 districts. The Union Government has identified 75 Scheduled Tribe communities as PVTGs. Current estimates show that around 45.56 lakh individuals from these communities live in 19 States and Union Territories.

- The Jammu and Kashmir government has rejected over 39,000 out of 46,090 forest rights claims filed under the Forest Rights Act (FRA.[7] In this context, the Gram Sabha of Gulistan Hajan in Tral, Pulwama, took a democratic step by declaring 200 square kilometers of forest as Community Forest through a formal resolution, in the presence of officials from the Forest and Wildlife Departments. This assertion reflects the community's commitment to participatory governance and highlights the need for a more accountable system that fully recognizes and upholds forest rights.[8]

- The use of digital systems like Van Mitra in Madhya Pradesh created significant barriers for forest dwellers, including issues with access, procedural errors, and document uploads. The government has resumed the manual claim submission process alongside the app to improve accessibility and ensure smoother claim submissions.

- In Chhattisgarh's Hasdeo Aranya forest, approximately 5,000 trees were felled across six villages for the Parsa coal block project, with around 400 police and forest department personnel deployed to the area.[9] The forest and environmental clearances granted for the project are alleged to be based on forged documents. Additionally, the gram sabhas of Hariharpur, Salhi, and Fatehpur villages did not provide consent for forest diversion, as required under applicable laws, including the Forest Rights Act.[10]

- Villagers in Dhunkapada of Ganjam district in Odisha have opposed mining activities on Dahi Mundia hill, a site of religious significance and ecological importance. The communities argue that mining would have a consequential impact on the water sources and disrupt local wildlife and its habitats.[11]

- The proposed "voluntary" relocation of 57 families from Talewadi village in Bhimgad Wildlife Sanctuary (BWS), Belagavi district - an ecologically critical tiger corridor contiguous with the Kali Tiger Reserve and adjacent to Mahaveer and Mahadai Wildlife Sanctuaries in Goa – constitutes violations of the Wildlife Protection Act, 1972, Forest Rights Act, 2006, and National Tiger Conservation Authority (NTCA) guidelines, as the relocation process bypasses the statutory requirement of free, prior, and informed consent of the Gram Sabha.[12]

- In the landmark judgment of *T.N. Godavarman Thirumulpad v. Union of India* dated December 18, 2024, the Supreme Court recognised sacred forests managed by indigenous communities as essential to cultural heritage and biodiversity, ruling that restricting access to such sites violates constitutional and statutory rights.[13] Notwithstanding the Supreme Court ruling, since January 2025, Odisha authorities have barred the Munda tribe from accessing the Jamunagarh sacred sites within the Simlipal Tiger Reserve's core zone under the tiger supplementation initiative.[14]

- The Siang Upper Multipurpose Project (SUMP) in Arunachal Pradesh, proposed for hydroelectric development in the Siang Valley, has raised legal and environmental concerns. The project is expected to cause deforestation, alter river flow, and disrupt ecological balance, affecting agriculture, fish habitats, and water access for the Adi tribe. The Forest (Conservation) Amendment Act, 2023, by removing the requirement of Gram Sabha consent for forest diversion, enables such projects to proceed without mandatory environmental impact assessments or public

consultation. On October 5, 2024, protests were led by the Siang Indigenous Farmers' Forum (SIFF) in opposition to SUMP. [15]

– In Sundargarh, Odisha, the reported unauthorised conversion of over 1,000 acres of forest land has resulted in the displacement of approximately 1,088 Scheduled Tribe families from eighteen villages within the Kasada, Jhirdapali, S. Balang, Pithachore, and Bhalupani gram panchayats. The action, carried out without compliance with due legal procedures, constitutes a violation of the Forest Rights Act, 2006, thereby rendering the affected families landless and infringing upon their legally protected forest rights.[16]

– Thousands of Tangsa community members in Kharsang, Arunachal Pradesh, are opposing the auction of coal blocks in the Namchik-Namphuk coalfield, citing risks of displacement and ecological harm. Villagers have accused the government of violating established procedures by not securing their free, prior, and informed consent and by allegedly providing inaccurate data regarding the number of families that would be affected.[17]

– Odisha has witnessed multiple mining-related protests, with local communities and organisations in districts like Koraput, Kalahandi, Sundargarh, Angul, Rayagada, Jajpur, Keonjhar, Khurda, and Bargarh opposing projects such as bauxite mining in reserve forests, black stone and graphite mining, iron ore and coal mining operations, and illegal laterite extraction, citing violations of environmental laws, lack of Gram Sabha consent, displacement, and threats to traditional livelihoods and ecology. [18,19]

– Enacted in October 2024, the Tamil Nadu Land Consolidation (Special Projects) Act, 2023, faces strong opposition from farmers because it permits the consolidation of land for special projects, including development on waterbodies. Handing over land containing waterbodies risks damaging these crucial resources, grazing lands, and causing environmental harm.

### Description and critical analysis of any relevant policies, schemes, legislations or budget announcements

The Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change (MoEF&CC) received a slight budget increase for FY 2024-25, with the Finance Minister announcing an allocation of Rs 3,330.37 crore in the Union Budget on Tuesday, July 23, 2024. This represents a rise of Rs 93.25 crore from the previous fiscal year's allocation of Rs 3,231.02 crore. [20]

A significant budget increase was observed for the National Tiger Conservation Authority, rising from Rs 15.8 crore in 2023-24 to over double at Rs 35 crore. Correspondingly, several other entities, such as the pollution control board, National Mission for a Green India, and the National Afforestation Programme, also received larger budgetary allocations. In contrast, the 2024-25 budget omits any funding for Bhopal gas leak disaster matters, which previously received Rs 126.09 crore. Meanwhile, biodiversity conservation saw a slight rise in funding to Rs 5 crore, up from Rs 3.5 crore.

The National Tiger Conservation Authority's direction in June 2024 to set in motion a time bound relocation of the remaining 4 lakh or so forest dwellers from the Critical Tiger Habitats of 54 Tiger Reserves from where already 1.1 lakh have been relocated, undermines the rights of forest dwelling communities and violates the provisions of Wild Life Protection Act 1972 as amended in 2006, FRA and the Right to Fair Compensation and Transparency in Land Acquisition, Rehabilitation and Resettlement Act, 2013.[21]

The Bhu-Aadhaar or ULPIN scheme is a government initiative to assign unique IDs to all rural land parcels, aiming to digitise land records, integrate them with a national farmers' registry. In 2024-25, Rs. 10,000 crore has been allocated for land reforms, with an additional Rs. 5,000 crore dedicated to creating a Farmers' Registry. However, challenges remain, including the need for accurate and updated land records, technical infrastructure for digitisation, and addressing concerns related to data privacy. [22,23] A critical issue pertains to the potential exclusion of marginalised communities, who may lack

requisite awareness, access, or documentation to engage with the process, thereby risking the alienation of their land rights and contributing to systemic landlessness.

In February 2025, the Wildlife Crime Control Bureau (WCCB) issued a nationwide red alert aimed at countering the escalating threat of tiger poaching, citing credible intelligence and recent poaching activities in key wildlife landscapes across India. Following this, states like Chhattisgarh, Uttarakhand, Madhya Pradesh, and Maharashtra ramped up surveillance and patrolling in and around tiger reserves.[24,25]

In January, Madhya Pradesh issued an order allowing forest officials to search homes and collect personal data from denotified, nomadic, and semi-nomadic tribes like the Pardhi community, especially in tiger corridors, to prevent poaching. The order, lacking a clear legal basis, has been criticised for targeting vulnerable groups, violating constitutional rights to equality, privacy, and non-discrimination, and resembling colonial-era practices under the repealed Criminal Tribes Act of 1871.[26]

The Mizoram Legislative Assembly on March 11, 2025, has adopted the LARR Act of 2013. This adoption establishes a legally binding and transparent system for land acquisition within the state, guaranteeing fair compensation for those affected. Mizoram now has a legally enforceable framework that ensures transparency and fair compensation during land acquisition processes. [27]

The Meghalaya State Investment Promotion & Facilitation (Amendment) Bill, 2025, potentially weakens tribal land protections under the Meghalaya Land Transfer Regulation Act, 1971, by promoting "land banks" that facilitate long-term leasing of land for development projects. This has raised concerns among tribal communities about possible land alienation. The Bill has also been criticised for lacking inclusive consultation with local tribal stakeholders during its formulation.[28]

In recent months, the judiciary has actively addressed forest-related matters. Specifically, in a judgment issued on 15 May 2025, the Supreme Court directed the Forest Department to assume control of forest land previously held by the Revenue Department. The Supreme Court has instructed the Chief Secretaries of all States and the Administrators of all Union Territories to form Special Investigation Teams. These teams are tasked with investigating whether any reserved Forest Land under the Revenue Department's control has been allocated to private individuals or institutions for non-forestry purposes. Furthermore, the court has directed the Chief Secretaries to establish special teams to ensure all such transfers are completed within one year.[29]

On May 16, 2025, the Supreme Court of India delivered a landmark judgment declaring ex-post facto environmental clearances – approvals granted after the commencement of project activities – as illegal. The Court invalidated the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change's 2017 Notification and the 2021 Office Memorandum, which had permitted such retrospective approvals.[30]

### Overview of existing policy and/or implementation gaps

- In April 2023, responding to a PTI report citing government data that 7,50,648 hectares of forest land were encroached upon, the National Green Tribunal (NGT) directed the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change (MoEFCC) to gather data on forest encroachments from all states and Union Territories. The MoEFCC's report, submitted to the NGT in March 2024, indicated that 13,05,668.1 hectares of forest area were under encroachment across 25 states and Union Territories. The report noted that the full scale of encroachment remained undetermined pending the complete implementation of the Forest Rights Act (FRA) and the resolution of all claims and reviews. The NGT had taken suo motu cognisance of the encroachment issue following the prior year's report.[31]
- The Ministry of Tribal Affairs (MoTA) repealed Community Forest Resource Management guideline issued as a statutory direction under Sec. 12 of Forest Rights Act (FRA) empowering the Gram Sabha to freely and autonomously develop, decide and implement the plan replacing it with a guideline in 2023 to bring the process under the control of the panchayat and forest

bureaucracy attempting to reduce forest governance to forest management influenced by external interests. [32]

- The Dharti Aaba Janjatiya Gram Utkarsh Abhiyan (DA-JGUA), launched by the Government on October 2, 2024, transforms the Forest Rights Act into a beneficiary welfare scheme, undermining its primary legislative intent of rectifying historical injustice and vesting forest governance authority in Gram Sabhas. DA-JGUGA fails to address structural issues in FRA implementation and instead focuses on saturating rights recognition, completing recognition processes within set timelines, and converging with government welfare schemes. It creates a parallel structure of FRA Cells at district and sub-divisional levels, controlled by MoTA and State Tribal Welfare Departments, which undermines the authority and bypasses the accountability of statutory Gram Sabhas, violating key provisions of the Act. Furthermore, empanelling technical agencies and NGOs sidelines Gram Sabha bodies, reducing them to extensions of FRA Cells. The mission's techno-bureaucratic, technology-driven approach, including digitisation of FRA records and integration into the PM Gatishakti portal, risks turning forest rights data into a tool for land commodification, enabling faster infrastructure clearances and private sector investments at the cost of community control.

- Under the Dharti Aaba Janjatiya Gram Utkarsh Abhiyan (DA-JGUA), the Ministry of Tribal Affairs (MoTA) provides financial assistance of Rs. 15,000 per hectare, capped at Rs. 15 lakhs for up to 100 hectares, for implementing activities in Community Forest Resource (CFR) Management Plans. However, this support is primarily routed to technical agencies such as NGOs and CSOs, who also receive an additional Rs. 1 lakh per plan as administrative costs. This mechanism sidelines Gram Sabhas, reducing their statutory role in CFR governance and effectively transferring control to the forest department and private actors.

## Comparison of government data and UN/civil society/other data on the subject

- The UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD) has raised concerns about the relocation of tribal communities from tiger reserves in Odisha and 17 other Indian states. CERD has highlighted that the relocations violate both Indian laws, such as the Wildlife Protection Act and the Forest Rights Act, and international protections under the Convention on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination. It pointed out issues like incomplete recognition of tribal rights, lack of evidence that tribal presence harms tigers, and absence of resettlement options. CERD has requested a response from the Indian government by 1st August.[33]

- According to the latest data released by the Global Forest Watch (GFW) in collaboration with the University of Maryland and over 100 global organisations, India experienced a loss of 18,200 hectares of primary forest in 2024, marking an increase from the 17,700 hectares lost in 2023. Since 2001, India has lost approximately 2.31 million hectares of tree cover, representing a 7.1 per cent decrease and resulting in 1.29 gigatonnes of carbon dioxide equivalent emissions. The GFW data identifies the Northeast region, along with Chhattisgarh, Odisha, and Maharashtra, as critical hotspots for tree cover loss.[34]

- In contrast, the India State of Forest Report (ISFR) 2023, prepared by the Forest Survey of India (FSI), asserts a net national increase in forest and tree cover. The report claims an overall gain of 2,261 sq km in forest and tree cover compared to the previous assessment. While ISFR 2023 acknowledges the decline of moderately dense forests in the Northeastern states, it maintains a broader narrative of net national gain, which often diverges from independent assessments and ground-level ecological realities.[35]

## Recommendations

The Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006 – commonly known as the Forest Rights Act (FRA) – was enacted to redress historical injustices faced by Adivasi and forest-dependent communities, and to democratise forest governance by legally vesting decision-making powers in Gram Sabhas. Nineteen years since its passage, however,

the implementation of the FRA remains inadequate, fragmented, and increasingly subsumed within a bureaucratic and technocratic framework.

In blatant contravention of the Act's transformative spirit, the FRA is being operationalised as a top-down welfare measure, with the central role of Gram Sabhas frequently diluted or entirely bypassed in key decisions. Forest lands continue to be diverted for mining, infrastructure, and industrial projects without securing the free, prior, and informed consent of the Gram Sabha, as mandated by law. Likewise, initiatives such as carbon trading schemes and afforestation drives are being undertaken in the name of Gram Sabhas, but without meaningful consultation, participation, or consent from the communities they purport to serve.

Simultaneously, large tracts of land acquired under the Land Acquisition, Rehabilitation and Resettlement Act, 2013 remain idle for extended periods, while displaced communities continue to face prolonged suffering and systemic neglect.

Moreover, forced evictions and land alienation under the guise of development or conservation not only contravene the FRA but also violate provisions of the Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act, 1996 (PESA), which upholds self-governance rights for Adivasi communities in Scheduled Areas.

The following recommendations aim to address these urgent gaps in policy and implementation, reaffirm the constitutional and legal mandate of Gram Sabhas, and restore the principles of justice, participatory governance, and community sovereignty enshrined in the FRA and PESA.

- The statutory authority of Gram Sabhas in the initiation, verification, and adjudication of forest rights claims under the Forest Rights Act (FRA) must be unequivocally upheld, ensuring that no administrative or technological interventions override this mandate.
- Any diversion of forest land for mining, infrastructure development, or conservation projects must strictly conform to the provisions of the FRA, including obtaining the free, prior, and informed consent of the Gram Sabha as mandated by law.
- To achieve effective and equitable climate action, the government must ensure all climate and biodiversity policies fully comply with the Forest Rights Act, 2006 (FRA), in practice. Adopting the Community Forest Resources-Forest Rights Act (CFR-FRA) framework is crucial for realising this goal. [36]
- The government should ensure that all land acquired under the Land Acquisition, Rehabilitation and Resettlement Act, 2013, which remains unutilised for a period of five years from the date of taking possession, be mandatorily returned to the original landowners or their lawful heirs. This provision must be implemented in both letter and spirit to prevent land hoarding, curb speculative acquisitions, and uphold justice for displaced communities.
- All forced evictions, displacements, and land acquisitions undertaken in the name of development should be deemed illegal if carried out without prior informed consent of the Gram Sabha and due process as mandated under the Forest Rights Act, 2006 and the Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act, 1996. All measures must ensure the protection of community rights and the ecological balance of forest landscapes.
- The State shall ensure transparency in all forest governance processes and recognise the authority of Gram Sabhas to lead in the management and protection of forest areas, thereby mandating a bottom-up, community-led approach in policy formulation and implementation.
- The government must release a comprehensive white paper detailing all land acquired in the name of 'public purpose', including specific information on its current usage status. Any discussion of acquiring new land for industrial or developmental projects must be preceded by full transparency and accountability regarding previously acquired land. Communities have a right to ask: account for the land already taken – its utilization, beneficiaries, and outcomes – before seeking to acquire more land.

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# STATUS OF MARGINALISED COMMUNITIES

# When Inducing Homelessness (and Hopelessness) is a Policy

*An evidence-based, rights-oriented framework is vital for slum transformation in India. Priorities include real-time GIS mapping, participatory data collection, blended finance, tenure security through regulatory reform, climate-resilient infrastructure, community-led governance, and integrated livelihood, health, and education services.*

A study of slums, homelessness, urban livelihoods, and migrants illustrates the depth of urban challenges being faced by Indian cities. Cities are not just sagging under the weight of overburdened infrastructure; they are facing the onslaught of climate change in the form of urban heat island effects and urban flooding.

In the bargain, the urban poor are left to fend for themselves in terms of housing, sanitation, water, electricity, health, education, transportation, financial services, access to food distribution systems etc., – all in search of livelihoods. The urban poor are stuck between a rock and a hard place – unable to go back to villages where there are no jobs in the non-farm sector, they are forced to live in squalid conditions in hostile cities where they are viewed as 'outsiders' and are denied the right to decent life and livelihoods.

In spite of the various government initiatives like Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana, AMRUT, Swacch Bharat Mission, and Smart Cities Mission, the plight of the urban poor continues to remain fragile and vulnerable.

## CHALLENGES TO SLUM UPGRADATION IN INDIA

Since June 2024, the Indian government has prioritized urban slum redevelopment through initiatives like the Dharavi Redevelopment Project[1], the construction of 4,000 homes [2] under PMAY-2 in Ahmedabad, and policy shifts recognising upper-level slum residents in Mumbai. However, progress is hindered[3] by structural challenges, including reliance on outdated 2011 census data, risks of eviction, and housing models misaligned with residents' needs.

The Indian government has increased funding for PMAY-U 2.0[4] and AMRUT[5], emphasizing in-situ slum redevelopment and infrastructure improvements. However, the lack of new legislative frameworks and reliance on developer-driven models hinder progress. Historical issues, including forced evictions, inadequate housing, and marginalisation of informal workers, necessitate inclusive, evidence-based, and data-driven policies for equitable urban development[6].

While the flagship urban initiatives, mentioned above, besides others such as the Smart Cities Mission[7] are expressly crafted to uplift slum dwellers by ensuring access to *pucca* housing, upgraded infrastructure, and smart-city services, their impact has been dampened by several persistent implementation shortcomings. These include prolonged stagnation of the In-Situ Slum Redevelopment (ISSR) vertical, the prevalence of forced evictions without adequate rehabilitation, chronic shortfalls in essential services and the marginalisation of slum communities from decision-making processes[8].

Government data often highlights programme successes, such as housing delivery and self-help group formation[9], while UN and civil society reports[10] underscore escalating challenges, including slum population growth, service deficiencies, and tenure insecurity[11]. This necessitates regular data updates beyond the 2011 Census using real-time GIS and community surveys, increased budgetary allocations aligned with SDG targets, integrated land tenure reforms with in-situ upgrading, and robust independent monitoring to align official claims with actual slum conditions[12].

An evidence-based, rights-oriented framework is vital for slum transformation in India. Priorities include real-time GIS mapping, participatory data collection, blended finance, tenure security through regulatory reform, climate-resilient infrastructure, community-led governance, and integrated livelihood, health, and education services. Institutional convergence must underpin these measures to ensure inclusive, sustainable, and accountable slum upgrading over the next four years.

## URBAN LIVELIHOODS IN INDIA TODAY

Building on the DAY-NULM, MoHUA launched a new scheme, Deendayal Jan Aajeevika Yojana, to support 2.5 crore urban poor households, focusing on six vulnerable worker groups. A pilot began in October 2024 across 25 cities, with nationwide rollout planned. The mission emphasises self-employment, skill development, social protection, and financial inclusion through five key components and a tech-driven approach[13]. The two annexures Annex 1 and Annex 2 give details of the progress of DAY-NULM between June and November 2024 and the progress of the pilot intervention[14].

The focus on building social infrastructure and innovative projects is welcome, but efforts to promote self-employment and micro enterprises under DAY-NULM have largely failed to address urban unemployment over the past decade. India adds 1-1.2 crore youths to its labour force annually[15], with unemployment rates high among the 15–29 age group – 13.8 per cent nationally, 17.2 per cent in urban areas, and 12.3 per cent in rural areas[16]. Most of these youths have limited education and skills and are concentrated in the less urbanised, backward states of East and Central India[17], leading to high migration to the more developed West and South[18].

As per the ILO, the worldwide youth unemployment rate was 15.6 per cent in 2021 which fell to 13.3 per cent in 2023. [19]. Going by these standards, the youth unemployment rate is very high even if the PLFS data is considered.

The creation of urban livelihoods has to be tackled from the angle of urban development – one wherein the government invests in the creation of urban infrastructure in these backward states and in this process, there is employment generation. Investments in physical infrastructure will lead to overall development of these cities (leading to multiplier effects) while the creation of social infrastructure will enable the cities in these states to become more liveable.

That said, India's unemployment problem is multi-faceted with different states exhibiting different patterns of labour demography and development levels. Mass employment for the unskilled and semi-skilled labour can be provided by undertaking infrastructure development and boosting the manufacturing sector. At the same time, a large cohort of educated unemployed have to be imparted required skills to meet industry needs.

**Annexure 1: Major Achievements for the last 6 months (June to November, 2024) under DAY-NULM**

| Sr. No. | Components | Progress |
|---|---|---|
| 1. | No. of Self Help Groups (SHGs) formed | 35,612 |
| 2. | No. of members in SHGs formed | 1,92, 079 |
| 3. | No. of SHGs given Revolving Fund (RF) | 23,502 |
| 4. | No. of ALFs formed | 1,980 |
| 5. | No. of ALFs given RF | 818 |
| 6. | No. of CLFs formed | 126 |
| 7. | No. of beneficiaries assisted with loans for setting up of individual and group micro enterprises | 43,521 |
| 8. | No. of loans given to SHGs under bank linkage | 1,074 |
| 9. | No. of shelters for urban homeless made functional | 10 |
| 10. | No. of street vendors issued Certificate of Vending (CoV) | 21,194 |

**Annexure 2: Progress on Pilot Intervention**

| Sr. No. | Key Parameters | Overall Progress |
|---|---|---|
| 1. | No. of ULB Executive Committees formed | 7 cities (Under process in other cities) |
| 2. | No. of District Level Committees formed | 4 cities |
| 3. | Total number of urban poor identified | 11,69,353 |
| 4. | Vulnerable groups identified | Construction – 42,260; Domestic – 70,002; Care – 3,355; Transport – 1,674; Waste – 11,355; Gig - 402 |
| 5. | No. of new SHGs Formed since 1st October | 655 |
| 6. | No. of new CIGs Formed since 1st October | 384 |
| 7. | No. of SHGs identified for RF since 1st October | 6760 |
| 8. | No. of old ALFs identified for RF since 1st October | 106 |
| 9. | No. of individual loan applications received and disbursed | 659 received, 400 disbursed |
| 10. | No. of group loan applications received and disbursed | 1720 received, 1677 disbursed |
| 11. | No. of social infrastructure identified for development | SUH - 12<br>CLC -30<br>Labour chowk – 7<br>Care Cluster - 22 |
| 12. | No. of I&SP projects identified | 4 |
| 13. | C-LAP process initiated | 7 |
| 14. | SUYOG centre established | 1 established, 3 under process |

Narendra Modi's government, in its third term from June 2024 has unleashed a brazen disregard to constitutional provisions. The right to housing under Article 19 on right to life has been utterly disregarded.

Right from 2014 until this year, its records of taking care of the homeless people, whom we call CityMakers[20] has been indeed dismal[21]. In Feb-Mar 2023 it demolished nine homeless shelters in portacabins under the orders of DUSIB (Delhi Urban Shelter Improvement Board), DDA (Delhi Development Authority), and Delhi Police (all under the LG of Delhi), for the G-20 summit.  In Jan 2024, it closed five homeless shelters in portacabins in Yamuna Bazaar. And now DUSIB has filed an affidavit in the Supreme Court of India to take out eight shelter spaces, further.

A survey[22] of the homeless in the City of Delhi, during the monsoon season (rainy – a first ever survey done in this season) from 27th – 31st Aug., 2024: 11 pm – 5:30 am (each night) revealed that 1,56,369 people were sleeping on the streets of Delhi, with an estimated population of over 3,00,000 homeless persons. It has already been pointed out that "The shelter space is deficient by 87.4 per cent of the MPD – 2021 norms."[23] And on top of it the government is trying to reduce the shelters by subterfuges. This has been topped with recurrent demolitions of the slums, thereby rendering hundreds and thousands of the urban poor, homeless.

It's shocking to note that the DDA cites the homeless shelters as a place where the slums evictees can be housed, mainly the Geeta Colony shelter in East Delhi. It was expected that there was a proper housing policy in place before the present de-housing and domicide drive was launched by the NDA govt.[24]

 "Homelessness is a symptom of malgovernance and systemic neglect, rather than an individual folly."[25] The NDA govt has perpetrated that only.

## Status of Migrant Workers In India

Poor wages, arduous and hazardous work conditions, near complete absence of social protection and increasing informality characterise India's labour landscape. Construction, mining, manufacturing and ever-expanding service sectors of the urban economy are fed primarily by distress-driven, rural migrant workers. Their numbers are in uncounted millions. Not only are work and work conditions poor for migrant workers, their access to essential services and infrastructure in cities continues to keep them on the margins of urban India's growth story. Decent, affordable housing, sanitation, transportation, health care – the very basic ingredients of urban survival remain hard for migrant workers to reach. The appalling conditions of migrant workers and their instant slide into vulnerability became sharply visible during COVID 19 lockdowns. This period provided a strong push for revisiting state response and responsibility towards migrant workers. E-Shram portal for registration of workers, One Nation One Ration Card, Affordable Rental Housing and reactivation of social security funds and boards were products of the post lockdown times.

Five years from those times, including in the one year that has passed, there is meagre progress to offer.

The eShram portal that was launched in 2021, is a national database that aims to register and provide social security benefits to unorganised workers, including migrant workers, construction workers, gig workers, and street vendors. As of now, over 30 crore workers have registered on the portal. It is however yet to become the gateway to comprehensive and universal social security and protection.

The implementation of the One Nation One Ration (ONOR) launched in 2020 has virtually halted across the country. The ONOR was intended as a radical scheme to make PDS access portable to migrant workers but technological glitches, Aadhar enabled access and inter-state coordination over food allocation have rendered the scheme ineffective.

The Affordable Rental Housing Complex scheme that aims to place un-used stock of public housing within reach of migrant workers in cities has made almost no progress across most states. Over 80,000 units were identified under this scheme and barely 7 per cent of this stock has been used thus far.

There are several gaps that remain unattended and need urgent attention. These include better implementation of Inter-State Migrant Workmen (Regulation of Employment and Conditions of Service) Act particularly keeping in mind the new streams of migration, employment and contractual arrangements that confront migrant workers. An urgent policy framework to monitor and combat workplace accidents and injuries particularly in unorganised, informal work settings is needed. Labour governance has been steadily weakened across the country and this infrastructure needs investment and strengthening. Public provisioning of decent housing, sanitation, transportation and health care for migrant workers needs universal attention for the workforce to be stable and productive – and not just serve as sites available for relentless extraction with no returns or replenishment.

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# Tribal Communities Face Land Rights, Education, Poverty, and Employment Challenges

*The Tribal Health Report highlights that around 40.6 per cent of the Scheduled Tribe (ST) population continues to live below the poverty line, nearly double the 20.5 per cent rate observed among non-tribal groups.*

The diversity of tribal communities in India, referred to as the Scheduled Tribe (ST) by the Constitution of India, represents a complex interplay of growth paradigms, identity and nativity concerns, economic distinctiveness, developmental initiatives, and socio-political dynamics. It showcases some of the most culturally rich yet socially and economically marginalised populations in many countries. In reviewing their current status (mid-2024 to mid-2025), it becomes essential to consider a broad range of indicators including policy-level initiatives, socio-economic indicators, employment, education, healthcare and nutrition, land and forest rights, livelihood, and cultural preservation. This review seeks to highlight both the progress made and the persistent gaps that hinder the full inclusion of tribal communities in mainstream development.

## Developmental Initiatives and Challenges

1. **Pradhan Mantri Adi Adarsh Gram Yojana (PMAAGY)-** As of 2024, the Pradhan Mantri Adi Adarsh Gram Yojana (PMAAGY) continues to be a pivotal initiative by the Indian government since 1977-78 (renamed from Special Central Assistance to Tribal Sub-Scheme in 2021-22), aiming for the holistic development of tribal villages. The scheme targets villages with significant tribal populations, focusing on integrated socio-economic development through a convergence approach. However, several states and union territories lack specific data on Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs), complicating targeted interventions.

2. **Pradhan Mantri Janjatiya Vikas Mission (PMJVM)-** The Pradhan Mantri Janjatiya Vikas Mission (PMJVM) is a Central Sector Scheme launched by the Government of India to promote livelihood-driven development among tribal communities. Implemented from 2021–22 to 2025–26, the mission aims to enhance tribal entrepreneurship and create sustainable livelihood opportunities by leveraging local resources and traditional knowledge.

3. **Prime Minister's Janjati Adivasi Nyaya Maha Abhiyan (PM-JANMAN) Yojana-** The Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs); another ST group recognised by the Constitution of India comprising 75 groups in number, are the focus communities under this scheme, launched on November 15, 2023. While 100 per cent mobile medical units are installed in 1,055 PVTG settlements within 5km of tribal health centres, only 2,450 of the 7,370 approved rural housing units have been completed to date. Just 89 out of the targeted 235 habitations have been covered regarding the piped water supply. Meanwhile, 15 minor road projects are underway in micro-project areas, with completion targeted by December.

4. **Dharti Aaba Janjatiya Gram Utkarsh Abhiyan-** Launched on October 2, 2024, the Dharti Aaba Janjatiya Gram Utkarsh Abhiyan in Hazaribag, Jharkhand seeks to address key deficiencies in social infrastructure, healthcare, education, and livelihood opportunities. Many tribal-dominated areas suffer from weak administrative presence and limited governance capacity, affecting timely execution. Many of the 63,843 targeted villages are in remote or forested regions with limited road access, making transportation of materials and workforce a challenge.

## Socio-Economic Indicators

Although India's overall poverty rate dropped below 5 per cent in 2024, significant disparities persist – particularly among tribal communities. The Tribal Health Report highlights that around 40.6 per cent of the Scheduled Tribe (ST) population continues to live below the poverty line, nearly double the 20.5 per cent rate observed among non-tribal groups. This gap is even more pronounced in rural areas, where over 45 per cent of ST individuals are estimated to be living in poverty, according to figures cited in the Ministry of Tribal Affairs' 2021–22 Annual Report.

Employment indicators for tribal communities have improved, with unemployment dropping to 1.8 per cent in 2022–23 from 5.3 per cent in 2017–18. However, challenges remain. In Jharkhand, 38.11 per cent of MGNREGA workers were ineligible for Aadhaar-Based Payments due to unlinked bank accounts, resulting in wage delays. In Andhra Pradesh's Visakhapatnam district, tribal workers protested receiving only Rs. 150 per day under MGNREGA – well below the mandated Rs. 307 – underscoring persistent wage issues and payment delays.

## Education

By mid-2024, tribal education in India showed mixed progress. Mizoram leads with a 98.2 per cent literacy rate, becoming the country's first fully literate state. In Jharkhand, efforts to include tribal languages like Kurukh, Mundari, and Santhali in school curricula aim to foster cultural inclusion. Yet, challenges persist – particularly in Palamu district, where dropout rates remain high. The 2024–25 Shishu Panji update reported hundreds of dropouts, driven by seasonal labour, disease outbreaks, and issues like meal fraud and dual school enrolments.

## Health and Nutrition

Health disparities remain a significant concern. According to data from the National Family Health Survey, life expectancy at birth for Scheduled Tribes is significantly lower than the national average, with high rates of malnutrition and inadequate healthcare services. In Karnataka's Udupi and Dakshina Kannada districts, the Koraga community – classified as a PVTG – has raised concerns over the poor quality of nutritional supplements provided under government welfare schemes. Substandard items such as ghee, oil, chickpeas, and eggs have contributed to worsening health conditions, including increased cases of anaemia and malnutrition.

## Land and Forest Rights

The implementation of the Forest Rights Act (FRA), 2006 remains uneven across states. In response to reports of illegal evictions, the Union Ministry of Tribal Affairs urged states in January to ensure proper enforcement of the FRA. This followed the National Tiger Conservation Authority's (NTCA) June 2024 directive to expedite evictions from tiger reserves. Over 100,000 people have been displaced due to protected area demarcations, with 64,801 relocated from core reserve zones by the NTCA alone.

## Livelihood

Initiatives aimed at improving tribal livelihoods have begun to yield positive results. In Odisha's Kandhamal district, the government has introduced black pepper cultivation across 500 acres, engaging approximately 4,000 tribal households. This agroforestry initiative is projected to generate sustainable income, with estimated returns of Rs. 4.5 to 5.4 lakh per acre annually within three years. Likewise, the Telangana government has rolled out the Rs. 12,600 crore Indira Solar Giri Jal Vikasam scheme to uplift tribal farmers through solar-powered irrigation. The programme is set to benefit 2.1 lakh tribal farmers by offering a 100 per cent subsidy on solar pump systems, along with assistance for horticulture and intercropping practices.

## Cultural Preservation

Uttar Pradesh's eco-tourism project in Dudhwa Tiger Reserve engages the Tharu tribe through homestays and cultural experiences, promoting sustainable development and heritage

preservation. Meanwhile, after a two-year pause, Manipur's Shirui Lily Festival returned to Ukhrul, celebrating 75 years of the state flower with traditional arts and performances, fostering regional unity.

Despite constitutional safeguards and development efforts, tribal communities face land rights, education, poverty, and employment challenges. Ensuring their well-being requires stronger policy implementation, inclusive development, and legal protections. This review highlights their lived realities, contributions to culture and the environment, and the urgent need for equitable and sustainable growth to ensure that tribal populations are not left behind in India's growth trajectory.

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# India Still Far From the Goals of Equality, Inclusion and Justice

*Only 30 of 236 schemes in the SC Budget are targeted. Of the 244 schemes in the ST budget, only 31 are targeted. This raises serious concerns for these communities. The budget gap for SC and ST communities is Rs 2,48,991 crores, with only Rs 1,13,642 crores allocated to targeted schemes.*

Caste determines who we interact with and who we become in this nation – everything from our living arrangements to our professional decisions is influenced by the social hierarchy of which we are all a part. Even though there are several policies, Dalits are unable to access these schemes which makes their condition concerning. Below is an examination of a few critical areas over the last year.

**Manual Scavenging:** 92 per cent of Sewer and Septic Tank Workers (SSWs) profiled by the Social Justice Ministry belong to Scheduled Caste, Scheduled Tribe, or Other Backward Class communities. An exclusive report published by *The Hindu* suggests a high concentration of Dalit workers in the profession. *The Hindu* reports that 77.2 per cent of sewer entry professionals/septic tank workers in India are from Dalit communities, despite the Indian government's claim that manual scavenging is not a caste-based occupation. The Safai Karamchari Andolan (SKA) movement, which aims to eradicate manual scavenging, recorded 339 deaths of manual scavengers in 2022-23[1]. The prohibition of the employment as Manual scavengers and their rehabilitation act 2013 prohibits manual scavenging as a hazardous and dehumanising task linked to caste discrimination. This systemic oppression perpetuates poverty, health issues and social exclusion. However, effective implementation requires adequate financial resources for rehabilitation and alternative livelihood programmes. Manual scavengers face significant challenges, especially for Dalit women, who face social stigma, sexual violence, exploitation, and limited access to education and employment due to intersectionality of caste, gender, and age[2]. The Supreme Court has ordered a fresh survey to identify individuals involved in manual scavenging and provide them with sustainable and accessible alternative livelihood options but sadly no steps have been taken till now[3].

**Education:** The caste system and poverty still make it difficult for the Scheduled Caste (SC) or Dalit children to receive high-quality education, even though education has improved their social and economic circumstances in India. Even after 75 years of independence and the ratification of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, most children in the SCs cannot attend school, and the quality of their education remains inadequate[4]. Education is a critical sector for the development of Dalits and Adivasis. Education is a basic human right and important for growth in society and the economy. Even after many improvements since independence, these groups still struggle to get good education because of social stigma, poor facilities, and poverty.

One of the critical Schemes on education for SC and STs is the Pre-Matric Scholarship (PMS). In the financial year (FY) 2025-26 the allocation for PMS is Rs 577. 96 crores for SCs and Rs 313. 79 crores for STs, showing an increase for SCs and a decrease for STs from the last year. Additionally, Rs 1,156. 07 crores has been allocated for Central Universities under Allocation for the welfare of the SCs (AWSC) and Rs 561. 76 crores under Allocation for the Welfare of the STs (AWST), with the University Grants Commission providing Rs 567. 11 crores and Rs 300. 24 crores for AWSC and AWST, respectively.

Also, the Post-Matric Scholarship scheme allocation has decreased to Rs 5,900. 00 crores for SCs and increased to Rs 2,462. 68 crores for STs compared to the previous financial year. The National Overseas Scholarship Scheme faces challenges such as delayed disbursements, barriers for

disabled students, and online issues, leading to dissatisfaction among beneficiaries. While SC allocation increased from Rs 95 crores to Rs 130 crores, ST allocation decreased from Rs 6.00 crores to Rs 0.01 crore, and interest subsidies and guarantee fund contributions have been eliminated in the FY 2025-26[5].

**Caste Census:** It is impossible to address the issues faced by the social groups that have been traditionally faced discrimination (whether due to caste, ethnicity, religion, gender, disability, etc.) without gathering information and understanding about each group's identity. Therefore, the census is crucial for promoting inclusive growth and making informed policies, and it should not be seen as giving in to identity politics.

Instead of leaving caste enumeration up to the whims of the Union administration, the Census Act of 1948 should be changed to make caste census mandatory. By adding a few relevant questions to the questionnaire, such data may be gathered as part of the standard census[6]. The call for a caste census in India is due to unequal access to resources and limited political representation for marginalised groups. There is a need for accurate data to evaluate the unfair distribution of social, political, and economic benefits among various caste groups[7].

States like Bihar and Andhra Pradesh have recently conducted caste-based census. Telangana government conducts a comprehensive household caste survey for targeted resource distribution, becoming the third state after Andhra Pradesh and Bihar to hold such a caste-based headcount[8].

Bihar released a detailed social composition data from a year long survey in October 2023, followed by Andhra Pradesh and Telangana. Each state has initiated a caste census and a "door-to-door" survey to gather comprehensive data. There is a growing demand for detailed caste data in the country, as it relates to political representation and affirmative action for disadvantaged groups in jobs and education. This particularly affects fields like medicine, engineering, and science. However, collecting caste data is politically sensitive, as some people fear it could expose ongoing discrimination[9].

The government has finally announced a nationwide caste count alongside the next population census. The census forms will now capture caste for the first time since 1931, however it is not clear how much of an influence the information will have on the country's affirmative action policies[10].

**Union Budget:** In the financial year (FY) 2025-26, Rs. 1,68,478. 38 crores is allocated for SC communities, representing a slight increase of 1. 8 per cent. For ST welfare, the budget is Rs. 1,29,250 crores, up by 3. 5 per cent. However, this increase does not align with new targeted schemes announced by the finance minister. Only a small portion of the funds for SC and ST welfare, Rs. 62,150 crores and Rs. 51,491. 59 crores respectively, are aimed at targeted schemes, making up only 3. 9 per cent and 3. 3 per cent of total funds. Most schemes are general and do not specifically benefit the intended groups, serving broader sections of society instead.

Out of 236 schemes in the SC Budget, only 30 are targeted, and from 244 schemes in the ST budget, only 31 are targeted. This raises serious concerns for these communities. Analysis shows that only 30 SC schemes and 31 ST schemes have their results documented in budget reports. The budget gap for SC and ST communities is Rs 2,48,991 crores, with only Rs 1,13,642 crores allocated to targeted schemes. Important programs like the National Safai Karamchari Finance and Development Corporation and others are under-funded in this budget cycle, which is troubling. A guideline from 2018 requires the government to focus on non-divertible targeted schemes for community development, but it is unclear how existing non-targeted schemes will address development gaps in the future[11].

**Violence and Atrocities:** Dalits in India continue to be vulnerable to caste-based atrocities as per the National Crime Record Bureau 2022. This national crime report has not been produced for the years after 2022. There is an increase of 13.1 per cent in the incidents in 2022 (57,582 cases) against the Dalits over the year 2021 (50,900 cases). The crime rate registered an increase from

25.3 in 2021 to 28.6 in 2022[12]. Of the total crime (58,24,946 cases) against Dalits, 15.91 per cent of the crime is committed against SC Women. The year 2022 also recorded a fall in the conviction rate and an increase in the acquittal rate in the cases of Dalits. In 2022, the conviction rate in conjunction with IPC was recorded as 34 per cent compared to 2021, which was 36 per cent. 61.7 per cent of the cases registered ended up in acquittal in 2022, an increase over 2021 (57.1 per cent). At the end of 2022, 94.4 per cent of cases were pending at the stage of trial in SC cases.

The central government releases to the state and union territories a yearly budget for effective implementation of the PCR Act, 1955 and the SC/ST (PoA) Act, 1989. For strengthening the said mechanism, the ministry received Rs. 500 crores for FY 2023-24 and Rs. 550 crores for FY 2024-25, which is insufficient to provide protection to the survivors from atrocities in the form of immediate relief and rehabilitation, like land and employment in all states. Despite the increasing violence against SC and ST women, the allocation for the scheme 'Strengthening of Machinery for Enforcement of PCR Act, 1955 and PoA Act, 1989' remains limited, with only Rs. 138.90 crores allocated for women of these groups. This under-allocation for the very important aspect defeats the objective of the PoA Act and PCR Act.

**Climate Change:** The 2025 Climate Change Performance Index (CCPI) report ranks India in 10th place as the highest performer. India also receives a high ranking in the Green House Gas (GHG) Emissions and Energy Use categories, medium in Climate Policy, and low in Renewable Energy[13]. Despite the positive developments in renewables, India remains heavily reliant on coal. The CCPI country experts expect India to revise the country's Nationally Determined Contribution (NDC) to set more ambitious absolute emissions reduction targets across more sectors.

India has launched a central sector scheme "Mission Mausam" in September 2024, for two years, 2024-26, developed by the Ministry of Earth Sciences to make India a "weather-ready and climate-smart" nation, to strengthen observations and improve model capability to be able to plan and protect life and property from extreme and high-impact weather; to improve our Model/Data Assimilation/High performance Computing (HPC) for giving accurate information to the Public and stakeholders; and to forecast dissemination: Effective communication with Society: Early Warning for all etc.[14].

Mission Mausam also aims at the Gram Panchayats across India to boost agricultural productivity in rural areas through providing timely and localised weather information to nearly 2.6 lakh panchayats, thereby directly supporting the farmers. These updates cover critical parameters such as temperature, rainfall, humidity, wind, and cloud conditions – essential data that farmers need for informed decision-making regarding sowing, harvesting, and irrigation.

India submitted its 4th Biennial Update Report (BUR-4) to the UNFCCC on 30th December 2024. India pledged to achieve net-zero emissions by 2070 at the 26th Conference of the Parties (COP 26) in 2021. India's 4th Biennial Update Report (BUR-4) highlighted a 7.93 per cent reduction in GHG emissions in 2020 compared to 2019[15].

The Government of India has also embarked upon ambitious actions in the areas of renewable energy, afforestation, energy efficiency and urban development. As a result of these efforts, India has achieved 21 per cent reduction in the emission intensity of its gross domestic product (GDP) between 2005 and 2014, thereby achieving its pre-2020 voluntary goal of reducing the emission intensity of GDP by 20-25 per cent from 2005 levels by 2020[16]. The success of the missions launched under the NAPCC is key to India's commitment to the Paris Agreement to combat climate change and achieve its SDGs.

The frequency and severity of the climate-change induced disasters are increasing in India, which includes heatwaves, landslides, floods, cyclones, drought, unseasonal flash floods etc. Natural disasters claimed 2,936 lives across India in 2024-25 (as of January 27, 2025), according to data presented by the Centre in the Lok Sabha in February. The disasters, including floods and landslides, also led to the loss of 61,826 cattle, damage to over 3.63 lakh houses, and affected

14.24 lakh hectares of cropped land[17]. This also led to the loss of 61,826 cattle, damage to over 3.63 lakh houses, and affected 14.24 lakh hectares of cropped land.

In 2024, Uttar Pradesh observed hailstorms and unseasonal rainfall from January to March 2024. It affected the Bundelkhand region badly, ravaged several winter-sown crops like wheat, mustard, and chickpeas, and caused delays in harvesting. The Official surveys found crop loss of above 33 per cent in nine districts, of which five are in Bundelkhand, and two in western Uttar Pradesh. Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister ordered officials to assess crop damage. The state government announced the survey and released the compensation to the farmers for the loss who have crop insurance.

However, Dalit farmers did not fall into the eligibility criteria and were deprived of monetary assistance provided by the state government. The landless Dalits either are sharecroppers or cultivate the land on lease, having no crop insurance. A National Dalit Watch-NCDHR survey of the Dalit households in six districts of the Bundelkhand region, namely Jalaun, Lalitpur, Jhansi, Hameerpur, Chitrakoot, Kanpur (Rural) and Kanpur (Urban), covering the 9 blocks, 39 villages and 944 households (Dalit farmers) reveals that these farmers lost 40 to 100 per cent of their crops. This survey was done in two phases, in March, which happened in Jalaun and Lalitpur districts. The rest of the districts were covered in June 2024.

Considering the aforesaid policies and mechanisms and India's position in different indicators, and India's claim to progress towards a net-zero status rapidly, India is still far from the goals of equality, inclusion, and justice in the climate change aspect. Despite this preparedness, mitigation, resilience building and mechanisms in India, climate change affects the marginalised and vulnerable communities more dependent on the natural resources for their livelihoods and are more exposed to disaster events. Policies and programmes fail to include Dalits, women from marginalised groups, sexual minorities, lactating and pregnant women of these groups, PWD and single women, etc. The government programs and policies are developed with a general point of view that completely neglects the marginalised groups. The budget documents (Union and State budgets) show the sheer absence of Dalits from the agenda of the policymakers.

The schemes under the various departments, which may help Dalits build their resilience against the impact of climate change, are allocated less budget under the Allocation for Welfare of Scheduled Caste (AWSC) or are generally obsolete allocations. The Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change is a nodal agency for the implementation of the policies and programs on climate change. The guidelines of the NITI Aayog 2018 mandate the forty ministries and departments to obligate fund allocation for SCs and STs (Allocation for Welfare of Scheduled Caste and Allocation for Welfare of Scheduled Tribe). Since India does not have a dedicated climate budget, there is a need to look at several schemes under the selected departments and ministries to analyse the pattern of allocation of funds by the government in building resilience, adaptation, and disaster risk reduction for the Dalits.

An analysis of the Union and state budget with the Dalit and Adivasi perspective by the NCDHR revealed disturbing figures. For Climate Change Adaptation schemes under the Department of Agriculture and Farmers' Welfare's as Pradhan Mantri Fasal Bima Yojana (PMFBY), Pradhan Mantri Kisan Samman Nidhi (PM-Kisan) and Pradhan Mantri Annadata Aay Sanrakshan Yojna (PM-AASHA), allocation is Rs 2,048 crores, Rs 1,1707.50 crores and Rs 1,726.39 crores for FY 2025-26 for Dalits. Being a notional/general scheme, there is a little outflow of funds towards the Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribes. In that case, the marginalised communities are denied the benefits of the schemes.

The Department of Fisheries has allocated a budget of Rs 415 Cr under the only DRR and CCA scheme i.e. Pradhan Mantri Matsya Sampada Yojana (PMMSY) for SCs. Though the allocation has been increased for SCs compared to the previous year, but again, the outcome budget has no specific mention of the SCs beneficiaries. In this case too, the extent this scheme would benefit the SCs and STs is a matter of concern.

The Ministry of New and Renewable Energy (MoNRE) has earmarked Rs 2,180 crores for AWSC under Solar Power (Grid) and Rs 2,258 Cr for AWST. The ministry has increased the allocation but this would not help the SC and ST communities as the scheme has no SC-ST target in the outcome budget.

**Recommendations:**

1. Social awareness campaigns and community engagement are crucial for challenging caste-based discriminations and stereotypes associated with manual scavenging, while mentorship programmes provide emotional support for SC men and women transitioning out of manual scavenging.
2. Eliminate Manual Scavenging to stop men and women from doing this work in public and private spaces. Use a multi-pronged strategy to help women involved in Manual Scavenging find alternative jobs, which includes training and capacity building. Also, ensure that measures are taken to prevent women from continuing in this work.
3. Educational scholarships for children of persons involved in manual scavenging should be reintroduced and funded, and the fresh survey to identify the persons engaged in Manual Scavenging should be started at the earliest possible.
4. Increase scholarship and financial aid budget for SC ST students by 30 per cent to reduce financial instability, reduce dropout rates, and ensure transparent fund disbursement. Allocate Rs 200 crore for curriculum revision and teacher training programme focused on caste sensitivity and inclusive teaching practices to address the educational disparities faced by SC/ST students
5. Ensure that there is at-least a total allocation of Rs 10,000 crores for the post matric scholarship
6. Census data serves as the foundation for developing policies, allocating resources, and monitoring national progress. We demand a nationwide caste census to be carried out at the earliest. This will help in creating proper development policies, distributing resources, and monitoring the progress of SCs and other marginalized communities in India.
7. We demand the introduction of more targeted development schemes and better innovative economic policies for SC and ST communities. In the top funded 50 schemes in both SC & ST Budget, increase funds to targeted schemes, currently at 38.6 per cent.
8. The lack of a legislative framework has led to several gaps. Central legislation would mandate equitable allocations, enhance transparency, and direct more funds to targeted schemes, addressing specific community needs and fostering inclusive development. This framework is crucial for bridging existing gaps and ensuring holistic community development.
9. A monitoring mechanism needs to be set up to look at the investigation, access to the monetary and rehabilitation to the survivors, timely charge sheet, arrest of the perpetrators and protection to the survivor family from the threats, and intimidation from the perpetrator and their supporters.
10. The governments make provisions, and programs to create awareness among the community about the national helpline and orient them on how to register and track their complaints on the portal.
11. A sensitisation programme should be started and run by the government for the police officials, especially those who are directly dealing with the survivors, medical officers, judicial officers, and judges, especially towards the women of these communities.
12. The standing committees on the "Social Justice" at the panchayat level under Panchayati Raj Institutions should also be given responsibilities to create awareness and sensitization programs for monitoring, combating, and mitigating the caste-based atrocities and discriminations in institutions within the Panchayats such as schools, healthcare centres (Anganwadi, VHCs), Panchayat offices, Police posts/stations, and other government offices.

13. Psycho-social support should be provided by the expert practitioners to the survivors of the sexual violence, especially to the Dalit minor girls. This is recommended to be a continuous support till the survivor overcomes the trauma, instead of a one-time session.
14. Increase the budget for climate actions under the AWSC and AWST proportionate to the SC and ST population taking into consideration regional and socio-economic vulnerabilities and exposure to climate risks in line with the guidelines of NITI Aayog.
15. It is also recommended to make provisions in the National Disaster Management Act for compensation to the Dalit sharecroppers and landless farmers who lose their crops and livelihoods during disasters.
16. The five most important departments/Ministries (Agriculture and farmers' Welfare, Environment, Forests and Climate Change, the allocation of the Department of Fisheries, Drinking Water and Sanitation and New and Renewable Energy) which hold importance for climate resilience should come up with more climate resilience schemes. This should also be mentioned in the outcome budget with a clear number/percentage of the beneficiaries of SCs and STs.

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# Enhance Financial Allocations for Schemes Benefiting Workers

*The perspective of the government should go beyond social security to address the workers' rights and welfare holistically. The legal framework for uncovered sections such as gig and platform workers, domestic workers etc need to be improved.*

More than 60 crore workers in the formal and informal sectors are the key contributors to the GDP growth in the economy. Their rights and welfare continue to be a key indicator for assessing the performance of any government. Progress and status on the welfare of workers on a few fronts during the period of governance by NDA III are shared below.

More than a decade ago, the NDA I government announced the development of four Labour Codes ( on social security, wages, occupational safety and health, and industrial relations). During the initial days of NDA II, they were also passed by the parliament despite massive protests and opposition by workers' organisations. The full implementation of these four labour codes has not yet been announced. It is expected this year, as most states are completing the framing of rules about these codes.

## Budget

The union budget has grown to more than Rs 50.65 lakh crores during 2025-26. But the percentage of allocations to the Ministry of Labour and Employment (the key ministry responsible for looking after the interests of labour) continues to be less than 1 per cent of the total  Union Budget  (0.64 per cent). There is no increase in the budget for labour welfare schemes (meant for beedi workers, cine workers and labour working in (i) mica mines, (ii) iron, chrome, manganese ore mines, (iii) limestone and dolomite mines). There is hardly any increase from the revised budget 2024-25 for the PM Shramyogi Mandhan scheme. The PM Karmyogi Mandhan scheme has a nominal allocation, but looking at the trends in the last few years, this scheme is dying.

## MGNREGA

Besides the allocations for workers' welfare under the ministry of labour and employment, the most important budgetary allocation is for MGNREGA under the ministry of rural development, which focuses on rural workers. Actually, the budget of MGNREGA is more than double that of the ministry of labour and employment.  While the actual expenditure on MGNREGA in 2023-24 was more than Rs 89000 crores, its budget was reduced to Rs 86000 in 2024-25, and it is allocated the same amount in 2025-26 also. While the overall union budget has increased by more than 12 per cent in this period of two years, no increase in the allocation of MGNREGA indicates a lack of commitment to address the employment needs of rural workers and the crisis in the rural economy. At the beginning of the year, there were more than Rs 7500 Cr dues for West Bengal ( *The Hindu* Feb 1st 2025). If this amount is deducted from the overall allocation, one finds that the MGNREGA budget has reduced substantially and it will lead to the suppression of demand. The average number of work days earned per household is about 45. Total person days created have declined since the previous year.

## Employee State Insurance (ESI )

The Employee State Insurance Act led to the formation of the Employee State Insurance Corporation, which provides social security coverage to registered and contributing workers, especially in the areas related to health and accidents. ESIC already covers more than 4 crore insured persons.  The NDA 3 government has announced the opening of 101 more ESI hospitals and dispensaries. It has also announced the extension of services to more districts. The social

security code also expands the definition of employees, and supervisory and administrative staff can also be covered under ESIS in future. These are welcome steps.

Another major announcement has been regarding the linking of PMJAY (Ayushman Card) and ESIS. Not much information is available about the exact nature of this linking. ESI members can avail of services at the PMJAY registered hospitals and vice versa. But it may also mean opening the use of ESI hospitals, already struggling to provide quality services, to the general public and increasing their load. As ESIS is a contributory scheme, there are apprehensions that the funds of ESI member workers can be used by others.

The salary limit for eligibility should be raised from Rs 21,000 to at least Rs 30,000. Ideally, the government should extend the coverage of ESIC to all the formal or informal sector workers and thus universalise this social security coverage. The contributions of economically weak workers can be covered by the government funds. The universalisation will make the piecemeal schemes like PMJAY redundant.

Secondly, the existing reserve funds of ESIC should be used only to improve the quality of services and the opening of new ESIC hospitals and dispensaries connected to the workers' areas. Diversion of ESIC funds to private hospitals in the name of speciality services should be stopped. A progress report in the public domain will also be much in order on all the related announcements in the past.

### Gig and Platform Workers

The number of gig and platform workers is rapidly growing in India. As per estimates of NITI Ayog, it can reach up to 2.35 crore workers by 2030. Other estimates are even higher as the platform-based economy is growing at an unprecedented speed. The government has taken some good steps to address the welfare of these workers. A new window is opened at the E-Shram portal for their registration. The Social Security code mentions them as a distinct occupational category, encouraging government action. NULM has recognised them as one of the vulnerable groups, making them eligible to access some credit schemes. They will also get access to the Ayushman Bharat (PMJAY) scheme. They are likely to be covered under the new national law on social security.

However, mere recognition of social security is not enough. They should also be covered under other codes, and the government should convince the aggregator companies to formally recognise them as workers eligible for all workers' rights related to occupational safety and health, wages, industrial relations and collective bargaining and social security. Transparency and accountability of algorithms used by aggregators should also be ensured. Data privacy regulations need to be strengthened to protect gig workers from the exploitative surveillance practices of employers. To improve the legal framework for gig and platform workers, some states such as Rajasthan, Karnataka, Telangana and Jharkhand have taken some initiatives, but a comprehensive national law will be useful. Establishment of tripartite welfare boards will help in building a self-sustaining welfare model.

### Street Vendors and Hawkers

The PM SVANidhi Yojana, initiated by the government, has benefited numerous street vendors and hawkers financially and also encouraged the documentation process for them. Presenting the union budget 2025-26, the minister announced that PM SVANidhi will be revamped with enhanced loans and credit cards with an INR 30,000 limit. PM SVANidhi is a central sector scheme of the ministry of housing and urban affairs to support street vendors by micro credit. The government claims that PMSVANidhi has benefited more than 68 lakh street vendors. The PM SVANidhi dashboard updated on 8th June 2025 and accessed on the same day reveals that since its inception on 1st June 2020, GOI has paid 241.68 crores to digitally active street vendors as cashback. GOI has paid 298.13 crores as interest subsidy. So, in the last five years, just about a bit more than 100 crore per year has been supported through the union budget. No new beneficiary has been added in the recent past, and street vendors are still awaiting for the revamped scheme. The significant value the

scheme brought to street vendors is by issuing the certificate of vending (COV) with a picture of the Prime Minister to all beneficiaries.

The budget allocated to this scheme for 2025-26 ( Rs  373 crores) has shown a significant reduction as compared to the revised budget for 2024-25 ( Rs 450.32 crores). Does it mean that the government is not willing to support the street vendors to the extent needed?

 Moreover, enforcement agencies, including municipal authorities and police, are reported to evict beneficiaries across India. Rampant pan-India eviction and slow and inconsistent implementation of the Street Vendors Act are making it difficult for the beneficiaries to pay back the loan. The SV Act provisions vending for 2.5 per cent of the urban population but vending zones are few and most are struggling to register footfall in absence of natural location, basic infrastructure and support services.

 An intervention by the central government to stop the eviction of street vendors would be very helpful to street vendors and hawkers.

In general, the ministry of labour and employment appears to be active. However, financial allocations for different schemes benefiting workers need to be enhanced. The legal framework for uncovered sections such as gig and platform workers, domestic workers etc need to be improved. The perspective of the government should go beyond social security to address the workers' rights and welfare holistically.

# The Road Towards 70% Women in the Workforce

*India ranks 91 among 139 countries in the SDG Gender Index 2024 and the SDG India Index report states that Goal 5 demands special attention, owing to poor overall country score (49) with 14 States and UTs still in the aspirant category.*

The union budget 2025-26 announced a 37.25 per cent rise in gender budget allocations, accounting for 8.86 per cent of the total budget[1]. This is the highest allocation in two decades since the inception of Gender Budgeting in India. A total of 49 ministries/departments will be reporting this year, including 12 new ones that have allocations in the Gender Budget Statement (GBS) 2025-26. However, review of the allocations reveals that PMAY (urban and rural), which received a significant increase, are classified under Part A; but these schemes are not exclusively for women. Whereas, there is no increased allocation for the Sambal sub scheme or the Widow Pension Scheme that are dedicated towards women. Nearly a quarter of the entire gender budget comes from the PMGKAY scheme, under Part B, inflating the overall gender budget. New ministries reporting under Part C this year[2] received very small allocations and the allocation for the PM Kisan scheme remains the same[3].

## Provisions for Economic Participation

The contribution of agriculture in GDP has risen in the last few years and so has the participation of women in agriculture[4]. However, the rising Female Labour Force Participation Rate (FLFPR) for the last seven years[5] is primarily driven by increasing participation of rural women in unpaid and low productivity work, rather than by raised earnings or better access to regular wage job opportunities[6]. Gender Budget (GB) allocations endorsing women's employment remain modest, despite an FLFPR lower than the global average. Only 33.6 per cent of the allocation under MGNREGS is reflected in GB, while it provides 57.8 per cent of person-days worked by women. Although 76.9 per cent women are employed in agriculture, schemes like Krishonnati Yojana remain under Part B, without targeted provisions for women farmers[7]. On the other hand, funding for PMEGP, designed to support entrepreneurship, has decreased in 2025-26. Also, the announcement of a new scheme for five lakh first-time women entrepreneurs from Dalit (SC) and tribal (ST) communities does not have clarity on departmental allocations for its implementation.

## Challenges in the Informal Sector

A 2023 study[8] highlighted the need to address unique climate challenges faced by women waste pickers, mason and construction workers, outdoor street vendors and home-based workers. Another study reported challenges impacting the work of women street vegetable vendors in Ranchi – including sexual harassment, lack of safe transportation, absence of designated toilets and no drinking water facilities in markets[9]. Women street vendors from low-income settlements in Delhi face challenges due to lack of documentation, poor transportation and sexual harassment at the workplace. In 2024, a study on the gendered nature of transport-based gig work in South Asia highlights that despite the potential for flexible work opportunities, entry of women is restricted in gig work, more so in transport-based gig work, owing to several barriers including physical safety, digital divide, time constraints and financial barriers among others[10]. In Delhi, unions state[11] that street vendors were evicted despite having valid vending certificates; in many places, evictions reportedly happened before conducting the survey for issuing certifications, in violation of the Street Vendor Act[12].

The definition of workers in the new labour codes excludes those employed in private households[13], and hence denies women domestic workers the social security benefits offered by the codes. A 2023 study on occupational health hazards faced by women domestic workers[14] in Delhi and

Jaipur, reports on the severe health and safety related challenges that they face, including sexual harassment at the employers' house. They also have limited access to the provision of Local Committees (LCs) under the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013.

Including gig workers within the Ayushman Bharat Scheme and revamping the PM Svanidhi scheme[15] with enhanced loans and UPI-linked credit cards for street vendors are welcome steps. However, this sector, addressing about 80 per cent of employed women in India (non-agriculture labour)[16], will benefit from investments specifically targeted towards inclusive infrastructure and enhanced social security of women.

### Lack of Investments in Care Infrastructure

The Time Use Survey 2024[17] reports an increase[18] over the last few years in time spent by women in unpaid caregiving activities and a persistent gender disparity in domestic work[19]. Despite evidence from rural and urban India[20] stating how unpaid care duties interfere with women's work participation and The Economic Survey 2024-25 highlighting the role of care infrastructure[21] in increasing the FLFPR, substantial investments in the care sector remain absent in the present budget. The flagship Mission Shakti umbrella scheme has not received adequate increase to invest in improved care infrastructure and facilities. Concern areas like elderly care or maternity benefits didn't reflect any increase in allocation[22]. Also, the lack of gender perspectives into macroeconomic policies (inflation, cooking energy, water, etc.) continue to impact the care infrastructure.

### Safety Remains a Persistent Issue

The Nirbhaya Fund continues to be the only major budgetary allocation exclusively focused on gender-based violence and women's safety, despite almost 40 per cent underspending since its inception[23]. Provisions in the fund for combating violence against women in both private and public spaces face multiple challenges at the level of implementation. The existing 802 One Stop Centres lack in outreach, infrastructure and maintenance, integration with other services and a gap in sensitisation and training of appointed personnel[24]. India Justice Report 2025 reveals that nearly three in 10 police stations do not have Women Help Desks and 17 per cent police stations in the country do not have CCTV surveillance[25]. While the Sambal sub-scheme, for prevention of violence against women[26] received no increase, the allocation to the Department of Police (under Part A of the GBS) witnessed a drop of 51 per cent for training and capacity building, despite a gap in gender sensitisation of the police[27]. Women accessing public spaces on their way to work continue to face severe safety challenges. Recently conducted safety audits as part of a survey with women domestic workers in Delhi revealed hazardous commutes to work, marked by lack of safe and affordable public transport, overcrowded and under-maintained streets, inadequate street lighting, lack of surveillance and frequent incidents of sexual harassment[28].

### Gender Digital Divide

The ASER report 2024 finds a glaring gender gap in smartphone ownership[29] across all states. Similar gaps were noted in basic digital skills where boys outperformed girls on every task[30]. Even more concerning was the gender gap in awareness of safety features among children who used social media across a majority of states. While the GBS addresses the gender gap in digital literacy by incorporating the National Mission on Education through ICT (NMEICT) under Part A[31], funding for this scheme has significantly decreased.

### From Political Participation to Political Representation

Indian women, the crucial 'vote banks' with 65.8 per cent turnout in 2024[32], marginally exceeding men, actively take part in electoral processes. Yet, they are still largely underrepresented in decision making executive and legislative positions. Currently only 14.7 per cent of the members in the Lok Sabha and 16.8 per cent members of the Rajya Sabha are women[33]. This is despite the Women's Reservation Bill 2023 seeking 33 per cent seats in parliament for women, Within Panchayati Raj

Institutions, women currently constitute 46 per cent of total elected members, but are often subdued by proxy leadership[34].

## Gaps in Diversity and Inclusion

Allocations for Welfare of Scheduled Castes/Scheduled Tribes are inadequate and do not cater to the needs of Dalit and Adivasi women[35]. A meagre 1.20 per cent of the total funding from Centrally Sponsored Schemes and Central Sector Schemes is allocated to Dalit women and only 0.60 per cent for tribal women. Education for girls is among the worst hit, with insufficient allocations in Post Matric Scholarships and National Overseas Scholarships for Dalits and Adivasi women. Moreover, only Rs. 138 Crores is allocated to implement SC-ST Prevention of Atrocities Act for women. The allocation to the National Action for Mechanised Sanitation Ecosystem (NAMASTE) initiative, targeted towards sanitation workers, is too small to meet the need for rehabilitation, training and safety of these women workers. The Budget also neglects women living with disabilities[36], with only a 9.22 per cent increase in allocations under the Department of Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities.

## Recommendations

India ranks 91 among 139 countries in the SDG Gender Index 2024[37] and the SDG India Index report states that Goal 5 demands special attention, owing to poor overall country score (49) with 14 States and UTs still in aspirant category[38]. India's rank in the World Economic Forum's Gender Gap Index has decreased from 127 in 2023 to 129 in 2024[39]. An economic model of growth at the cost of jobs, compounded by the gender pay gap, further negates the rights of women workers[40].

Following are some recommendations towards the vision of 70% women in economic activities as part of Viksit Bharat goal[41]:

*Eliminating violence against women*

- Enhanced response systems with more investments in training of police, recruitment of more women in the police force including in senior positions, better functioning of women's helpline and help desks, monitoring and maintenance of OSCs.
- Implementation of the PoSH act, collaboration among ministries and departments for effective functioning of LCs and bringing sexual harassment at workplace within the Labour Codes.
- Ratification of C190 as a crucial step for long term commitments towards ending violence against women at the workplace.
- Signing of the Optional Protocol to CEDAW[42] and withdrawal of the Declarations to Article 5 (a) and 16 and Reservations to Article 29.

*Enhancing safety and inclusion*

- Increased budgetary allocations and provisions for enhanced access to, and control over resources for women from marginalised identities.
- Planning and redesigning urban and rural spaces with a gender lens, with allocation of resources for safe and inclusive infrastructure and services.
- Women's Safety Audits[43] in communities to identify safety challenges faced by women and introduce measures to address them.

*Facilitating access to education*

- Adequate allocation for scholarships supporting higher education of girls from marginalised communities.
- Robust skill development and career counseling programs including provisions for non-traditional vocational education for girls.
- Programmes to enhance girls' access to digital spaces and training on digital literacy and security.

*Protecting rights of women farmers*

– Recognition of women farmers through provisions within existing schemes and programmes, including a larger allocation under MGNREGS.
– New schemes and policies at state and national levels to increase land ownership of women farmers and revamp existing schemes directing benefits towards women.

*Endorsing rights of women informal workers*

– Enforcement of the Street Vendor Act 2014 and Street Vendor Rule 2017.
– Formation of an inter-ministerial committee to recommend a comprehensive legal framework for the benefit, protection and regulation of rights of domestic workers, as per Supreme Court directives[44].
– Investment in labour-intensive technology and policies.
– Building women's leadership
– Investments into capacity building of Elected Women Representatives (EWRs) and catalysing increased political participation of women.

*Strengthening care infrastructure*

– Increased investments in care infrastructure to facilitate women's economic participation
– Substantial financial allocations for Saksham Anganwadi and POSHAN 2.0 schemes, incorporating care workers within the E-Shram portal, ensuring fair wages and mandating state level care centres, among others.
– Integrating gender perspectives into macroeconomic policies (water, cooking energy, etc.) is also necessary, as care is incorporated in unpaid work.

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# Much Remains to be Done to Ensure Women's Health and Well Being

*The growing elderly population and growing population of elderly women in particular, brings forth health challenges like increasing burden of chronic illnesses, fractures leading to disabilities, mental health issues*

There has been some progress in India's health outcomes. Yet, the dual burden of communicable as well as lifestyle related diseases is a significant challenge for India. The report by the Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation (MoSPI-2024[1])  reveals that a higher percentage of women (80.70) in the age group 15-49 years reported that they sought treatment out of the total population in that age group having diabetes as compared to men (71.50). The report also shows that in 2022 there were a higher number of female respiratory cases than male (98,93986 female as against 94,98,940 male). Similarly,  sexually transmitted infections are more prevalent among women.  Life expectancy at birth for both sexes is increasing – female life expectancy is projected to be at 74.7 years, and male  life expectancy  at 71.2 years by 2036.

A significant aspect of the MOSPI report is that it has considered some degree of gender analysis. While analysing the sex disaggregated disease burden data, the report emphasises that gender sensitive approaches need to be integrated into both infectious and chronic disease control programmes.

Maternal health related services have been a priority for the public health system for a long time, resulting in significant reduction in maternal mortality ratio from 130 in 2014-16 to 93 in 2019-21 (RGI 2025)[2]. MoSPI report 2024[3] reveals that mothers who consumed iron folic acid for 100 days increased from 30.3 per cent to 44.1 per cent, post natal checkups of women within two days of birth increased from 65.1 per cent to 81.7 per cent.  Institutional deliveries increased from 82.6 per cent in 2015-16 to 90.6 per cent in 2019-21.

However, many health services for women are found wanting. Despite cervical cancer being the second most common cancer among Indian women, contributing to 123,907 new cases and 77,348 deaths in 2020 (Vikraman et al 2022)[4],  NFHS 5 (2019–2021) reported that just 1.9 per cent women aged 30–49 years have ever undergone cervical cancer screening. And according to NFHS 5 only 0.9 per cent women have been screened for breast cancer. Unmet need for contraception continues to remain high – 74.1 per cent of women reported having their need for family planning satisfied by modern methods in 2019-21. Medicines for medical abortion are included in the national essential drug list but availability varies across states because of supply chain and other issues (Karna et al 2024)[5]. Adolescent birth rate has remained stagnant - from 11.1 per cent in 2015 to 11.3 per cent in 2020. Despite the flagship Rashtriya Kishore Swasthya Karykram,  gaps such as less funding, legal barriers posed by the POCSO Act for accessing SRHR services, lack of comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) in schools, interventions for mental health challenges and substance abuse, lack of sustainable funding for cyber safety initiatives, and lack of disaggregated data on adolescent health, have been identified with respect to adolescent healthcare[6].

The growing elderly population (expected to double by 2050), and growing population of elderly women in particular, brings forth health challenges like increasing burden of chronic illnesses, fractures leading to disabilities, mental health issues (India Gender Report, 2024)[7].

Lack of identity documentation (particularly the Aadhaar card) as well as digitalisation often hinder women from accessing health schemes/services including Ayushman Bharat and Pradhan Mantri Jan Arogya Yojna. Portability of cash transfer schemes is an issue – migrant workers report difficulties in accessing health benefits as they move across states. Intersecting social identities

create unique barriers for women's healthcare access. For instance, Dalit, Adivasi, Muslim women and sex workers report facing discrimination at health facilities (CommonHealth 2025)[8]. Women face vulnerabilities, like domestic violence – the health system response to violence against women is still very nascent. There are not too many functional One Stop Crisis Centres within hospitals with trained health care providers and counsellors.

Another important aspect of gender responsive health governance is addressing the issues of women in the health work force. ASHAs in several states[9] have been demanding regular payments, being appointed as employees instead of as volunteers being paid on piece rates.

Jan Swasthya Abhiyan's critique of the 2025-26 Union budget[10] points out that in nominal terms there is an increase of Rs. 9180 crores in the total allocation of the Ministry of Health and AYUSH taken together compared with the previous budget. But in real terms, adjusting for the effect of inflation, this means an increase of only 3.04 per cent. In real terms, this is 4.7 per cent less than what was actually spent in 2020-21. This means that the health care that could be provided in 2020-21 cannot be ensured now, given that allocations have declined while prices have skyrocketed. Anaemia in women and girls continues to be a major health issue despite the Anaemia Mukt Bharat Abhiyan and Kuposhan Mukt Bharat Abhiyan. The Finance Minister announced enhancement of cost norms for nutritional support under Saksham Anganwadi and Poshan 2.0 programme. However, the allocations for this component declined by 2.7 per cent in real terms over the last year's budget allocation.

### Recommendations

– Progressively move towards universal health care over a specified time frame by increasing investment in health, in accordance with the National Health Policy 2017's promise of 2.5 percent of GDP. Increase expenditure for adolescent health, SRHR, gender-affirming care; and climate resilient health systems.
– Reform Ayushman Bharat and PMJAY to cover out patients' health care as well as improve access to health services for women and gender diverse persons.
– Monitor progress towards equitable health care, ensuring the commitment to 'Leave No One Behind'. This will entail improvement in data systems to capture health needs of excluded groups. Promote participation of these groups in programme design and implementation and monitoring of outcomes.
– Establish partnerships with Community Based Organisations and NGOs working with women and girls living with disabilities, gender diverse persons, women from minority communities, other excluded and stigmatised groups, to reach them and generate demand for services, and adapt programmes to suit local contexts.
– Design gender transformative policies and programmes to address issues of women in the health work force. Invest in their empowerment and leadership development. Ensure their safety and dignity as workers.

*Note: This article draws from consultations and research carried out by UN Women, Institute of Social Studies Trust (ISST), SAHAJ and Feminist Policy Collective (FPC) during Feb-April 2025, towards informing India's Voluntary National Review on SDGs 3, 5 and 8.*

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# Individual Responsibility Overlooks Structural and Systemic Issues

*The draft of the National Youth Policy has been in development since 2021, with inputs from various stakeholders. Yet, nearly a year after the 2024 draft release, the final policy is still unavailable.*

The year 2024-25 has seen some important policy developments in relation to young people in India. This is a significant constituency for the country's progress. We highlight some of these important policy developments in this section.

*National Youth Policy (NYP-2024)[1]:* The Government released a draft of the National Youth Policy (NYP) based on a review of the NYP 2014. This draft outlines a ten-year vision for youth development in India, aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). It focuses on **five** main areas: education, employment, youth leadership, health, and social justice, with a commitment to social inclusion.

*Launch of "Economic Case for Investment in the Well-being of Adolescents in India" report[2]:* In July 2024, following the release of Partnership for Maternal, Newborn & Child Health (PMNCH) report – "Adolescents in a Changing World – The Case for Urgent Investment," – at the 77th World Health Assembly in Geneva, the "Economic Case for Investment in the Well-being of Adolescents" was launched in New Delhi at the Inter-Ministerial Dissemination of Investment Case and Measurement Framework for Adolescent Health and Well-being in India. The Ministry of Education highlighted increased education funding, support for girls and children with special needs, curriculum reforms post-6th grade, menstrual hygiene promotion, and the National Adolescent Health Programme in government schools.

*National Youth Commission Bill, 2024[3]:* This bill was introduced in the Lok Sabha by Smt. Smita Uday Wagh, MP. The stated purpose of the bill is to 'evolve and implement programmes for educating and empowering youth and to serve as a protector of the rights of youth.' The commission will comprise of a maximum of eleven members, all youth, including a chairperson, at least one woman, one person each belonging to Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribes, and a legal practitioner.

*Budget 2024-25:* The Union Budget for 2024- 25 includes a Rs 2 lakh crore package aimed at education, job creation, skill development, and employment-linked incentives, benefiting 4.1 crore (41 million) youth across the nation. Of the Rs. 2 lakh crore the Budget has allocated Rs. 1.48 lakh crore towards education, employment and skilling, marking a 30 per cent increase from the previous allocation of Rs. 1.13 lakh crore. According to Government sources, this budgetary allocation reinforces the Government's commitment to investing in the future of India's adolescents and youth, creating the enabling environment and providing them with the necessary resources and opportunities to thrive.

### A Critique of the draft National Youth Policy 2024

- The draft has been in development since 2021, with inputs from various stakeholders. Yet, nearly a year after the 2024 draft release, the final policy is still unavailable.
- The draft focuses heavily on individual responsibility, overlooking structural and systemic issues. This framing shifts the burden of change onto young people instead of addressing socioeconomic factors affecting their wellbeing and development.[4]

- The policy treats youth as a homogeneous group, failing to recognize diverse identities across caste, class, gender, sexuality, and religion. It must ensure inclusive growth through tailored provisions.
- The draft lacks a gender perspective. Gender justice should be integrated across sectors – such as promoting girls' participation in sports, creating mentorship and support systems for young women entrepreneurs, and ensuring access to non-traditional livelihood opportunities.

### Critical Issues in Education and Skill Development[5]

*Education.* According to the Unified District Information System for Education (UDISE+) report, 2023-2024, school enrolment in India dropped by 2.07 crore, from 25.57 crore in 2021-22 to 23.5 crore in 2023-24 (cited in 5). In addition, the quality of education imparted continues to be extremely concerning. The Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) 2023, noted that, 25 per cent of 14-18 year olds enrolled in school, are unable to read a Class II (six to seven-year-olds) text fluently in their regional language. Around 65 per cent are unable to handle simple division problems, an expectation from seven to nine olds in Class III-IV. And 61 per cent were unable to measure length using a scale, if the starting point was moved from 0.

Higher levels of education typically enhance the possibility of landing a full-time position with a long-term contract in addition to lowering the chance of unemployment[6]. The Periodic Labour Force Surveys (PLFS) from 2018–19 to 2021–22, show that almost 30 lakh youth entered the labour market just after completing high school in these four years. They may possibly get jobs in the unorganised sector because, in competitive markets, the firms do not prefer least qualified people.

*Skills.* While more than 1.1 crore young people graduate from India's institutions of higher education each year,  only a fraction of these have the skills necessary to find jobs  commensurate with their qualifications. A 2024 Niti Aayog report, 'Electronics: Powering India's Participation in Global Value Chains', reconfirms that up to 80 per cent of India's electronics engineers lack the skills needed for their field.  The Skill India Programme continues to battle with challenges of inadequate infrastructure and resources, lack of industry linkages and relevance to industry needs and trainer quality to mention a few.  The general opinion is that the majority of youth who emerge from the Skill Development programmes cannot be accommodated in any modern production process, even after re-training. Results of the India Skills Report 2024 indicate that only about 50 per cent of India's youth with formal education could fulfil the requirements for employment in a variety of fields. A significant portion of graduates from top institutions  remain unemployed – this was highlighted by India Today – 38 per cent of IIT graduates across 23 campuses were still unemployed in 2024[7].

 'As per the National Scholarship Portal (NSP) 2015, only 2.7 per cent of India's workforce has received formal skill training, compared to 52 per cent in the United States, 80 per cent in Japan, and 96 per cent in South Korea'  (ISB 2024)[8].

*Gender gap.* There is a huge gap in gender wise employment. The Labour Force Participation Rate (LFPR) among men belonging to all age groups is at 57.3 per cent in 2021–22 according to the PLFS. The LFPR among women remains at 24.8 per cent - less than half as compared to male. Though the LFPR for women increased as  per the PLFS 2023-24[9] to 41.3% it still remains much lower than 78.3% for men and most of this increase has come from increase in female labour in agriculture and self employment. The number of younger working females in agriculture and the allied area has increased from 0.76 crore in four years (from 2018-19 to 2021–22)  to 1.83 crore, which is almost a twofold rise in the male youth workforce. Another gender disparity that is observed is that female youth workers in public administration and  education and health sectors have dramatically increased by almost 4 lakh in the last four years, whereas the employment of male youth in these sectors dropped by almost 11.4 lakh.

*Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEET):* A good percentage of youth (14 years and above) are out of the education system. Additionally, about half of the youth (15-29 years) female and

almost one fourth of the youth (15-29 years) male are not in education, employment of training (NEET) as per the NSSO, Multi-indicator Survey in India, 2020-21.[10]

To conclude, while economists and advocates of new economic policies celebrate India's youthful population profile and the 'demographic dividend' that can make India a global power, the unhappy reality, is that, if the energies of the youth are not properly channelised, a discontented 'youth bulge' can be a potential for violence and social unrest.

### Budgets and Utilisation

In her 2024 budget speech, Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman stated that 1.4 crore individuals were trained under the Skill India Mission, which included up-skilling and re-skilling 0.5 crore. But there appears to be a disconnect between these claims and the ground reality.

The ISB Policy Brief states 'Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Yojana (PMKVY) has been Skill India Mission's flagship programme and yet, not only is the training all short term, but the placement rate also shows no improvement over time: placement rate for PMKVY 1.0 (which started in 2015) is 18.4 per cent, PMKVY 2.0 is 23.4 per cent, and PMKVY 3.0 is 10.1 per cent. However, the programme is still being funded — PMKVY 4 is starting this year with a budget outlay of Rs. 1,200 crore, approximately' (8). The Policy Brief goes further to state '... the official website data (of PMKVY) claims that 54 per cent of the trainees have been placed through this scheme. Analysis of the actual data shows that of the total 12,454,858 candidates assessed, 11,041,125 candidates were certified, and only 2,451,517 candidates were placed, i.e. only 22.2 per cent.'

A substantial part of the budget for the Ministry of Skill Development and Entrepreneurship, remained unutilised during the previous years (Annexure). In 2022- 23, for example, the Ministry of Skill Development and Entrepreneurship could utilise less than half of the allocated budget of Rs. 2999 crores. In 2021-22 the utilisation was 76 per cent of the allocated budget. Utilisation improved in 2023-24 – about 85 per cent of the allocated budget. While the Ministry's budget allocations have increased during the years 2022-25 and 2025-26, the revised budget for 2024-25 has declined sharply from Rs. 4520 crores to Rs. 3300 crores.

An important planned scheme to upgrade 1,000 Industrial Training Institutes (ITIs) using a hub-and-spoke model. They are expected to align their curricula and courses with industry needs to address the skill gap. The plan involves developing 200 hubs and 800 spoke ITIs, with a total investment of Rs. 60,000 crore over five years. The centre will contribute Rs. 30,000 crore, while states Rs. 20,000 crore, and the industry (including CSR funds) Rs. 10,000 crore. However, the actual allocation remains relatively low at Rs. 4,520 crore.

Take the case of ITI upgrade. The central government plans to spend Rs 30,000 crore over the next five years on ITI upgrades, averaging Rs. 6,000 crore annually. Yet, the Budget has only allocated Rs 1,000 crore for this.

Part of the allocations towards the Ministry of Education remained unutilised in 2021-22 and 2022-23. The budget expenditure of the Ministry of Education was more than the allocated budget in 2023-24. While the Ministry's budget allocation (BE) has increased in 2025-26, revised budget for 2024-25 declined compared to the allocated budget in 2024-25.

There has been no substantial increase in the budget for the Ministry of Women and Child Development in recent years. The Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports has seen an increase in its budget from Rs. 2596 crores in 2021-22 BE to Rs. 3794 crores in 2025-26 BE. However, this too could not be fully utilised during all these years. For example, the ministry's actual budget expenditure was Rs. 2545.7 crores against an allocated budget of Rs. 3062.6 crores in 2022-23 and in 2023-24, the ministry spent Rs. 2982.6 crores against its allocated budget of Rs. 3397.32 crores. The revised budget in the year 2024-25 has declined to Rs. 3232.85 crores from 3442.32 crores.

Major schemes of the Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports are central sector schemes like Rashtriya Yuva Sashaktikaran Karyakaram. The budget for this scheme has increased in recent years from Rs. 140.51 crores in 2023-24 BE to Rs. 250 crores in the year 2025-26 BE. However, the actual expenditure in 2023-24 was less than the allocated budget for the scheme and so is the revised budget for the scheme in the year 2024-25. The budget for the Nehru Yuva Kendra Sangathan, an autonomous body under the Ministry, in the year 2025-26 (BE) remains slightly less than what it was in the year 2024-25.

Schemes. The budget for the PM Poshan Shakti Nirman (MDM) under the Department of School Education and Literacy (Ministry of Education) has not increased since 2022-23 and actual expenditure under the scheme has been much lower than the allocation in 2023-24 and in 2024-25 also the revised budget is much lower than the allocated budget.

**Overview of unaddressed existing policy and/or implementation gaps**

Dhanya and Thakur's analysis shows that a large number of young workforces is absorbed by the agriculture and allied sector. More than 1.2 crores of youth across all India have increased in agriculture and allied sectors within four years of the PLFS (2018–19 to 2021–22). Trends show drastic rise in the agro-based sector majorly from 2019–20 and increasing continuously till 2030 with an employment generation of 8.59 crore youth. The service sector, known for providing white-collar quality jobs, absorbs mostly high skilled labour. Projections with the available data till 2030 show the number of jobs provided by this sector is almost half of that provided by agriculture and allied industry. This shows that the contribution of youth in the service sector will remain smaller. Hence, the solution for employment among the youth is to make the youth highly skilled for future work by providing various training based on coding languages, Artificial Intelligence (AI), robotics, etc. (6)

While much of the analysis in this paper is focused on economic opportunities for the youth in India, critical gaps in programmes promoting their health are also of concern. The implementation of the Rashtriya Kishore Swasthya Karyakram (RKSK) needs attention, including a focus on boys' and young men's sexual and reproductive health issues, which often have an impact on their mental health status, especially for gender non-conforming individuals. In this connection, the urgent need for age appropriate comprehensive sexuality education must also be highlighted.

**Recommendations for way forward**

**YOUTH POLICY**

The Youth Policy needs to incorporate the feedback received. Before the policy is finalised, it must once again be open for public scrutiny, as an accountability measure.

The National Commission for Youth Bill should also be widely discussed and public opinion generated and incorporated before the Bill becomes an Act.

Coherence must be ensured between the Bill/Act, Policy and programmes and schemes. Here again the Youth Commission and participation and meaningful engagement of diverse groups of youth is desirable.

**EMPLOYMENT AND SKILL DEVELOPMENT**

The Government of India has already initiated various policies and programmes for generating youth employment and skill upgradation. However, youth employment across major economic sectors and forecast by 2030 indicate that most of the growth in jobs among youth is observed in agriculture and allied activities, which majorly absorbs unskilled and low-skilled labour forces. The structural changes arising in the economy need to be re-examined in the era of the future of work. Additionally, more efforts are required to improve the quality of education and improve the ecosystem that will promote higher education and better skills training that will result in a more productive labour force.

More, and rational investment, as well as enhanced monitoring of results in relation to the investments to optimise utilisation of funds, is required to tackle the employment challenges in the coming years. An equity perspective and a differentiated and nuanced approach must be reflected in the budgets.

Public Private partnerships for skill development and employment generation must be fostered and strengthened.

## ADOLESCENT AND YOUTH HEALTH & WELL-BEING

Creating a productive youth population will also require sound health programmes, both for optimum nutritional status, physical – mental health and wellbeing. The School Health Programmes including Comprehensive Sexuality Education and the RKSK must be effectively implemented and their outcomes closely monitored. In all this participation of young people must be ensured at all levels.

Collaborations with youth organisations and other civil society organisations must be fostered and strengthened.

There are some additional policy recommendations (submitted for India's Voluntary National Review (VNR), 2025) that can be referred to. These recommendations emerged from "YouVaani" where 84 youth leaders from 22 states convened to review the progress on SDGs 3, 5, and 8, centring on the perspective of young people.

## ANNEXURE - BUDGET ANALYSIS

| Ministry/Dept. | 2021-22 (BE) | 2021-22 (AE) | 2022-23 (BE) | 2022-23 (AE) | 2023-24 (BE) | 2023-24 (AE) | 2024-25 (BE) | 2024-25 (RE) | 2025-26 (BE) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Ministry of Women and Child Development | 24435 | 21655 | 25172 | 23994 | 25448.8 | 24696 | 26092 | 23183 | 26889.7 |
| Department of School Education and Literacy (A) | 54873.7 | 46822 | 63449 | 58640 | 68804.9 | 67972 | 73008 | 67571.2 | 78572.1 |
| Department of Higher Education (B) | 38350.7 | 33531 | 40828 | 38557 | 44094.6 | 55393 | 47620 | 46482.4 | 50078 |
| Total Ministry of Education (A+B) | 93224.3 | 80352 | 104278 | 97196 | 112899 | 123365 | 120628 | 114054 | 128650 |
| Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports | 2596.14 | 2250.19 | 3062.6 | 2545.7 | 3397.32 | 2982.6 | 3442.32 | 3232.85 | 3794.3 |
| Ministry of Skill Development and Entrepreneurship | 2785.23 | 2121.14 | 2999 | 1371 | 3517.31 | 2982.17 | 4520 | 3300.83 | 6100.1 |

*Source: Union Government Budget documents, various years, available on: indiabudget.gov.in*

*Endnotes*

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3.  The National Youth Commission Bill 2024

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# Convergence, or Merging of Services?

*While official statistics state that India has 9.3 lakh out-of-school children, the actual number is much higher. India has the largest absolute number of child labourers in South Asia and is at risk of failing its SDG commitments to eliminate child labour by 2025.*

India is celebrating 76 years of Independence under the banner of Azadi Ka Amrit Kaal and is nurturing the dream of Viksit Bharat (Developed India). The aspiration is to walk towards a future India that is a caring and enabling democracy and where its citizens have opportunities to achieve their full potential. This implies that every Indian child, irrespective of caste, class, culture, religion, gender, or disability, must receive an equitable quality education, health, nutrition that can enable the next generation to realise its full potential.

The Indian government has taken up policies and programmes for the same. However, the policy commitments in most cases remain unfulfilled due to inadequate public provisioning.

### Early years (0-8) Years:

2025 marks the end of 50 years of the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) program in the country. Launched on Oct 2nd, 1975, it was designed as a response to the fundamental challenges of early childhood development (ECD) in terms of a) cognitive development through pre-school non-formal education on one hand, and b) physical growth by liberating childhood from the vicious cycle of malnutrition, morbidity, reduced cognitive capacity and mortality. It is still one of the world's largest programmes for children under 6 and pregnant and lactating mothers. There are *14,00,324 Anganwadi Centres (AWC) 13,32,727 Anganwadi Workers (AWW) reaching 10,16,32,373 beneficiaries* [1]across 36 states under this scheme. In recent years, the Anganwadi-cum-creches through the Palna scheme is also aiming at enabling universal access to childcare services focusing on children under three years of age*. However, ICDS is still not a right or an entitlement for every child in the country.*

The Palna scheme was launched in 2022 for public provisioning of creches. The erstwhile National Creche Scheme was reorganised and renamed as Palna Scheme in 2022 under the sub-scheme 'Samarthya' of 'Mission Shakti'. Palna is a Centrally Sponsored Scheme for establishing creches in urban areas where it is assumed that the number of working mothers and hence the need for creches is more than in rural areas. It also ensures the participation of State/ UT government to ensure better day-to-day monitoring and proper implementation of scheme, and is implemented with a funding ratio of 60:40 between Union and State Governments and UTs with legislature except North East and Special Category States where ratio is 90:10. For UTs without legislature, 100 per cent funding is provided by the central government. Delhi, Odisha, Assam are taking proactive steps to implement the scheme as compared to other states.

The National Education Policy 2020 also includes early years of childhood (birth till 8 years) and mandates for education of children from birth for the first time in the country. Section 11 of RTE Act which makes education a fundamental right is also mandated for early childhood education but limiting till 3-6 years. However, after NEP 2020 the structure of school education has been revisited after the Kothari Commission in 1964 to include five years of foundational learning in the formal school education system. Policy developments have been positive and meet one of the critical SDG targets, 4.2, which aims to ensure that by 2030, all girls and boys have access to quality early childhood development, care, and pre-primary education so that they are ready for primary education. However, the need to extend the right to children under six (given the criticality of this stage in laying the foundation for human development and in line with the recommendations of the Law Commission of India) and till 18 years of age is still pending[2].

For implementing the NEP, the MWCD (Ministry of Women and Child Development) also developed a curriculum for children under the age of six years, viz: Navchetna for the under 3s and Aadharshila for the 3–6-year-old children in 2024. This has been developed to facilitate inclusion of education from birth of children till termination of school education.

## Elementary Years (6-14 years)

The right to education in India currently only applies to children within the age group of 6-14 years. Critically, far from ensuring universal, high-quality standards of education in the form of a Common School system and even 14 years after the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education (RTE) Act came into force, only 25.5 per cent[3] of schools in the country are RTE compliant. The government has initiated a scheme, PM Shri school[411] for strengthening government schools across the country. The policy shift from universalisation to strengthening model schools may impact complete implementation of RTE Act which has been a challenge throughout. It may add to the increase in the number of children out of children.

While official statistics state that India has 9.3 lakh out-of-school children, the actual number is much higher. India has the largest absolute number of child labourers in South Asia and is at risk of failing its SDG commitments to eliminate child labour by 2025. Being out of school not only deprives children of education's transformative potential but also risks pushing children into child labour. Many state governments have been closing and merging schools putting the right to education at risk; by some estimates 72,157 schools have been closed between 2017 and 2022. India is yet to fully recover from the trauma inflicted by the COVID19 crisis and the world's longest school lockdown.

## Challenges

− Seamless convergence and continuum, linking children from home-centre-school is not effectively implemented on ground. There are disjointed efforts like age-appropriate curriculum, Anganwadi-cum-creches, integration of Anganwadi in school premises to mention a few aiming at convergence. Instead of convergence, there is a merging of services, in turn, compromising the norms of distance, access and equity. A convergence committee was envisaged by the NEP drafting committee which never saw light of the day.

− The Palna scheme is also implemented in an uneven manner across states. Even approved and sanctioned creches are not implemented on ground[2]. For instance 1024 creches are sanctioned under Palna scheme in Jharkhand but on ground not a single creche is implemented under the scheme.

− Merging ICDS into Saksham Anganwadi and Poshan 2.0 in financial Year (FY) 2021-22, restructured the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) and POSHAN (Prime Minister's Overarching Scheme for Holistic Nourishment) Abhiyaan into Saksham Anganwadi and Poshan 2.0 also impacted resources which was solely meant for ICDS before the integration.

− Universal access to SNP (Special Nutrition Programme included the Take Home ration and Home Cooked Food) is still a challenge. Only 17 per cent of the children have been given HCF for 25 days as per the Poshan tracker data.

− Stunting (5 per cent), underweight (16 per cent), and wasting (36 per cent) including 5 per cent (SAM, MAM) children implies the gravity of the situation.

− Processed food and lack of dietary diversity is leading to an increase in obesity of children. Also large, global and national food corporations see children's hunger and malnourishment as a source of profits and are trying to influence government policy towards providing packaged foods which aids obesity among children and adults.

− Budgets for the young child are meagre (only 0.7 per cent of the Union Budget and 0.1 per cent of the GDP), which is much below the OECD countries (0.9 per cent). Similarly, budget for implementation of NEP 2020 has increased but still not crossed the 6 per cent of GDP mark.[3]

− 8.4 lakh teacher positions are vacant and there is a constant shift towards contractual teachers. 19 per cent of schools in India are estimated to have teacher vacancies and one in

seven schools is run by a single teacher. While the quality of education cannot be ensured without professionally qualified and motivated teachers, 44 per cent of all teachers across the country work without job contracts, many fail to receive social security benefits, and all are pressured with non-academic work which is estimated to account for 20-25 per cent of teachers' working hours. The curriculum and the content of teaching have also been under constant attack .

– India's education is highly unequal with girls, children with disabilities, the poor and Dalits, Adivasis, Muslim minorities, migrants and other excluded groups[4] suffering in the face of discrimination, linguistic exclusion, segregation and harmful social norms. Only 0.14 per cent of India's mother tongues are used as a medium of instruction and 0.35 per cent have been taught in India's schools – something that hits Adivasi learners hardest. 57 per cent of girls drop out upon reaching the 11th Grade. Among 5-year-olds with disabilities, three-fourths do not go to any educational institution as does a quarter of those aged between 5 and 19.

– Education has been commercialised and there has been a steady growth in the number of private schools across the country. Seven of 10 new schools in India are now private. The growth of private provision segregates society with rich and poor children growing up in different worlds. Children from the richest quintile are seven times more likely to attend private early childhood institutions than those from the poorest quintile. Average out of pocket expenditure per student on education has been high, particularly in private schools, but also in all institutions offering pre-primary and secondary education which lie outside the ambit of the commitment to free education made by the RTE Act.

– Climate Change is also impacting children from marginalised communities[5].

## Recommendations

– A convergence/coordinating committee needs to be constituted for effective implementation of NEP.

– Institute a National Care fund for ensuring universal access of childcare services.

– As per 259 Law commission report make ECCE a fundamental right for all children.

– The budget for the young child should be increased to ensure implementation of the policy commitments. A separate budget head for ECCE and community engagement is critical for implementation of targeted schemes for the young child.

– Ensure universal access to the Palna scheme and extend it from urban areas to across the country.

– Regulate large national and global companies making profit through influencing government policy towards processed food replacing local food.

– Ensure complete implementation of the RTE Act including realising the norms and standards in all schools by 2026 and notify clear responsibilities and penalties for non-implementation.

– Ensure total eradication of child labour up to the age of 18 years. This entails removing the provision in Section 3 of the Child Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Amendment Act 2016 which legalises child labour in 'family enterprise', removing the distinction between hazardous and non-hazardous work and strengthening the enforcement of penalties on employers.[6]

– Extend the purview of the RTE Act up to the age of 18 years, in line with the internationally recognised definition of childhood, by including ECCE, secondary, and higher secondary education as legal entitlements. Education across this age-span must be free and age-appropriate in all schools and ECCE centres (both government and private) and must also be of a consistently high uniform standard, safe and equitable, provide all children with the same services and provide for parent and citizen participation.

– Enhance expenditure on education to at least 6 per cent of GDP with 10 per cent of the education budget committed to ECCE to ensure adequate resourcing for delivery of school and early childhood education including provision of quality and nutritious midday meals to all children.

- Stop the closure and merger of government schools in the name of rationalisation or consolidation[7].
- Fill all teachers' vacancies. Ensure all teachers and ECCE personnel are professionally qualified and well trained, have scope for career progression, receive a dignified wage and working conditions, and are free from activities that are non-educational or unrelated to core ECCE & Teaching functions[8].
- Take affirmative action and remove barriers to completion of at least equitable, quality education by Adivasi, Dalit, Muslim minority children, girls, children with disabilities and other vulnerable groups, and stop discriminatory practices by ensuring all education adheres to constitutional principles of equity, fraternity, dignity and secularism.

*Endnotes*

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# Agrarian crisis writ large on the body politic of rural India

*The policy direction of the government is clearly towards corporatisation of agriculture, a clear articulation of which was the three farm laws which the government pushed undemocratically in September 2020 and repealed in November 2021 under pressure from farmers' unions.*

Vulnerability and precariousness underscore the lives and livelihoods of farmers and farm workers. The 2024 data from the National Sample Survey's (NSS) 77th round (January-December 2019) on the "Situation Assessment of Agricultural Households" reveals that the national average for monthly farm income is Rs. 5,298 and the average monthly total income is Rs. 10,695. *(Please note that the mentioned figure refers to household income, as opposed to individual earnings.)*

Analysis of the 77th round further reveals that agricultural households account for 54 per cent of rural households in India. For 38.8 per cent of rural households, farming is the principal source of income. Agricultural households that generate at least 50 per cent of their household income from farming make up 31% of all rural households. Only 21 per cent of rural households are entirely dependent on farming.

## Heavy debt burden

The recently released second edition of the "All-India Rural Financial Inclusion Survey 2021-22" by the National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development (NABARD) sheds light on the economic conditions of the agricultural households. Among other things, it shows the level of debt among agricultural households: on average, they carry a debt of Rs 91,231, while non-agricultural households have Rs 89,074. But these figures are for formal credits and do not include farmers' informal borrowings. A recent study on farmers' informal debts and their distribution across the major farm-size groups in India using the unit-level data from the 77th round 'Situation Assessment Survey (SAS)' of agricultural households show that about one-half of the borrowers continue to depend on informal credit sources – partially or fully. Informal sources also account for about one-third of the total debt of the agricultural households. Informal debt incidence (IDI) and informal debt share (IDS) are found to be higher among the smallholders. These studies and analysis show that the agricultural households bear a heavy debt burden, which is many times more than their monthly gross income.

## Stagnant rural wages

If we look at the wages, rural wages have remained stagnant, especially in real terms. India's GDP grew at an average rate of 4.6 per cent from 2019-20 to 2023-24, reaching 7.8 per cent over the last three fiscal years (April-March). Agricultural sector growth rates averaged 4.2 per cent and 3.6 per cent for the same periods. However, these macro growth numbers are not reflected in rural wages.

Wage growth data as compiled by the Labour Bureau based on the daily wage rate for 25 agricultural and non-agricultural occupations shows that from 2019 to 2024, rural wages grew by 5.2 per cent annually in nominal terms; however, adjusted for inflation, the real growth was -0.4 per cent. This stagnation points to a deep crisis in rural India and indicates something is clearly wrong with India's growth strategy.

## Something is clearly not right

The peasantry and landless labourers are struggling to survive. The demands of the farmers during the farmers struggle of 2021 of a legal guarantee on MSP and a debt waiver which remain

unfulfilled, came out of the experience of the policy driven impoverishment of farmers and neglect of the farm sector. Over 60 per cent of India's 1.3 billion people still primarily depended on agriculture for their livelihood, but agriculture is secondary in India's growth strategy. The continued emphasis on agricultural productivity has meant an over emphasis on the role of capital based forms of agriculture which fail to take note of the requirements of the small and marginal farmers and landless farmer-labourers who form the majority – official data sources indicate that the volume of small and marginal cultivators has grown and almost 86 per cent of agriculture households have less than two hectares of land, with the land holding size diminishing over the years to the current average holding size of only 1.4 hectares. Overwhelmingly, this section of cultivators do not have access to capital, technology and networks to market and they are caught in a vicious cycle of 'high costs of inputs – low prices of produce-debt'. It is now clear that debt is the single most prevalent source of agrarian distress and suicides.

Despite such conditions, policies and programmes related to agriculture continue to be piece-meal, often based on various agreements with Aid and Development agencies who see the sector as overwhelmingly over-populated with low productivity. The solution they offer is to push people out of agriculture. Niti Aayog shares these sentiments and has been arguing for pushing people out of agriculture.

### Piecemeal Policy Response

The policy direction of the government is clearly towards corporatisation of agriculture, a clear articulation of which was the three farm laws which the government pushed undemocratically in September 2020 and repealed in November 2021 under pressure from farmers' unions. The government is committed to bringing these laws back, as we will see below, but it continues to introduce piecemeal schemes in the name of benefiting the poor farmers, empowering women and increasing farm productivity.

In 2024, after coming to power for the third time, the NDA government laid down six priorities for growth of the agriculture sector. These included increasing production, reducing cost of production, giving farmers a fair price for their produce, giving relief amounts to farmers during natural disasters, diversification of agriculture and natural farming. Shiv Raj Singh Chouhan, the Union minister in-charge, said in response to a question in Parliament that the Centre was committed to providing remunerative prices for crops to farmers. "We cannot leave smallholders to fight climate change, price volatility and resource scarcity challenges alone; they need our policy support, and for India, empowering women socially, economically and politically is a mission", he said. He announced several technological initiatives – Digital Agriculture Mission, AgriStack, drone technology, and Climate-Resilient Villages – and schemes like Lakhpati Didi and Drone Didi were highlighted as examples of India's commitment to the social and economic empowerment of rural women.

A clear example of how disconnected these schemes are with agrarian distress and its scale, is the **Namo Drone Didi** scheme. A Ministry of Agriculture and Farmers Welfare scheme, with an outlay of Rs. 1261 crores, launched in November 2024, is intended to provide drones to Women Self-Help Groups (SHGs) under the Deendayal Antyodaya Yojana – National Rural Livelihoods Mission (DAY-NRLM), focused on poverty reduction in rural areas. Namo Drone Didi aims to equip 14,500 selected Women SHGs with drone technology from 2024-25 to 2025-2026. The state departments are responsible for selecting SHGs and from the selected women SHGs, one member is selected for a 15-day mandatory drone pilot training and additional training for agriculture purposes to apply fertilisers and pesticides on crops.

The agricultural drones are manufactured by tech start-up Garuda Aerospace. As of late 2024, the company had delivered 446 drones to women Self-Help Groups across 20 states, with the company website claiming that it has led to ***boosting agricultural productivity and increasing rural incomes***. There are approximately 20 crore rural households with an overwhelming majority under acute distress, the Drone Didi scheme has provided training to 500 rural women, and it makes the

preposterous claims of fostering economic independence, helping rural women boost their income *and* India's agricultural productivity.  In reverse, farmers in Haryana who practice natural farming have raised concerns about the pollution of their fields due to drone sprays of chemical fertilizers, pesticides, and herbicides. Clearly there is a lack of coordination between different aspects of the policy and the conflicting impacts are evident.

## The National Policy Framework on Agricultural Marketing

Returning to the actual policy direction for the agriculture sector, the Union Ministry of Agriculture and Farmers' Welfare put up the National Policy Framework on Agricultural Marketing draft on its website on November 25, 2024, inviting comments from stakeholders within a time frame of 15 days.  The policy aims to create a unified national market for agricultural produce giving a free hand to the private sector.  This draft is the government's first concerted push to ease restrictions for corporate players to function in the country's agrarian markets after its failed attempt to do so in September 2020.

The proposal claims to provide farmers with better pricing and reduce barriers in agriculture-trade. The policy recommends setting up of private wholesale markets, direct farm gate purchases, replacement of traditional market yards with corporate warehouses and silos, and fixing a unified market fee and trading licence system. It proposes that big corporations can purchase directly from farmers, bypassing the APMC market yards.

This proposal marks a clear and decisive retreat of government responsibility from public procurement of food grains and provides a deregulated environment in which big agri-businesses will be able to push farmers to enter into contracts for the supply of agricultural produce.  The draft marketing framework makes the MSP system, for the legal guarantee of which the farmers have been fighting long and hard, irrelevant.  Once implemented, the farmers will not have any assured income from their farming. The draft is also quiet on government procurement and PDS ration distribution under the purview of agriculture policy framework.

Farmers have rejected the draft regulations in numerous states, leading the Punjab government to pass a resolution in the state Assembly against the proposed draft. This policy framework has raised concerns regarding the central government's intent to initiate 'reform' in the agricultural sector. Farmers' unions argue that it could make farming unsustainable for small and marginal farmers, jeopardise the food security of millions of impoverished labourers, and potentially allow private sector dominance in the sector.

## Recommendations

- Take back the National Policy Framework on Agricultural Marketing draft which moves away from APMCs, establishes unregulated markets and acts against the spirit of federalism.
- Rethink development policy and bring agriculture to the centre in India's development strategy.
- Extend legal guarantee of MSP on all crops as demanded by the farmers to make agriculture sustainable.
- Guarantee government procurement and PDS ration distribution under the purview of agriculture policy framework.

# Perpetuating the Historical Marginalization of Nomadic Communities

*While the government has started a special scheme for the economic empowerment for denotified, nomadic and semi-nomadic tribes, the budgetary allocations generally fall short of real needs and its performance is even more inadequate.*

Denotified and Nomadic Tribes (DNTs), with roots tracing back to the Indus Valley civilization, have historically sustained themselves through mobility, excelling in animal husbandry, trade, and specialized crafts. Communities like the Banjara (grain transporters), Pardhi (hunting experts), and Gadia Lohar (metalworkers) played vital roles in pre-colonial economies. However, the British Criminal Tribes Act (1871) branded 200+ groups as "born criminals," imposing surveillance and restricting movement. Post-1952, the Habitual Offenders Act perpetuated this stigma, while modern laws (Wildlife Protection Act, anti-begging statutes) criminalized traditional livelihoods like snake charming and Mahua production. Displaced by forest laws and denied land rights, many DNTs were forced into marginal spaces, enduring systemic exclusion.

Despite constitutional guarantees post 1947, DNTs face pervasive barriers: police harassment, denial of identity documents, and crippling laws such as an exorbitant interstate livestock taxes that cripple nomadic livelihoods. Even educated DNT members encounter job discrimination, underscoring the need for inclusion under the SC/ST (PoA) Act. Legal aid systems (e.g., NALSA) often fail them, while forest departments harass women and children, despite FRA protections. Banned from traditional occupations (e.g., Mahua malt liquor production – a practice which is monetised by the state government), many resort to exploitative informal labour, with no access to healthcare, education, or burial rights. This systemic neglect contrasts sharply with their historical contributions, leaving DNTs trapped in cycles of poverty and stigma.

## Structural Barriers to Development & Livelihoods

NT-DNT communities confront multifaceted barriers to education, health, and economic participation. Low female enrolment—particularly in Madhya Pradesh—and high dropout rates stem from the absence of job linkages, language barriers due to migration, and a lack of translated textbooks or residential schools. Forced settlement policies, such as those imposed on the Banjara community, have disrupted traditional livelihoods, exacerbating child labour (e.g., Pardhi children in forest harvesting) and early marriages. Women remain excluded from India's "women-led development" agenda due to landlessness and limited scheme access, with no clear roadmap for their inclusion. Civil society representation is nascent, leaving communities without safe platforms to voice grievances. Even burial rights are denied in many villages, reflecting deep-seated social stigma. Health initiatives lag for high-risk groups like the Bediya community, who lack access to HIV prevention tools (e.g., silicone vaginal rings, PEP). Vocational training programs fail without stipends, as economic precarity forces families to prioritise immediate income over education. These intersecting challenges demand targeted interventions, from livelihood decriminalization to legal safeguards and inclusive policy frameworks.

## Updates of the Year 2024-25

*Unconstitutional Surveillance of Nomadic Communities in Madhya Pradesh*

The Wildlife Crime Control Bureau (WCCB) and Principal Chief Conservator of Forests (PCCF), Madhya Pradesh, in January 2025 issued directives[1] ordering heightened surveillance and search operations targeting "wanderers, nomadic, and hunting communities" across forest divisions in Narmadapuram, Seoni, Chhindwara, Betul, Bhopal, Jabalpur, and Balaghat. The alert mandated: (1) conducting raids with dog squads at nomadic settlements (termed *"Ghumakkad Jatis"*), (2) interrogating and documenting movements of Denotified and Nomadic Tribes (DNTs) in police

records, (3) monitoring those selling plastic goods, blankets, herbs, or dry fruits in tiger corridors, and (4) forcibly collecting personal details (Aadhaar, phone numbers, vehicle details) to be shared via WhatsApp with the State Tiger Strike Force. These measures explicitly singled out communities like the Pardhi (a Scheduled Tribe in most MP districts), perpetuating colonial-era criminalization under the repealed Criminal Tribes Act, 1871.

This order violates Articles 14 (equality) and 15 (non-discrimination) by profiling communities based on caste and nomadic identity, while also infringing on privacy rights. The Supreme Court has previously acknowledged the historical persecution of groups like the Pardhis, yet the PCCF's order revives the same stigmatizing logic — treating entire communities as inherent criminals. Such directives lack legal basis and contradict forest governance principles, which mandate community rights under laws like the Forest Rights Act (FRA). The order's focus on petty trade (e.g., selling dry fruits) reveals its prejudiced intent, further marginalizing DNTs already struggling against systemic exclusion.

*Fight for Residential Land Allotment (Patta Abhiyan) Ongoing in Rajasthan*

In Rajasthan, where nomadic tribes constitute approximately 8 per cent of the population, a critical challenge persists — the lack of land ownership, leaving these communities vulnerable to evictions due to their historically transient lifestyle and societal prejudices. To address this, organizations like MKSS and local NT-DNT activists launched the Patta Abhiyan, a campaign aimed at securing land rights for nomadic families by providing legal ownership documents (pattas). Under this initiative, the government classified eligible nomadic, semi-nomadic, and denotified tribal households as Below Poverty Line (BPL) beneficiaries, granting them pattas for the land they occupied — 450 square feet for urban/peri-urban dwellers and 2,700 square feet for those in rural areas. However, implementation has faced resistance from local panchayats due to entrenched biases, slowing progress. According to the Rajasthan state government, over 21,000[2] land deeds have been distributed in the past year to previously homeless NT DNT families who had been living on unoccupied land, marking a significant, though still incomplete, step toward securing permanent residency and dignity for these marginalized communities. These schemes are woefully incomplete without the monumental efforts of the local CSOs and local NT DNT leaders and community volunteers whose painstaking efforts linking Jan Aadhar Cards, registering identity documents and explaining each welfare scheme to the members of the community lead to life changing inclusion for the NT DNT communities.

*Anthropological Survey of India Categorisation of Denotified Tribes*

In a landmark effort, the Anthropological Survey of India (AnSI) and Tribal Research Institutes (TRIs) have, for the first time, comprehensively documented and categorized 268 denotified, semi-nomadic, and nomadic tribes[3]— 85 of which had never been classified before. After a three-year study (2020-2023), they recommended 179 communities for inclusion in SC, ST, or OBC lists, while noting that 63 groups were "not traceable," likely due to assimilation, migration, or name changes. This initiative stemmed from the Idate Commission's push for urgent classification, leading the PMO to form a Special Committee in 2019 (chaired by NITI Aayog's Vice Chairperson) to oversee the project. Now, the Development and Welfare Board for DNTs faces a pivotal decision: whether to integrate these communities into existing SC/ST/OBC categories for reservation benefits or advocate for a separate constitutional classification. The committee is currently scrutinizing the findings ahead of a final report, which will shape state and central policy on granting long-overdue recognition and rights to these marginalized groups[4].

While the government has started a special scheme SEED (Scheme for the Economic Empowerment for denotified, nomadic and semi-nomadic tribes) the budgetary allocations generally fall short of real needs and its performance is even more inadequate. Another problem is that these communities sometimes face more problems in accessing development schemes meant for all people or all villagers. To give a recent example[5], the mahila sangathan of Barmer district,

Rajasthan has complained that members of these communities are facing more problems in obtaining employment under NREGA.

*Official Request for Name Change Ignored in Telangana*

The Pitchiguntla community, classified under Telangana's BC-A category (for nomadic/semi-nomadic tribes), has petitioned[6] the state Backward Caste Commission to officially rename them as "Vamsharaj" – their historically recognized identity – arguing that their current name (often mispronounced as 'pichakuntla', meaning 'crackpot' in Telugu) is derogatory. Despite being documented as Vamsharaj in 1995, authorities reverted to the stigmatized 'Pitchiguntla' by 2008, ignoring repeated appeals. Community leader O Narender highlights bureaucratic inconsistencies (listed as BC-A-17 in surveys versus BC-A-18 in records) and demands reclassification exclusively with other nomadic or semi-nomadic groups, noting that a simple gazette notification by senior officials could resolve the issue easily.

*Custodial Death of Pardhi Community Boy*

On July 14, 2024 a 25-year-old Deva Pardhi — a member of the historically persecuted Pardhi community — died under suspicious circumstances while in police custody in Guna district, Madhya Pradesh. Police claimed he suffered a fatal heart attack after complaining of chest pain, stating he received 45 minutes of medical attention at the district hospital following an initial referral from an understaffed local facility. However, his family alleges brutal custodial torture, describing how officers hung him upside down, gagged him with cloth, and beat him — an accusation that echoes the systemic targeting of denotified tribes under colonial-era policing paradigms[7]. While authorities have initiated a probe and ordered a postmortem, the incident underscores how the absence of specialized legal protections leaves marginalized communities like the Pardhis vulnerable to institutional violence, with their lives repeatedly devalued by a justice system still shaped by historically discriminatory origins.

## Recommendations

*National-Level Actions*

− Include DNTs as a separate Census category, fund studies on their status, and mandate bureaucrats to engage directly with communities.
− Repeal discriminatory laws: Scrap Habitual Offenders Acts, anti-begging laws, and advisories targeting nomadic communities (e.g., MP's 2023 surveillance order).
− Review harmful policies: Remove interstate livestock taxes, revise police training to eliminate caste bias, and ensure stipends for vocational trainees.
− Boost documentation and research.
− Promote cultural representation: Support DNT artists through govt-sponsored festivals, films, and performance platforms.
− Legal & welfare safeguards:
   o Extend SC/ST (PoA) Act protections to DNTs or enact a similar law.
   o Establish DNT cells in human rights commissions.
   o Implement Renke/Idate Commission reports.
   o Reform caste certificates to allow maternal-line claims for children of sex workers/single mothers.

*State/Regional Actions*

− Institutional support: Create state DNT commissions with dedicated budgets and CSR funding.
− Legal ID access: Waive domicile requirements for documents; issue caste certificates via oral testimonies and mobile camps.

- Justice system reforms:
  - o Set up specific DNT cells in District Legal Services Authorities (DLSAs) to serve issues of NT DNT communities.
  - o Track crimes against DNTs, especially women/ landowners under FRA 2006.
  - o Audit police training manuals and training methods to remove anti-DNT bias.
- Livelihoods & traditional skills:
  - o Link DNT artisans (e.g., Sapera snake venom harvesters, Van Gujjar pastoralists) to corresponding modern industries.
  - o Guarantee employment for performers in govt events/theatres through an expansion of MNREGA
  - o Provide childcare for traveling entertainers.
- Education:
  - o Build DNT-specific residential schools apart from just simple Eklavya residential schools; reserve seats in existing ones
  - o Translate textbooks into localised dialects and languages of the NT DNT Communities, appoint DNT teachers for Vimukta Schools , and open schools near forest settlements of the NT DNT Communities.
- Healthcare:
  - o Deploy mobile health units and mental health counsellors for trauma support to NT DNT habitations and fund programs done by CSOs working on the mental health issues of NT DNT communities, especially concerning the rising suicide rates.
  - o Distribute HIV prevention tools (e.g., vaginal rings) to those NT DNT who come from historically discriminated backgrounds forced to work in the sex trade

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# Half-hearted Attempts to Include LGBTQIA+ People

*The Equal Opportunities Policy should be strictly enforced, and penalties for violence against transgender persons should be enhanced to match those for cisgender women.*

India has taken several steps toward LGBTQIA+ inclusion since June 2024. The Supreme Court, in its verdict on the Supriyo vs. Union of India case on 17 October 2023, accepted the Solicitor General's request to establish a committee chaired by the Cabinet Secretary[1]. The committee was tasked with examining queer persons' rights to civil unions, protection from violence, recognition of chosen families, healthcare decision-making rights, joint bank accounts, succession rights, insurance benefits, and prohibition of forced medical interventions. Additionally, in July 2024, the Union government's Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment organised a consultation involving central ministries, state governments, and community representatives[2]. Key demands raised by Civil Society Organisations included[3]:

– Legal recognition and registration of marriages for lesbian, gay, and non-binary individuals.
– Adoption rights for LGBTQIA+ families.
– Criminalisation of marital rape.
– Protection from maintenance claims by abusive parents.
– Legal recognition of chosen families.
– Provision of state-funded shelter homes for LGBTQIA+ individuals facing gender-based violence.
– Criminalisation of conversion therapy and forced corrective surgeries on intersex children.
– Coverage for gender-affirming care in public health schemes public group insurance schemes like the Employee State Insurance Scheme (ESIC), Ayushman Bharat - Pradhan Mantri Jan Aarogya Yojana (AB-PMJAY).
– Accessible, queer-affirmative mental health services.
– Horizontal reservations in education and employment within public and private sectors.

Following the consultation, ministries issued several directives. On 23 August 2024, the Ministry of Consumer Affairs directed states and union territories to allow registration of queer partners as family members in ration card applications[4]. The Ministry of Health and Family Welfare issued guidelines on 21 August 2024 to[5]

– Raise awareness among medical professionals.
– Prohibit conversion therapy.
– Provide SRS facilities in designated institutions.
– Standardize procedures for SRS.
– Include LGBTQIA+ health in medical curricula.
– Enable accessible teleconsultation services.
– Conduct sensitization training for healthcare professionals.

On 28 August 2024, the Ministry of Finance issued an advisory confirming that queer individuals may open joint bank accounts and nominate partners as beneficiaries[6]. Marriage and family are the foundation for many socio-economic rights which a queer person is denied access to in the absence of marriage equality. In lieu of this, earlier in 2024 the Supreme Court had observed the importance of chosen family for a queer person[7].

Despite these efforts for LGBTQIA+ inclusion, there has been a lack of enthusiasm on the part of the government. The government has taken incremental steps, such as issuing guidelines for healthcare access, ration card inclusion, and financial entitlements for queer individuals. However, it has not joined global initiatives like the Generation Equality Forum (GEF), which promotes intersectional and inclusive gender equality frameworks. GEF explicitly recognises the compounded

discrimination faced by marginalised identities and calls for intersectional policy action — an approach India has yet to adopt fully[8]. Additionally,

India abstained from voting on the UN Human Rights Council's 2022 mandate[9] to protect against violence based on sexual orientation and gender identity, highlighting its reluctance to support international LGBTQIA+ protections.

Civil society reports, including the 2024 submission by The Advocates for Human Rights to the UN Human Rights Committee, highlight ongoing discrimination, denial of marriage and civil union rights, and exclusion from economic, educational, and employment opportunities[10].

These findings contrast with the government's narrative of inclusion, suggesting a substantial implementation gap.

### Analysis of Relevant Policies, Schemes, Legislations, and Budget Announcements

Following the Supriyo judgment in October 2023 — which held that marriage is not a fundamental right — the Supreme Court emphasised that it is Parliament's prerogative to legislate on marriage equality. Despite this, the judgment reiterated the LGBTQIA+ community's rights to gender identity, sexual orientation, and cohabitation, with freedom from coercion or violence. Review petitions challenging the judgment were dismissed by the Supreme Court on 9 January 2025. It was noted that while the Supreme Court did not allow the petition on marriage equality, its reiteration to end societal violence towards LGBTQ+ persons sent conflicting signals and also undermined efforts towards an equitable world[11].

Meanwhile, the Ministry of Home Affairs issued an advisory on 10 July 2024 instructing police to protect queer individuals from violence and not to direct them back to unsafe natal families[12]. It also emphasised the need for preliminary inquiries before registering FIRs involving consensual queer relationships and recommended sensitisation training for police personnel. Whilst, this might seem like basic human rights for any citizen, it is a known reality that often queer individuals and couples who approach the police are infantilised and their autonomy is violated.

As mentioned above, a cabinet secretary-led committee, formed in compliance with the judgment, held its first meeting on 21 May 2024. A sub-committee was later constituted. On 25 July 2024, the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment conducted a closed-door meeting with community representatives, who submitted written suggestions. Key recommendations included reviewing marital laws, recognising chosen families, addressing socio-economic rights, preventing gender-based violence, and ensuring inclusive healthcare.

Several ministries issued advisories in line with these suggestions. The Ministry of Food and Public Distribution advised states to recognise queer partners as a single household for ration card purposes. The Ministry of Finance confirmed joint bank account eligibility for queer individuals. The Ministry of Health and Family Welfare issued detailed healthcare guidelines, including access to SRS, inclusive curricula[13], and recognition of chosen partners for body claim rights. The ministry of Health and Family Welfare also issued directions to ensure inclusive healthcare, including prohibition of conversion therapy, availability of sex reassignment surgery, tele-consultation[14], and sensitisation at various levels. It also espoused the right to claim a deceased partner's body when next of kin is not available. The advisory uses the term *Sex Reassignment Surgery* rather than *Gender Affirmative Procedures* and provides suggestions for making the procedures available at designated government or aided hospitals and provision of medical insurance for the same.

However, these advisories are not legally binding and serve as guidance for voluntary compliance by states and departments.

## Unaddressed Policy and Implementation Gaps

Five years since its enactment, the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act, 2019 remains fraught with challenges. Petitions challenging its constitutionality are still pending before the Supreme Court. The Act's requirement under Section 7 for medical surgery contradicts the NALSA judgment's principle of gender self-identification. The Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Rules 2020 use the term "medical intervention"[15] as opposed to surgery mentioned in the Act, creating ambiguity and implementation inconsistencies.

Although the Act mandates issuing Transgender Certificates within 30 days, 937 applications have been pending for the duration of 7-12 months[16]. Of the 26,831 certificates issued, Maharashtra leads with 4,693 applications and 4,316 certificates granted.

Only 19 states/UTs have constituted Transgender Welfare Boards[17], these are namely, Rajasthan, Mizoram, Chandigarh, Andhra Pradesh, Pondicherry, Maharashtra, Kerala, Meghalaya, Manipur, Tripura, West Bengal, Chhattisgarh, Bihar, Gujarat, Uttar Pradesh, Assam, Tamil Nadu, Jammu and Kashmir and Andaman & Nicobar. Delhi has yet to establish one. Furthermore, only 11 states have set up Transgender Protection Cells[18] despite their crucial role in addressing violence against transgender individuals. These include Punjab, Chandigarh, Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, Chhattisgarh, West Bengal, Arunachal Pradesh, Sikkim, Mizoram, Andhra Pradesh, and Andaman and Nicobar Islands. The penalties outlined in Section 18 of the Act are notably lenient — six months to two years of imprisonment for offences[19] — when compared to penalties under laws protecting cisgender women.

The Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment officially launched the Equal Opportunities Policy for Transgender Persons on October 1, 2024[20]. This policy aims to ensure that transgender individuals have equitable access to employment, education, healthcare, and public services, thereby promoting their full participation in society. It aligns with the provisions of the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act, 2019, and the corresponding Rules of 2020. However, accessibility remains a challenge.

While comprehensive in scope, the "SMILE – Support for Marginalized Individuals for Livelihood and Enterprise" – scheme initiated by the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment, suffers from poor implementation. The budget allocated for 2024–25 under the SMILE scheme was Rs. 63.90 crores, to be increased to Rs. 76.88 crores by 2025–26[21]. The scheme includes scholarships (Rs. 13,500 per year) for transgender students, but the amount is insufficient for actual educational costs. Moreover, no public data is available on beneficiaries and skill development modules are inaccessible to those lacking internet access or digital literacy.

Garima Grehs (shelter homes) are limited in number, despite an estimated 48 lakh transgender individuals in the country as per 2011 Census[22]. Only 12 such homes exist, which is inadequate given the widespread familial rejection faced by transgender individuals. The Supriyo judgment also reiterated the right to choice of partner upheld in Shakti Vaahini v. Union of India[23] and Shafin Jahan v. Union of India[24]. The Shakti Vahini judgement has pioneered in addressing and ensuring preventive steps against violence faced by couples. It has directed state governments to establish safe houses for young married or unmarried couples whose relationship has been opposed by family/local community/khaps. Supriyo Judgment, following Shakti vahini directed the state governments/UTs to establish and publicise availability of safe houses or Garima Grehs for the members of queer community facing violence and discrimination. Most state governments paid no heed to the direction and have not taken any action to ensure the safety and security of queer individuals. In 2021, Delhi High Court further upheld that safe houses are meant for interfaith, inter-caste and LGBTQ+ community couples facing troubles from family[25].

Further, in 2021, the Tamil Nadu High Court had directed to make suitable changes to the existing shelters and Garima Grehs to accommodate any and every member of LGBTQIA+ community, who require shelter[26]. The High Court had also directed the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment to make infrastructural arrangements towards this within a period of 12 weeks. These orders of

apex court and high courts have still not been implemented and it is the harsh reality that the government has not established any safe homes for queer women and queer couples. This is also a violation of the right to choose a partner upheld by the Supreme Court, since queer couples cannot exercise that right because of a threat of violence.

## Recommendations for the Way Forward

A range of legislative and policy reforms are urgently needed to foster a more inclusive and equitable society for the LGBTQIA+ community in India. A key step would be to amend the Special Marriage Act, 1954, to recognise same-sex marriages, in line with recommendations from the Supreme Court. In the workplace, employment and labour laws should be updated to mandate inclusive hiring practices and establish robust anti-discrimination redressal mechanisms specifically for LGBTQIA+ individuals.

Access to healthcare must also be improved. This includes criminalising non-consensual surgeries on intersex infants and implementing a binding ban on conversion therapy. Comprehensive sexual and reproductive healthcare should be made accessible to lesbian, bisexual, and transmasculine persons. In the educational sphere, institutions must implement anti-discrimination policies, integrate inclusive sexuality education that addresses gender and sexual diversity, and appoint trained staff along with queer-affirmative counsellors. Providing gender-neutral washrooms across all schools and colleges would further support inclusivity.

Improvements to the SMILE Scheme are also essential. This includes increasing the number and geographical distribution of Garima Grehs (shelters for transgender persons); raising scholarship amounts; and, ensuring transparency in beneficiary data. Additionally, skill training programs should be adapted to cater to persons with disabilities and older transgender individuals.

Further policy and legislative reforms are necessary to strengthen protections. The Equal Opportunities Policy should be strictly enforced, and penalties for violence against transgender persons should be enhanced to match those for cisgender women. Issuance of transgender ID cards must be expedited, and welfare boards along with protection cells should be established in every state and union territory.

Collectively, these measures can help build a legal and social environment that is not only inclusive and safe but also empowering for LGBTQIA+ communities across the country.

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# From Legislation to Realisation: Assessing Disability Inclusion and Governance

*There is an urgent need to modernise data collection, increase budget substantially, strictly enforce accessibility laws, invest in inclusive education and employment, leverage technology, and come up with robust accountability mechanisms.*

The year following June 2024 has witnessed both symbolic and substantive developments in the disability inclusion landscape in India. The judiciary played a pivotal role in advancing disability rights. In *Akshat Baldwa v. Yashraj Films*, the Delhi High Court ordered that all films released in multiple languages must include at least one accessibility feature by September 15, 2024, with full compliance required within two years. In *Rajive Raturi v. Union of India*, the Supreme Court said that accessibility should be deemed as a fundamental right in purview of Articles 14, 19 and 21 of the Constitution of India, directing the creation of binding accessibility standards for all public infrastructure and services, with penalties and withheld clearances for non-compliance. Additionally, in cases involving Omkar Gond, Om Rathod, and Anmol, the Supreme Court addressed barriers in medical education for students with disabilities, mandating the involvement of doctors with disabilities in admissions and urging more inclusive guidelines [1].Similarly, the Apex Court in *Amar Jain V Union of India and Ors.* held that inclusive and meaningful digital access to e-governance and welfare delivery systems is a part of the fundamental right to life and liberty [2].

These landmark judgments have significantly advanced the rights of persons with disabilities by making accessibility and inclusion legal requirements rather than optional measures. Meanwhile, events such as the opening of Miti Café in Rashtrapati Bhavan and the national debate around the Puja Khedkar controversy have kept disability rights in the public discourse, highlighting both progress and persistent ableism.

## Policy and Legislative Developments

The Rights of Persons with Disabilities (Amendment) Rules, 2024, were notified to further harmonise Indian laws with the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities[3]. The government continues to operate major schemes -

*NIRAMAYA Health Insurance Scheme:* The scheme offers up to ₹1 lakh health coverage for persons with disabilities, without requiring pre-insurance medical tests[4]. As of 2024-25, it covers only four disabilities – Autism, Cerebral Palsy, Intellectual Disability (using outdated terminology), and Multiple Disabilities. It has been criticised for delayed fund disbursement, limited coverage, and outdated language, with just 47,307 beneficiaries enrolled in 2024-25 [5] [6] [7].

*Indira Gandhi National Disability Pension Scheme:* Monthly income support for adults with over 80 per cent disability and below the poverty line [4]. It varies by state, with many left uncovered due to administrative delays and low awareness [8] [9] [10].

*ADIP Scheme:* Facilitates access to modern aids and appliances for physical, sensory, and mental disabilities[11]. ₹316.7 crore allocated for modern aids and appliances for persons with physical, sensory, and intellectual disabilities[12] under the Assistance to Disabled Persons (ADIP) Scheme.

*Deendayal Disabled Rehabilitation Scheme:* Despite ₹165 crore allocated for NGO rehabilitation grants, delays and complex paperwork have disrupted funding and hindered consistent service delivery[6].

*Scholarship for Students with Disabilities:* Despite ₹145 crore allocated for educational advancement, delays, complex applications, and limited outreach still prevent a number of eligible students from receiving support [6].

## Budget Announcements

The Union Budget 2025–26 allocated ₹1,275 crore to the Department of Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities, a 9.22 per cent increase over the previous year, but still only 0.025 per cent of the total Union Budget[6] [13]. The Scheme for Implementation of the RPwD Act (SIPDA) saw its allocation slashed to ₹115 crore, despite the Supreme Court's mandate for accessible public spaces[14]. Notably, the overall social justice budget rose by 35.75 per cent, but disability-specific allocations remain disproportionately low relative to need and population share[6].

For FY 2024–25, the Department of Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities was allocated ₹1,225.27 crore. Of this, ₹615.33 crore was earmarked for the National Program for the Welfare of Persons with Disabilities[15]. However, the overall allocation remains at a mere 0.025 per cent of the total Union Budget[16]. The government has not yet adopted the sector's demand for 5 per cent of the budget to be earmarked for disability inclusion[7] [17].

## Unaddressed Policy and Implementation Gaps

Despite legislative and programmatic advances, several persistent gaps undermine the realisation of rights for persons with disabilities:

- *Chronic Underfunding and Underutilisation:* While the Union Budget has grown by 66 per cent since 2020–21, disability allocations have stagnated or declined in real terms, dropping from ₹1,325 crore to ₹1,275 crore for DEPwD over five years. SIPDA, which funds accessibility, has been cut sharply, and unspent funds are common, reflecting systemic inefficiencies and lack of absorptive capacity[7,8]. The allocation has steadily declined, with a 37.5 per cent reduction from 2022–23 to 2023–24, and a further 9.78 per cent cut in 2024–25[6].

- *Access to Health Insurance:* Access to health insurance remains a major challenge for persons with disabilities in India, with over 80 per cent lacking coverage and 42 per cent unaware of the Ayushman Bharat scheme, according to the NCPEDP's 2024 "Ayushman for All" survey [18]. Many are excluded from Ayushman Bharat due to income and age criteria, despite the scheme's recent expansion to provide unconditional coverage to all individuals above 70 years of age [19]. Disability rights advocates are calling for universal, unconditional health insurance coverage for persons with disabilities under government schemes, to address high healthcare costs and ensure equitable access [20]

- *Political Participation:* Despite recent general elections, persons with disabilities in India face significant barriers to political participation, including inaccessible polling stations, lack of accessible electoral information, low voter registration and turnout, underrepresentation as candidates, and insufficient training of polling staff. These challenges persist despite legal mandates, hindering persons with disabilities from fully exercising their democratic rights and highlighting the need for targeted reforms, better data, and improved implementation to ensure truly inclusive elections. [21] [22] [23] [24]

- *Inadequate Data and Exclusion from Surveys:* India continues to rely on outdated data from the 2011 Census, which recorded 2.21 per cent of the population as disabled, while the National Family Health Survey (NFHS)-5 reported only 1 per cent due to omission of key questions[11]. The absence of disability-related questions in the NFHS-6 further perpetuates the invisibility of persons with

disabilities in official statistics, impeding targeted policymaking[6]. Civil society and UN estimates suggest the true figure is between 3–8 per cent, or over 8 crore people, leading to severe underestimation and misallocation of resources[7][8].

- *Accessibility Deficits*: The Accessible India Campaign (*Sugamya Bharat Abhiyan*) has failed to meet its targets. As of 2025, less than 30 per cent of government buildings are fully accessible, and many public spaces, transport systems, and digital platforms remain non-compliant with accessibility norms, despite legal mandates and judicial orders[8].

- *Education and Employment:* Students with disabilities constitute less than 1 per cent of total school enrolment, reflecting exclusion due to inaccessible infrastructure, lack of trained teachers, and inadequate support services[6][11]. Employment rates have stagnated at 26 per cent, with no significant improvement, and private sector participation in mandated 4 per cent reservations remains minimal[4][11]. The cost of disability-such as the need for private transport due to inaccessible public transit-remains unaddressed in policy design[11]. The reduction in funding for inclusive education and skill development exacerbates these challenges[6].

Data Discrepancies-Government vs. Citizen Generated Data

A comparison of government data and independent sources reveal stark discrepancies-

| Indicator | Government Data | Citizen Generated Data (from civil society and other sources |
|---|---|---|
| Disability Prevalence | 2.21% (Census 2011), 1% (NFHS-5) | WHO estimates 15% globally; Indian NGOs estimate 3–4% [25][26] |
| Budget Allocation | 0.025% of total budget (2024–25) | Sector demand: 5% |
| School Enrolment | <1% students with disabilities | Civil society estimates higher exclusion due to systemic challenges and discrepancies in data collection methods |
| Employment Rate | 26% (2021 report) | No significant improvement, with anecdotal evidence of stagnation or decline |

The government's reliance on outdated and incomplete data leads to systemic underestimation of the disabled population and resource needs [27]. The absence of disability-specific questions in major surveys and the continued delay of the 2021 Census perpetuate invisibility and policy neglect [26][28]. Meanwhile, UN and civil society data consistently highlight a much larger affected population, underscoring the inadequacy of current policy responses [29]

## Recommendations for the Way Forward

*Data Modernisation*: Expedite the delayed national census with focus on enumerating disability and ensure that all major surveys, including the National Family Health Survey, comprehensively cover all 21 disabilities recognized under the RPwD Act, 2016.

*Budget Enhancement and Utilisation:* Raise disability funding to at least 1 per cent of the total budget as an interim target, with a clear roadmap to reach 5 per cent. Ensure full and timely utilisation of funds, with transparent reporting and independent audits.

Enforcement of Accessibility Laws: Mandate strict timelines and penalties for non-compliance with accessibility standards across public infrastructure, transport, and digital platforms. Establish independent monitoring bodies and require annual accessibility audits by both public and private entities.

*Inclusive Education and Employment:* Invest in inclusive education through curriculum reform, teacher training, and assistive technology. Incentivise private sector employment of persons with disabilities via tax benefits, stricter enforcement of reservation quotas, and support for reasonable accommodations at workplace.

*Leverage Technology and Innovation:* Subsidize assistive technology devices, ensure universal digital accessibility (IS 17802 standard), and expand remote digital service centres to bridge the digital divide for persons with disabilities, especially in rural areas.

*Community Participation and Monitoring:* Institutionalise regular consultations with disabled persons' organizations and civil society in policy formulation, implementation, and monitoring. Create time-bound grievance redressal systems and require annual disability-inclusion reports from all major institutions.

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# An organised refusal to bury Christian dead

*Christians see a disturbing trend in all of this – the emergence of a system designed to silence faith. Fabricated FIRs are being filed, often by individuals who aren't even the alleged victims.*

With over 840 reported cases  of violence against them in 2024, of which 640 were verified, and as many as 121 new cases in just January, February and March 2025, the last 15 months have been the most traumatic in the life of the Christian community in India since Mr Narendra Modi became Prime minister in 2014. His party, the Bharatiya Janata Party and its ideological partners launched a deliberately calculated campaign that fuelled both Islamophobia, on the one hand, and a bitter pogrom against Christianity in villages and towns in several states of the country, especially those with a sizeable population of Dalits, the former untouchable castes, and Indigenous people called Tribals or Adivasis.

Of the recorded incidents of hostility against Christians in India – the highest on record – over 200 cases were reported from Uttar Pradesh alone, making it the most dangerous state for religious minorities, followed by Chhattisgarh, Tamil Nadu and Orissa.

Religious minorities are tiny communities in India. For the religious minorities, every threat looms, every incident injures.

Hinduism is the dominant religion, accounting for approximately 79.8 per cent of the population, according to the 2011 census. Islam is the second-largest religious group, comprising about 14.2 per cent. Christianity, Sikhism, Buddhism, and Jainism each constitute a smaller percentage of the population, totalling roughly 6 per cent. A small percentage of the population (0.6 per cent) identifies with other religions.

Christians are a mere 2.3 per cent of the population. The decadal percentage figures in the Census for Christians have largely remained unchanged since Independence. No separate census is done for Christian denominations, but Catholics, as a general agreement between groups, constitute some 60 per cent of the total Christian population. Their largest concentration is in Kerala, followed by Tamil Nadu, Andhra, and other states. Kerala, Karnataka and the Tribal states of Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh and Odisha provide a sizable number of vocations in India.

The persecution of Christians has been assiduously documented and analysed by several groups and human rights activists, including the Evangelical Fellowship of India, the United Christian Forum, Persecution relief and senior activists.

Violence against minorities — particularly Christians — is not new to Odisha or to Chhattisgarh.  Odisha is notorious for the 1999 triple murder of Australian missionary Graham Stuart Staines and his two young sons. Odisha also witnessed the 2007-2008 mass violence against Christians that left more than a hundred dead, thousands injured, over 75,000 homeless as murderous mobs ravaged 4000 houses and 400 villages, destroyed 400 churches and institutions and raped a Catholic nun and other women. What is new in the last 10 years since 2014 is the seeming licence given to political elements professing a pro-Hindu religious nationalism. They believe they are above the law.

The newer and increasingly widespread forms of atrocities by religious bigots, illiterate village gangs, and dominant religious groups, often aided by political actors, are deeply concerning. These groups display blatant disregard for religious minorities and legal authorities, violating several fundamental rights.

These cases include attacks on Priests and Nuns, and protestant clergy, apart from vandalism against churches, forcible curtailment of worship, violence against common people which included pressure that families do not bury their dead in their villages, forcible social boycott of Christian families, denial of community resources, and targeted arrests under the anti-conversion laws.

At least four Christians were murdered for their faith and 113 injured, including 60 women, in 2024. Reports indicate that on average, four to five churches and pastors face attacks daily, with incidents nearly doubling every Sunday.

Additional data on arrests by the police in various states is deeply worrying, the statistics devastating. As many as 197 First Information Reports (FIRs) filed against Christians, 128 of these complaints under anti-conversion laws. There were 724 instances of imprisonment or illegal detention including 129 cases of pastors arrested. The data shows 11 cases of forcible conversion to Hinduism, and 18 cases of social boycott, again mostly from Chhattisgarh.

Each statistic tells a heartbreaking story – one more devastating than the next – a family torn apart, a church forced into hiding, a believer unjustly imprisoned for their faith.

## DISTURBING TREND – SILENCING FAITH

Christians see a disturbing trend in all of this – the emergence of a system designed to silence faith. Fabricated FIRs are being filed, often by individuals who aren't even the alleged victims. Bail applications are deliberately delayed. Even home churches are targeted, an attempt to intimidate small worship gatherings.

## HATE SPEECH

This is corroborated by hate speech studies done in the country. "The alarming increase in violence must be understood in the context of the growing normalization of hateful rhetoric targeting Christians, driven mostly by Hindu nationalist groups like the Vishwa   Hindu Parishad-Bajrang Dal, Antarrashtriya Hindu Parishad (AHP) and Rashtriya Bajrang Dal (RBD), Hindu Janajagruti Samiti (HJS), and the Maharashtra-based coalition of Hindu far-right groups called Sakal Hindu Samaj (SHS). Data reveals that 23 incidents of hate speech targeting the Christian community included calls to violence, while at least 17 speeches explicitly gave a call to arms," the Hate Speech Events in India Report 2024 said.

"The overall trends in anti-Christian hate speech recorded throughout 2024 highlight a systematic and deliberate effort by Hindu far-right groups to marginalize the Christian community in India. These groups have employed a calculated strategy to spread disinformation, incite violence, and promote hostility toward Christians, framing them as "foreigners" and "threats" to India's cultural and religious identity. This targeted hate has further normalized an environment where fear, harassment, and persecution have become routine experiences for the Christian community in the country," the report added.

The most recent physical attack by the police on Catholic priests and women occurred in Juba, Mohana under Gajapati District of Odisha state on 22nd March 2025 within the Church complex and residences.

The police had been harassing the local villagers accusing them of growing marijuana. That day, four young Kondh tribal women in the Juba Catholic Church were preparing for next day's Sunday Prayers when a posse of Police, numbering around 15 personnel, barged inside the Church. broke the cleaning instruments and desecrated the sacred space of the Church.

Two women were beaten with batons within the Church and then dragged almost 300 meters away to a police bus. The two other women, in their teens, ran for their lives towards the presbytery. In shock, they appealed for help from the Priests who were in their Residence.

The church cook, aged 38 and a tribal, came out to the portico hearing the cries of the girls. The police caught her by the throat and gave her a blow. In the process, her blouse was torn. Other

women and children collected at the place. The police caught all of them and put them inside their vehicle.

Hearing the cries of the children and women, two Catholic Priests had come out from their residence where they had been resting after attending a funeral service in the village. A police officer hit Fr. JG, aged 56 with her baton. The priest, who is from Kerala, has been working for the development of tribal and Dalit communities for 40 years.

He and his colleague, Fr. DN, a native of Gajapati district in Odisha, were beaten by the police all the way to the police buses some 300 to 400 meters away. The Priests were accused of converting local Hindus. Fr. DN, who was ordained a priest only three months ago and had joined as assistant priest in the Church., was to celebrate his birthday that day. Fr. DN was grievously injured with a fractured shoulder blade. At one time, he fainted and fell but was dragged on to the bus.

The case has been investigated by a fact-finding team of human rights activists and lawyers from Bhubaneswar, the state capital. There has been no explanation or apology by the police.

## MURDERS

In a country were lynchings of young Muslim youth are hardly ever covered by the mainstream media, and almost never by national TV channels, reports of the violent deaths of Christians persecuted for their faith are rarely to be noticed. Four cases of murder were recorded in 2024, but that may not be the only ones that took place. These were:

1. On January 23, 2024 in Jalandhar, Punjab, Pastor Bhagwan Singh of Muktsar, associated with RMS Church and was conducting a prayer service when religious extremists attacked him and other pastors. Pastor Bhagwan sustained severe injuries, including a head injury, and was hospitalised along with the other pastors. He was critically injured and passed away in mid-February.

2. On May 4 in Kapanar village, Bastar, Chhattisgarh, Kosa, a 22-year-old new Christian, was brutally murdered allegedly by his relatives who did not like him changing his religion. During a village celebration, many of the new Christians were pressured to undergo a "Ghar Wapsi" or conversion ceremony to Hinduism, which Kosa refused. Despite his wife's pleas, he was fatally attacked. His wife was also assaulted and hospitalised. Other Christians' homes were vandalised by the mob.

3. On June 24 in Toylanka village, Katekalyan block, Dantewada district in Chhattisgarh, Bindu Sodhi was murdered allegedly by villagers and her own family members armed with weapons after enduring harassment for her Christian faith. Despite filing a prior police complaint, she was attacked while working in the fields. Villagers also denied her family the right to bury her on village land

4. On July 7 in Arwal District, Bihar, Nilesh, the son of Pastor Sushil Kumar, was murdered by unknown assailants. Previously, the family had faced harassment and threats from religious extremists and members of higher caste groups. Enraged by the presence of a Christian family, they issued threats, including to kill Pastor Sushil's son. On July 7, around 11 PM, unidentified attackers brutally murdered Nilesh as he slept, breaking his hands, strangling him, and hanging him from a tree.

## THE ISSUE OF BURIALS

The freedom to be buried has taken a beating in Odisha and Chhattisgarh in particular, though incidents have come from several other states. Over 30 cases have been registered in the last 15 months where first- or second-generation Christians were refused a burial in their home villages or districts. Five of these incidents have occurred this year. One case went all the way to the national courts where finally a judge ruled that the body be buried in a neighbouring district's Christian graveyard to prevent any civil unrest.

Fact finding teams documented eight cases from just Nabarangpur District of Odisha since 2022 in which bodies were either exhumed, maltreated, or "converted" to Hinduism before being burned. Others were forcibly removed to far away forests to be reburied. In the first three months of 2025, five incidents took place in Chhattisgarh and one in Odisha. The officials did not ensure the fundamental rights of the aggrieved citizens.

A Christian girl, Pushpanjali Bagh's burial issue had in September 2022 become the epicentre of road-blocks and strikes, some 20 years of age and a resident of Umerkote town in Nabarangpur district, died of illness while being treated in the government hospital on 9th September 2022.

In October 2024, Madhu Harijan, age 27, of Menjar village in Nabarangpur died in the district government hospital on 22nd. His body was forcibly "converted" to Hinduism before it was allowed by the mob to be buried. Tribal communities practice both burial and cremation.

In a revealing public statement, Mr. Sunil Kumar Behera, district working president of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP), acknowledged that such incidents are the result of a VHP campaign titled "Jago aur Jagao" (Awaken and Awaken Others). Speaking to the media, Mr. Behera claimed that villagers have a right to deny burial to Christians because "they did not take permission from the villagers when they converted."

These cases flout many provisions of the penal code [Bharatiya Nyaya Samhita 2023 and the earlier Indian Penal Coder]. Dignity in death is assured by Indian laws and has been upheld by many pronouncements of the courts of law.

## ARRESTS ON FALSE CHARGES

Uttar Pradesh continues to witness the highest number of reported incidents against Christians, with 188 cases recorded in 2024. The Prohibition of Unlawful Conversion of Religion Act, 2021 has been widely misused, with pastors and believers frequently arrested under false allegations of "forced conversions." Many of these individuals were simply conducting prayer meetings, attending family gatherings, or offering spiritual guidance.

Religious extremist groups frequently raid prayer services and disrupt worship while accusing Christians of coercion. In several instances, law enforcement action has led to the arrest of victims rather than those responsible for the violence. Legal experts note that lower courts regularly deny bail, prolonging unjust imprisonment for many believers.

One particularly brutal case occurred on December 27 in Khaga, Fatehpur district, where Pastor Shivbharan was beaten, forcibly shaved, and paraded through his village. Instead of receiving justice, he was booked under the state's anti-conversion law.

Chhattisgarh remains a major centre of Christian persecution, with 150 cases recorded this year. Tribal Christians face physical violence, social ostracism, and economic deprivation as extremist groups attempt to force them to renounce their faith.

Punjab and Rajasthan, which recorded 38 and 40 incidents respectively, have witnessed increasing hostility toward Christians. In Jalandhar, Punjab, on January 23, Pastor Bhagwan Singh was conducting a prayer service when he was attacked. He suffered severe head injuries and succumbed to the injuries on February 19, 2024.

## WEAPONISING ANTI CONVERSION LAWS

Laws are becoming harsher. Under the amended Uttar Pradesh anti-conversion law, for conversions involving minors, women, or Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe individuals, penalties now range from twenty years to the remainder of a person's life.

The misuse of anti-conversion laws remains a key factor in the rising persecution of Christians. Laws meant to prevent forced conversions are instead weaponized to harass religious minorities. The burden of proof often falls on the accused, making legal defence extremely difficult.

Despite the increasing number of attacks, justice seems elusive. Many victims are too afraid to file complaints due to fear of police inaction, intimidation, or retaliation from their attackers. Even when cases are registered, they often result in delays, acquittals, or wrongful imprisonment of victims instead of perpetrators.

## RECOMMENDATIONS TO UNION AND STATE GOVERNMENTS

– Train both police and administrative officials at the state and district levels on fundamental, constitutional, and human rights of religious minorities – particularly concerning the rights and dignity of the dead. Stringent action should be taken against officials who are either indifferent or tacitly promote rights violations.

– Enact specific legislation to protect the rights of the dead: There is an urgent need to legislate protections that uphold the dignity and rights of the deceased, in accordance with NHRC guidelines, constitutional provisions, and Supreme Court rulings. This would help curb the ongoing disrespect for the dead.

– Apply relevant sections of the Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha Sanhita (BNSS) – specifically Sections 189–197, 297–299, and 351–356 to ensure the rights of religious minorities are constitutionally protected.

– Implement the Protection of Civil Rights Act (1955, amended 1976): This Act enforces Article 17 of the Constitution, which abolishes untouchability. As groups denying burial to Christians treat them as impure or untouchable, the law should be applied not only to locals but also to officials complicit in such actions.

– Halt the misuse of the PESA Act where it is used to violate the fundamental rights of religious minorities especially concerning upholding rights and dignity of the dead person under the guise of protecting tribal culture.

– Take legal and administrative action against fundamentalist groups that misguide tribal communities and foment communal unrest.

– Identify and investigate criminal elements among religious bigots who incite Adivasi and Dalit communities, causing public disorder and religious disharmony.

– Establish a consistent interface between law enforcement agencies, the district administration, and civil/community leaders to restore public trust and accelerate inclusive development processes.

– Create a District Minority Forum Cell to monitor and support religious minorities, and facilitate the protection of intersectional rights of Adivasis, Dalits, and religious minorities.

– Provide land for Christian burial grounds, recognizing that the right to burial is as essential as the right to life and liberty under Articles 19 and 21 of the Constitution.

– Activate District Legal Services Authorities (DLSAs) to conduct paralegal training on intersectional and constitutional rights, especially focusing on Articles 14, 15, 17, 19, 21, and 25, and the specific provisions related to Adivasis, Dalits, and religious minorities.

– Compensate affected victims and survivors for trauma, livelihood losses, and forced displacement. Offer legal protection and initiate witness protection measures to assist in police investigations and court proceedings, ensuring justice and safe return of the displaced.

– Strengthen community policing by recruiting officers from diverse backgrounds and grounding them in relevant laws such as the SC/ST (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, POCSO, Women and Minority Protection Laws. Cultivate a spirit of respect for all religious spaces – temples, churches, and mosques alike.

– Prioritize holistic development programs and establish legal aid cells to support citizen-centric welfare schemes. Encourage and support civil society participation to promote truth, justice, and reconciliation in affected communities.

# Muslims in India: Persisting Challenges and Systemic Concerns

*A review of last year, reveals a continued pattern of challenges of Muslim community in India, highlighting concerns that persist within the broader framework of societal standing. These developments underscore the critical need to examine the prevailing environment for Muslims in India, considering both specific incidents and systemic issues that impact their well-being and rights.*

The pressures experienced by human rights advocates and segments of the Muslim community have continued to build in the past year. On November 30, 2024, Nadeem Khan, a human rights activist and National Secretary of the Association for Protection of Civil Rights (APCR), was charged by the Delhi Police. These charges, 'promoting enmity and criminal conspiracy,' stemmed from a community exhibition held in Hyderabad, which showcased evidence of hate crimes, hate speech, and other human rights violations primarily targeting Muslims and other minority communities in India over the past decade. It highlighted cases pursued by APCR in various courts and provided legal guidelines designed to assist victims of hate crimes and arbitrary arrests. The official actions surrounding this incident escalated rapidly, with the Delhi Police attempting to illegally detain Khan just hours after the filing of a first information report, following a search conducted at APCR's office in Delhi on November 29, 2024. Such actions against an activist focused on documenting human rights violations raise concerns about the space for civil society engagement and the protection of those who seek to expose instances of discrimination and injustice.[1]

The legal processes stemming from the 2020 Delhi riots continue to be prolonged well into 2025. Five years after these events, which reportedly erupted following inflammatory speeches by leaders of the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party against those protesting the Citizenship (Amendment) Act (CAA), at least 12 individuals remain in pre-detention. A disturbing aspect of these detentions is that all 12 individuals who continue to languish in prison are Muslim, and their trial has yet to commence. These cases are described as being based on flimsy charges, with an examination of over 30,000 pages of charge sheets and interviews with defense lawyers revealing a troubling picture[2]. Concerns have been raised that gaps in evidence have been filled with questionable witness statements, and individuals have been implicated based on tenuous evidence. The Delhi Police reportedly booked 20 leaders and participants of the anti-CAA movement under the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act (UAPA), alleging they orchestrated the riots as a culmination of a long-term plan. However, civil society analysis has noted that a predetermined narrative runs through the charge sheets, often not reflecting the actual facts on the ground. The prosecution's case appears to rest on fragile foundations with limited direct evidence, which arguably blurs the lines between legitimate protest and accusations of terrorism. The continued detention of these individuals without trial for an extended period underscores concerns regarding due process and the potential for selective application of stringent laws.

Beyond individual cases, the period has also seen a continuation of broader patterns of violence and coercive actions impacting Muslim communities. Recent years have witnessed a concerning escalation in incidents of violence against religious minorities in India, often exacerbated by inflammatory rhetoric and misinformation[3]. Reports document multiple incidents of mob violence, specifically targeting Muslims and Christians, with a notable increase in hate crimes, including lynchings and assaults. These incidents have, at times, reportedly occurred even in the presence of law enforcement. Within just over a month of the new government forming, 13 reports emerged of lynching incidents involving Sikh, Muslim, and Christian individuals across several states. Concurrently, there were reports of the arbitrary demolition of two mosques in Delhi and at least 11 houses belonging to Muslims, purportedly after authorities claimed to have found beef in their

refrigerators. Such actions are seen as contributing to the dehumanization of minority community members, fostering significant societal divisions and mistrust. Activists and civil society organizations have voiced alarm over these violent practices that incite genocidal violence[4]. The response to criticism regarding the perceived inadequacy of governmental action against violence targeting minorities has, in some instances, involved a crackdown on journalists reporting these incidents[5].

In a significant development offering some reprieve, the Supreme Court[6], in November 2024, addressed grievances that properties of accused persons were being arbitrarily razed in several states and intervened to stop bulldozer demolitions across India delivering a landmark judgment affirming that demolishing a person's property solely based on their alleged criminal activity, without due process, is unconstitutional. This judicial intervention provides a measure of relief for minorities whose homes have been subjected to such actions based on what are often described as vague suspicions.

### The Larger Context: Status of Muslims in India

These specific incidents are not isolated but rather reflect deeper, systemic issues concerning the status of Muslims within India's multicultural democracy. Vulnerable minority groups, including Muslims, are recognized as needing special attention due to their quest for identity preservation and anxieties regarding security amid rising majoritarian trends. The minority question in India, home to diverse faiths and practices, manifests in various forms, broadly encompassing identity-specific needs, security-related issues, and questions of equity.

*Security Concerns:* Mass violence targeting religious minorities has been a frequent occurrence in India, with a newer pattern of anti-minority violence, specifically the lynching of individual members, also emerging. The rise in communal tensions, often fuelled by inflammatory rhetoric, has exacerbated these concerns. *The suggested measures to address these security issues include* the enactment of laws against mass violence and mob lynching, and the prosecution of officers found responsible by courts for falsely implicating youth in terror-related cases. Additionally, instituting impartial inquiries into extra-judicial killings by the police is deemed necessary. Addressing issues related to the National Register of Citizens (NRC) process in Assam and the concerns of the Bengali-speaking minority are also highlighted. Crucially, the withdrawal of the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), which discriminates on the basis of religion in granting citizenship, is identified as a vital step towards enhancing security and promoting a more inclusive society [11iv].

*Equity-Related Challenges:* Beyond security, Muslims in India face significant challenges related to equity. The Sachar Committee Report (2006) clearly delineated the developmental deficits experienced by Muslims, including gross underrepresentation in public employment, poor educational attainment, and low work participation ratios, particularly for Muslim women and those of OBC origins. These systemic disparities underscore a continued need for focused interventions. *Proposed measures to address equity concerns include* incentivizing diversity and maintaining a Diversity Index across public educational institutions, banks, government departments, and developmental agencies. Further suggestions involve the bifurcation of the Other Backward Classes (OBC) quota into advanced and backward OBCs, and the obliteration of clause 3 of the Presidential Order attached to Article 341 to enable Dalit Christians and Muslims to access Scheduled Caste (SC) benefits. A robust special minority development plan with committed budgetary allocations is recommended to address specific developmental needs, with particular attention to improving the abominably low work participation rate of Muslim women. Supporting entrepreneurship and self-employment, especially for artisanal work through better training, marketing, and credit facilities, is also proposed.

*Identity-Specific Needs:* The preservation of distinct traditions, religious laws, and cultural patterns is a core demand for virtually all religious minorities, including Muslims. Constitutional provisions like Articles 29 and 30 offer protection to culture and practices, and permit religious and linguistic minorities to establish and administer their own educational institutions. However, the practical

manifestation of these protections remains a point of focus. *Recommendations to safeguard identity include* strict adherence to the three-language formula in schools, ensuring one of the languages is that spoken by the largest minority in the region. Promoting inter-faith education as part of the school curriculum and facilitating reforms in personal laws with stakeholder involvement to ensure gender justice are also suggested. Furthermore, establishing laws against discrimination based on religious, ethnic, or caste identity, along with the institution of an Equal Opportunity Commission, could serve as safeguards against various forms of discrimination. Ensuring the availability of spaces for minority religious structures in new urban master plans and amending discriminatory laws that affect minority food habits, consumption patterns, or livelihood options are also considered essential steps to protect identity and foster inclusivity.

The aforementioned three dimensions of the minority question, namely identity, equity and security frequently intersect which results in cumulative victimation. Identity and security questions converged when members of the Tablighi Jamaat were singled-out and persecuted on accusations of spreading pandemic. Similarly, equity, identity and questions of security are enmeshed when bulldozers target slums and localities housing poor Muslims in Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh and certain other places. Economic indicators unambiguously suggest an increasing informalisation of primarily Muslim workforce as they are pushed out of the formal sectors of employment on account of their identity.

## Conclusion

The specific incidents listed here, alongside broader patterns of violence, collectively paint a concerning picture regarding the security and rights of Muslims in India. These specific instances resonate within a larger context where the Muslim community grapples with significant challenges related to security, equity, and the preservation of their identity. While constitutional provisions exist to protect minority rights, a palpable rise in majoritarian predispositions appears to have compounded these issues, which results in at times labelling efforts to alleviate minority concerns as appeasement. Addressing these deeply rooted challenges requires a comprehensive and sustained effort, focusing on robust implementation of existing constitutional obligations and the consideration of suggested measures such as laws against mass violence, reforms in justice delivery, proactive equity programs, and the safeguarding of cultural and religious freedoms. A focused and empathetic approach is imperative to ensure that the rights and well-being of the Muslim community are adequately protected, fostering a more inclusive and equitable society for all its citizens.

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# STATUS OF DEMOCRACY AND GOVERNANCE

# The 18th Lok Sabha: A Year of Paradoxes in India's Parliamentary Democracy

*We are seeing the return of a more accountable Parliament, a stronger opposition, and louder voices from India's diverse regions. In a multilingual, plural, and federal country, these changes matter.*

It has been just over a year since the 18th Lok Sabha was formed following the 2024 general elections – a turning point in Indian politics. For the first time in ten years, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) failed to secure a simple majority. While still the single largest party, it now governs through alliances, ending its uninterrupted dominance since 2014. This shift has introduced a new era in Parliament – less about unchecked power and more about negotiation and pushback. But is this the beginning of a more democratic Parliament or simply a new version of the same old politics?

## Power, Now Shared and Unstable

The BJP won 240 seats – 32 short of the halfway mark in the 543-member Lok Sabha. It now relies on key allies like the Telugu Desam Party (TDP) and Janata Dal (United), each with its political interests and demands.[1] The government can no longer steamroll decisions. Every step requires coordination and compromise, both with allies and within the party itself.

Meanwhile, the opposition, led by the Indian National Developmental Inclusive Alliance (INDIA) bloc, has returned with force. Together, they hold 234 seats, just a few behind the ruling coalition. For the first time in a decade, the opposition has met the threshold to appoint a Leader of the Opposition (LoP) – Rahul Gandhi. This development marks a return to institutional balance, reinforcing the principles of accountability and dissent.

## Performance vs. Progress

At first glance, the new Lok Sabha looks active. The Budget Session of 2025 reported 111 per cent productivity, with 16 bills passed and over 130 starred questions answered. However, a deeper look reveals that only 11 bills were passed throughout the full year – Parliament's lowest legislative output since 1999, according to the PRS Legislative Research and the Wire.[2]

So why is there a gap between activity and outcome? The answer lies in the nature of engagement. With the opposition strengthened and the government weakened; sessions are no longer rubber stamps for legislation. They are filled with debates, walkouts, and scrutiny. What some call "deadlock," others may see as real democracy – noisy, slow, but deliberate.

## Dissent That Matters

One of the defining features of the 18th Lok Sabha has been the return of meaningful dissent. The LoP role has added weight to the opposition, giving it both visibility and responsibility. The INDIA bloc has used its numbers effectively – delaying, diluting, or questioning legislation with a level of coordination not seen in recent years.

The LoP'S presence has brought a new seriousness to the opposition strategy. Once dismissed as inconsistent, the speeches on topics like electoral funding, agrarian crises, and federalism have been more focused and policy-driven. The opposition is no longer just reacting; it is actively shaping debates and offering alternatives.

Opposition MPs too, are playing a bigger role in parliamentary committees, pushing back against controversial bills and voicing public concerns – especially during national scandals like the exam paper leaks. This reassertion of the opposition is not just procedural; it is political and moral.

## The Delimitation Dilemma

One of the most contentious issues facing the 18th Lok Sabha is the upcoming delimitation exercise in 2026, which will redraw parliamentary constituencies based on population data. Southern states like Tamil Nadu, Kerala, and Andhra Pradesh have raised strong objections, arguing that a purely population-based approach punishes states that have successfully implemented population control measures.[3]

Their fear: a heavier tilt in favour of the Hindi heartland. This would mean fewer seats – and thus, less power – for states that are socially and economically more progressive. Critics see it as a centralising move that threatens the country's federal balance. As various new reports have noted, this is more than a procedural reform – it's a political flashpoint between regional equity and numerical dominance.

This debate strikes at the heart of Indian federalism. It challenges our understanding of representation: Should states be rewarded for development or simply for population size?

## Controversial Laws, Uneasy Communities

The 18th Lok Sabha has also seen heated debate around new laws, especially those affecting vulnerable groups. The Waqf (Amendment) Bill of 2024, for example, expanded government control over Muslim religious properties. It led to protests in Muslim-majority districts like Murshidabad[4], raising fears about targeting minority rights under the guise of reform.

Another law – the Public Examinations (Prevention of Unfair Means) Act, 2024 – aimed to curb exam cheating but drew criticisms. Although well-intended, it is seen as more of a political move than a real solution. Critics argue that it focuses on harsh punishments but ignores deeper issues like weak oversight and poor exam management. Relying only on fear of punishment will not stop organised offenders who treat paper leaks as profitable crimes. Experience from states like Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh shows such laws alone do not work. Real change needs better enforcement, preventive steps, and fixing systemic flaws in the examination system.[5]

These legislative battles highlight a bigger tension in Indian democracy: laws are not just tools of governance; they are political signals. And when such laws seem to affect certain communities disproportionately, they spark deep anxiety – fuelling resistance that is legal, social, and moral.

## A Parliament in Transition

This Lok Sabha is not just a collection of MPs – it is a mirror of India's democratic movement. It reflects the fault lines between centralised power and regional aspirations, strong leadership and shared governance. While legislative achievements may seem few, the symbolic gains are significant.

We are seeing the return of a more accountable Parliament, a stronger opposition, and louder voices from India's diverse regions. In a multilingual, plural, and federal country, these changes matter. They may not deliver immediate policy changes, but they create the conditions for a healthier democracy.

This is crucial at a time when India's democratic credentials are being questioned globally. In 2023, India slipped further on indices like Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem)[6] and The Economist's Democracy Index[7]. To reverse that trend, it is not enough to win elections – we must rebuild institutional trust, and Parliament is a good place to start.

## What Comes Next?

The first year of the 18th Lok Sabha has set the stage – but the real test lies ahead. The coalition government must juggle policy goals with political balancing acts. The opposition, on its part, must go beyond resistance and offer a compelling alternative vision.

The public – more vocal and informed than ever – will be watching closely. Citizens today are no longer satisfied with political theatre. They demand real accountability, inclusive policymaking, and genuine representation.

At the heart of this democratic renewal is the Constitution. It envisions Parliament as not just a law-making body but as a space for reasoned debate, dissent, and dialogue. The 18th Lok Sabha, for all its contradictions, has brought us closer to that vision than we have seen in years.

But this progress is fragile. Democracy does not run on autopilot. It requires constant engagement from both leaders and citizens. If Parliament wants to reclaim its place as the cornerstone of Indian democracy, it must move from mere symbolism to real substance.

The past year offered a preview of what is possible. The question now is whether India's leaders – and its voters – can rise to the occasion and turn this moment into momentum.

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# There is a Clear and Present Danger to India's Democracy

*As it is, due to the extreme asymmetry in state, money and media power there is no 'level playing field' among political parties while contesting elections. Now, the Indian election system itself is being weaponised.*

The words "election" and "democracy" have become synonymous. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948 states as much: "The will of the people shall be the basis of the authority of government; this will be expressed in periodic and genuine elections which shall be by universal and equal suffrage and shall be held by secret vote or by equivalent free voting procedures." Over the years, therefore, elections have become the fossil fuel of politics, democracy and governance in India. Whereas once they gave democracy a huge boost, elections have now become an albatross that could sink democracy and morph electoral democracies into electoral autocracies.

This reality came into sharp focus immediately after the 2024 Lok Sabha election when Civil Society Groups came together, undertook study and published a report which is summarised here:

"A month after the results, Vote For Democracy (VFD), a Maharashtra-based citizens' platform, apart from pointing out some glaring loopholes in the election process, has made three significant assertions... It has claimed that the difference between approximate votes polled by the Election Commission of India (ECI) on polling days at around 8 pm and the final voter turnout is nearly 5 crores. "...4,65,46,885 to be precise." .... The percentage increase between the estimated voter turnout on the evening of the polling day and the final turnout was in the range of "3.2% to 6.32%" across all the seven phases. It said that the figure was a "staggering 12.54% in Andhra Pradesh and 12.48% in Odisha", even as the cumulative average of the increase in the final voter turnout is 4.72%...

The VFD claimed that the sharp increase in the final voter turnout was greater than the margin of victory of the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance in 79 seats across 15 states, many of which were narrowly won by the NDA candidates. The report said that 79 seats included 18 in Odisha; 11 in Maharashtra; 10 in West Bengal; seven in Andhra Pradesh; six in Karnataka; five each in Chhattisgarh and Rajasthan; three each in Bihar, Haryana, Madhya Pradesh and Telangana; two in Assam; and one each in Arunachal Pradesh, Gujarat, and Kerala." [1] There has been no response whatsoever from the ECI so far!

Even direct charges by the civil society remains unrebutted: "India's Election System (IES) is being weaponised, will the Opposition act?: The systemic subversion of India's Electoral System through both the spurious injection of votes and suspect mass deletions of legitimate voters – coupled with the One Nation One Election (ONOE) proposal – could well achieve for the autocratic RSS its dream aim in its centennial year: a strong unitary government that excludes certain denominations (including Muslims and Christians) from the right to universal franchise." [https://sabrangindia.in/indias-election-system-is-being-weaponised-will-the-opposition-act/]

Rahul Gandhi, Leader of the Opposition said this on the Maharashtra Assembly election held in November 2024: "More people voted in the Maharashtra Assembly elections than there are adults in the state of Maharashtra. The Election Commission provided us with a voting figure for 5:30 pm, and between 5:30 pm and 7:30 pm, 65 lakh voters cast their votes. This is physically impossible to happen... He added that at an average of three minutes per vote, the numbers would have required polling stations to remain open till 2 am - something that didn't happen... When we asked

them for the videography, they not only refused but they also changed the law so that now we are not allowed to ask for the videography."[2]

ECI's ambivalent and supercilious response reflects an institutional collapse: "All Indian elections are held as per law and the scale and accuracy with which elections are held in India are widely acclaimed across the world... The entire nation is aware that each election process, including the preparation of electoral rolls, polling and counting, etc., are all held by government staff and that too in the presence of authorised representatives formally appointed by political parties and candidates from polling station up to constituency level....After any unfavourable verdict by the voters, trying to defame the Election Commission by saying that it is compromised, is completely absurd.[3]"

As it is, due to the extreme asymmetry in state, money and media power there is no 'level playing field' among political parties while contesting elections. Now, the IES itself is being weaponised. How? EVM-centered IES has three technical components. Microcontroller, to record the votes cast by the voter, Voter Verifiable Paper Audit Trail (VVPATs) to audit and verify that the votes are recorded as cast and counted as recorded and Symbol Loading Units (SLUs), the 'device' that feeds EVM candidate information. Electoral Rolls constitute the base of the IES.

Integrity of the microcontroller is suspect because their design and source of procurement are kept a closely guarded secret.  According to technical experts, EVM contains multiple labile memories that record each vote as it is cast. It also has the key to candidate mapping in labile memory (through SLUs) since this varies in each constituency and is needed to print the contents of each VVPAT slip. The presence of labile memory through SLUs implies that those values can be manipulated. Some manipulations may not leave any trace and will not be visible in a forensic investigation. What is worse, SLUs are not subject to any security protocol.

Supreme Court of India in its judgment in the "Association For Democratic Reforms vs Election Commission Of India" dated 26 April, 2024 issued an order allowing the checking and verification of the burnt memory/microcontroller in 5 per cent of the EVMs, that is, the control unit, ballot unit, and the VVPAT, per assembly constituency/assembly segment of a parliamentary constituency for any tampering or modification on a written request made by two top losing candidates[4]. Instead of facilitating this, ECI came out with its own Standard Operating Procedure which reduced the whole thing into a mock-poll, clearly indicating that the Commission is hell-bent on protecting the microcontrollers that seem to have been compromised! Even otherwise, the way ECI deals with microprocessors renders their independent "checking and verification" well-nigh impossible!

To make the EVM system auditable and voter-verifiable, the Supreme Court had ordered the introduction of VVPATs in 2013. But, virtually sabotaging this order, in February 2018 ECI directed state chief electoral officers to mandatorily verify VVPAT slips in only one randomly selected polling station in each assembly constituency. This pathetically low 0.3 per cent sample size defeated the very object of installing VVPATs in all EVMs. Inexplicably ECI, through bluff and bluster, has reduced the VVPATs into meaningless bioscopes! According to experts, this deliberate denial of verifiability and auditability has facilitated spurious injection of votes in various constituencies by hiking of vote percentages in all phases of polling.

In July 2023, Dr Sabyasachi Das of Ashoka University published a report called "Democratic Backsliding in the World's Largest Democracy" which outlined two manipulations in detail that were carried out in the 2019 Lok Sabha elections.

1) Registration manipulation, which is the padding of the electoral roll. By adding and deleting voters strategically. By manufacturing fake voters, most, if not all, of whom vote for the BJP.

2) Turnout manipulation, which is the addition of voter tallies after the polls have closed-most, if not all, of whom vote for the BJP.[5]

Soon thereafter, Ashoka University was raided and Dr Sabyasachi Das was sacked, thus giving a clear signal to all universities and institutions in India to not pursue any research pertaining to the electoral system in India. In the 2024 Lok Sabha election Das's findings came true on a larger scale!

Muslims, Christians, Dalits and Adivasis are the main targets of the "Registration manipulation." For the 2019 Lok Sabha election, India had nearly 90 crore registered voters and there have been reports of mass deletion of names from voters' lists from Assam, Andhra Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Karnataka, Uttarakhand and Delhi. An initiative called Missing Voters, estimates that a whopping 12 crore Indians are not on the voters' lists. Of these around 4 crore are Muslims while 3 crore are Dalits.[6] And ECI's recent move to link Aadhar with the Voter ID could further facilitate 'registration manipulation' causing selective disenfranchisement.[7]

With the election system so weaponized, all that is needed is a media-driven 'nationalist narrative' to steal people's mandate and capture power. This is a clear and present danger to India's democracy.

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## Continued Pressure on Civic Space Through Restrictive Regulations

*India's National Human Rights Commission is facing a historic downgrade from category 'A' to 'B' by the UN-linked Global Alliance of National Human Rights Institutions'. Crucially, the Sub Committee on Accreditations expressed concern that the NHRC has not addressed "shrinking civic space and increased instances of targeting human rights defenders, journalists and perceived critics".*

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 minority voices using vague and punitive laws. Proposed and existing media regulations have heightened concerns over censorship, and new criminal laws risk criminalising dissent. Protesters, students, and human rights defenders have faced arrests, surveillance, and harassment. Rising communal violence, often accompanied by official inaction or complicity, has further deepened fears of democratic backsliding and erosion of constitutional freedoms.

### Constraints on Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs)

The Foreign Contribution (Regulation) Act (FCRA) governs the acceptance and use of foreign funds by NGOs in India. Recent amendments and their implementation have severely restricted the operational capacity of many organizations, particularly those engaged in human rights, social justice, and environmental advocacy.

After consistently cancelling thousands of FCRA registrations since 2020 when these amendments came about, the Union Ministry of Home Affairs in November 2024 explicitly listed for the first time the reasons for denying the necessary clearance under the FCRA to receive foreign funds. These reasons included involvement in anti-development activities, inciting protests with malicious intentions, and links with radical organisations.

However, reports from various bodies suggest these actions are part of a broader strategy to stifle dissent and control civil society organizations that challenge government policies. Amnesty International highlights that this approach not only undermines the work of NGOs but also worsens issues related to poverty, health, and education for vulnerable populations.

A Human Rights Watch report in January 2025[1] highlighted that the Indian authorities used abusive foreign funding laws like the FCRA, among others, to unlawfully attack civil society groups and activists. CIVICUS Monitor[2] has documented how the FCRA and its amendments impose discriminatory restrictions on CSOs' access to funding under the pretext of preventing foreign influence, describing the authorisation process as difficult and bureaucratic.

The Home Ministry, in May 2025, issued new directives prohibiting NGOs[3] receiving foreign funding from publishing newsletters unless they submit financial statements and audit reports for the past three years and obtain a certificate from specific government bodies confirming that they do not circulate any news content. This move hinders circulation of any information on the status of development of marginalised communities and cross-learning opportunities among peers and different stakeholders.

Despite a large majority of NGOs focusing on areas like education, health, and poverty alleviation, contributing significantly to the GDP and providing livelihoods, the development sector is often perceived as a hindrance to government development goals. There is an urgent need for more enabling regulatory laws to support the voluntary sector as a partner in welfare work.

## Freedom of Speech and Media Regulation

The proposed Broadcasting Services (Regulation) Bill[4] 2024 aimed to update media regulation for the digital age and centralise oversight of traditional and digital media. An earlier version was criticised for including OTT platforms. The second version, provisionally released, proposed bringing content creators under regulation. However, the second draft was withdrawn on August 12, 2024, after experts raised concerns that it could label online content creators as "digital news broadcasters" subject to regulations. The bill, as it stands, presents several red flags that could have far-reaching implications for free expression, creativity, and the diverse media landscape in India.

The Information Technology (Intermediary Guidelines and Digital Media Ethics Code) Amendment Rules, 2023, proposed establishing a fact-checking unit (FCU) to determine if news related to the Central Government was "fake, false, or misleading" and require social media intermediaries to remove such content at the government's discretion. This amendment and the FCU proposition were declared "unconstitutional" and struck down by the Bombay High Court[5] in September 2024.

In August 2024, the Uttar Pradesh government introduced a new social media policy requiring registration for platforms and compliance with local content regulations. While the government claimed it aimed to combat misinformation and maintain public order, it was widely viewed as an attempt to control dissent. Reports indicate activists and citizens[6] have faced harassment and arrest for expressing dissenting opinions or sharing objectionable information. The policy is seen as a heavy-handed approach raising concerns about privacy, surveillance, potential abuse of power, and is viewed as a strategy to stifle dissent due to lack of transparency. It is seen as disproportionately affecting marginalised communities and dissenters who rely on social media.

The government revoked the nonprofit status of The Reporters' Collective (TRC) and the tax-exempt status of The File. TRC stated in January 2025[7] that the loss of its nonprofit status severely impairs its work and worsens conditions for independent journalism. Revoking nonprofit status can lead to taxation on donations, potentially applied retrospectively, discouraging funding. TRC is known for investigative reporting on the ruling government and corporate practices. The File, known for investigations into political parties, faced a similar tax order in December 2024.

India continues to be one of the most dangerous countries for journalists and independent media. In recent years, media personnel critical of the government have increasingly faced systematic harassment, including online abuse, legal intimidation, arbitrary detention, and even violent attacks[8]. A climate of fear is being reinforced through a combination of draconian laws, smear campaigns, and targeted administrative actions. The new measures further highlight the trend of creating an environment where all information is under government scrutiny and risks suppressing counter narratives through undue censorship and restrictions.

## Use of Draconian Laws and Targeting of Activists/Human Rights Defenders

New criminal laws, including the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, Bharatiya Sakshya Adhiniyam, and Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha Sanhita, replaced older codes on July 1, 2024. Amnesty[9] International expressed concerns that some provisions in these laws "would have debilitating consequences on the effective realisation of the rights to freedom of expression, association, peaceful assembly, and fair trial".

The new Penal Code retains offences similar to sedition, re-characterised as 'acts endangering the sovereignty, unity and integrity of India' under Section 152. Concerns exist about the broad and vague definition, potentially allowing misuse as it doesn't list specific threats or provide illustrations. It has also included 'electronic communication' and 'financial means' as tools for incitement, and increased the punishment term from three to seven years.

Multiple incidents in the past year have underscored the growing pattern of targeting activists, civil society members, and dissenting voices in India. Authorities approved prosecution under counterterror laws for speeches made over a decade ago[10,11], raising concerns from international

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bodies like UN Human Rights Commission and PEN America, about the use of repressive laws to silence critics, restrict freedom of expression and assembly, and validate attacks on NGOs and human rights defenders.

Security agencies have conducted raids on activists without due legal process, allegedly to intimidate and suppress dissent. In Jammu and Kashmir, five years after the revocation of its special status, the authorities continue to prosecute civil society leaders. Several individuals remain imprisoned in the Bhima Koregaon case despite the absence of trial progress, and some released on bail have spoken of systemic repression. In Chhattisgarh, a tribal rights movement was banned, and security operations have reportedly resulted in the deaths of many alleged Maoists, though activists and villagers claim many were innocent Adivasis killed in fake encounters. In Meghalaya, an RTI activist was threatened for seeking information on government programs. In Manipur, a human rights defender was abducted and coerced into silence. Two activists in Tamil Nadu opposing illegal mining were violently targeted, one fatally. A Delhi-based rights activist was charged over an exhibition highlighting hate crimes, with reports of attempts to detain him without due process[12]. These incidents collectively illustrate an increasingly hostile environment for dissent, where legal tools, intimidation, and violence are used to stifle criticism and curtail civil liberties.

As of early 2025, 12 people remained in pre-detention five years after the Delhi riots, which followed protests against the Citizenship (Amendment) Act in 2020. These individuals, all Muslim, were booked under the UAPA and accused of orchestrating the riots. An examination of charge sheets and interviews suggested gaps in evidence filled with questionable statements, and individuals implicated based on tenuous evidence, blurring the lines between legitimate protest and terrorism.

There have also been instances of police action impacting the right to protest. In December 2024, police arrested over 160 protesting farmers in Noida. The police stated that the arrests were made under Section 170 of the new Criminal Procedure Code (Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha Sanhita) to prevent a cognisable offence. The Samyukta Kisan Morcha condemned the action as a violation of the constitutional right to peaceful protest[13]. In February 2025, security guards at Jamia Millia Islamia campus detained at least 14 protesting students and handed them over to Delhi Police inside the campus. The students were detained at different stations for almost 12 hours without being informed of grounds for detention or having access to lawyers. The university also suspended 17 students. Concerns were raised about increasing police involvement in campus affairs[14].

### Incidents of Civic Violence Against Minorities

India has seen a disturbing rise in violence against religious minorities, often fuelled by inflammatory rhetoric. Reports indicate communal tensions have escalated, with increased hate crimes documented, sometimes in the presence of law enforcement.

Right after the new government formed in June 2024, in just over a month, there were reports of at least 13 lynching incidents targeting Sikh, Muslim, and Christian individuals in various states. During the same period, there were reports of arbitrary demolition of two mosques and at least 11 houses belonging to Muslims, reportedly after authorities found beef in their refrigerators[15].

These actions are seen as dehumanising minorities and fostering divides. Activists and civil society organizations have raised alarms about these practices and events like 'dharm sansads' inciting genocidal violence. It was also reported that India witnessed 59 communal riots in 2024, reflecting a significant 84 per cent rise compared to 32 riots in 2023, and resulting in the death of 13 people. Most of these riots were triggered during religious festivals or processions, concerningly highlighting how religious celebrations are also increasingly being used to fuel communal tensions and political mobilization[16].

Instead of addressing criticism for an inadequate response to violence targeting minorities, the Uttar Pradesh government reportedly cracked down on journalists reporting these incidents. The

Supreme Court in September 2023 stopped bulldozer demolitions across India until the next hearing, a move noted as a relief to minorities whose houses have been razed arbitrarily.

## Downgrade of National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) Status

India's National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) is facing a historic downgrade from category 'A' to 'B' by the UN-linked Global Alliance of National Human Rights Institutions' (GANHRI) sub-committee on accreditation[17] (SCA). The recommendation was made during GANHRI's March session, but the report's findings are relevant to the status of human rights institutions since June 2024.

The reasons cited for the downgrade include concerns about the involvement of police officers in investigations impacting impartiality, the government's capacity to appoint a senior civil servant as secretary general, and a recommendation for the NHRC to independently recruit for this position. The SCA also recommended transparency and pluralism in the selection process for commission members. Crucially, the SCA expressed concern that the NHRC has not addressed "shrinking civic space and increased instances of targeting human rights defenders, journalists and perceived critics". The report stated the NHRC has not publicly communicated positions on these issues in a way that promotes credibility or addresses the systemic nature of violations. It also noted information from civil society alleging the NHRC's failure to provide meaningful follow-up in significant human rights cases and lack of use of intervention powers or visitation for UAPA detainees. There were also allegations that the NHRC has not done enough to address declining press freedom despite complaints.

The period since June 2024 has seen continued pressure on India's civic space through restrictive regulations on NGOs, ongoing attempts to control media and online content (despite some judicial pushback and bill withdrawals), intensified targeting of activists, human rights defenders, and journalists using stringent laws like the UAPA and new criminal code provisions, documented incidents of violence against minorities often linked to inflammatory rhetoric and inadequate official response, a significant downgrade recommendation for the national human rights body citing failure to address civic space issues, and instances of police intervention impacting the right to protest and fair trial guarantees.

## Recommendations

- 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 and others
- Recognise Voluntary organisations contribution to nation building
- Collaborative actions by the diaspora community, cutting across religious, caste, and class divides, provide both inspiration and a template for civil society organising.
- Repeal of the overbroad, vaguely defined offences under draconian laws aimed at stifling dissent and curtailing free expression, assembly and association.
- A separate law should be enacted against the mob lynching as advised by the Supreme Court of India
- The Government and civil society organizations should take effective measures for the promotion of communal harmony and peace in society

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# Media or Mockery: The Status of Media in the World's Largest Democracy

*The complete takeover of media by state and private players has seriously diluted media ethics, paralysing the role of media in challenging the status quo, pushing audiences to reflect critically and make informed decisions. Freedom of press remains perilous in present times.*

*"If newspapers have criticized the government, it is largely because of its sluggish administration, slow economic progress, and the widening gap between promises and performance. My concept of a free press is to uncover the truth and inform the public,"* wrote journalist Kuldip Nayar to Indira Gandhi during the Emergency, underscoring the press's role in holding power accountable. As a bridge between the state and citizens, the media fosters informed debate, exposes rights violations, and safeguards democracy under Article 19(1)(a). However, technological advancements, while democratizing information access, have also amplified misinformation, propaganda, and corporate-political co-option of news outlets. The rise of paid news, attacks on dissent, and media manipulation now threaten both journalistic integrity and constitutional values, transforming the press from a watchdog into a tool for agendas or sensationalism.

## Historicising Indian Media

Mass media in India, evolving since the 18th century, has been instrumental in shaping public opinion—from the colonial-era press aiding the independence movement to state-run platforms like All India Radio and Doordarshan dominating the 20th century. Post-1990s liberalization saw private media surge, with 24-hour news channels and digital platforms wielding significant political influence. However, media regulation has been persistent, beginning with British-era laws like the Vernacular Press Act (1878) to suppress dissent. Post-independence, constitutional free speech protections (Article 19(1)(a)) and bodies like the Press Council of India sought to balance press freedom with accountability, though state control remains a recurring theme.

With the introduction of the Liberalization, Privatization and Globalization reforms in the 1990s brought a significant shift in the landscape of Indian media. The materialization of the economic reforms opened up floodgates for the corporatization of media. It was also the time which saw the rise of satellite television, booming the industry like never before. In 1995 the Cable Television Network (Regulation) Act was implemented. This act has been used to prohibit obscene and objectionable content on television networks. Shortly after, the Information Technology Act was also enforced in 2000 due to the rising popularity of the internet. It comprehensively looks into the issues of hacking, identity theft, online distribution of obscene materials and other such things.

In the recent past, with the advent of social media, a new set of media regulations have been implemented or proposed. In 2021 Information Technology (Intermediary Guidelines and Digital Media Ethics Code) Rules were enacted to regulate OTT platforms, digital media platforms, social media websites amongst other things. In 2023, the Digital Personal Data Protection Act came into force. Enacted in August 2023, the DPDPA imposed stringent rules on data collection and processing, impacting media organizations reliant on user data for targeted advertising and analytics. While the law mandated user consent, its exemptions for government agencies have raised alarms about transparency and accountability, with fears it could shield state surveillance from scrutiny. One of its major critiques is that it can infringe upon the right to privacy as enshrined in the Justice K.S. Puttaswamy vs. Union of India case.[1]

**Major Interventions & Incidents in the Past Year**

*1. Blocking Social Media Accounts & Online Content*

− In May 2025, the Indian government ordered X (Twitter) to withhold access to over 8,000 accounts—including those of foreign media and journalists—for users in India. X complied under threat of fines and staff imprisonment.
− In April 2025, the government banned 16 Pakistani YouTube channels with crores of subscribers, citing "provocative" content after the Pahalgam terror attack.
− This builds on a larger trend under Section 69A of the IT Act, where courts have allowed content and account blocks without notifying affected users, enabling broad and opaque censorship

*2. Digital Media Policies at State Level*

− Uttar Pradesh (2024–25 Digital Media Policy) penalizes so-called "anti-national" content with jail terms up to life, and financially rewards influencers to promote government schemes—raising concerns of propaganda and punitive censorship.
− Maharashtra (March 2025) set up an AI-driven "media monitoring centre" to classify coverage as "positive" or "negative," triggering criticism from groups like CPJ for potentially chilling dissent.

*3. Legal Action & Arrests Against Journalists*

− Numerous independent digital journalists have been arrested under defamation or anti-terror laws in early 2025—examples include -
− Tushar Kharat (Mumbai, Mar 10) for allegedly defamatory YouTube content
− Revathi Pogadadanda & Thanvi Yadav (Hyderabad, Mar 12) over alleged abusive content
− Dilwar Hussain Mozumder (Assam, Mar 25) for reporting on alleged bank irregularities
− Digital news sites like The Reporter's Collective and The File lost non-profit status, impacting their financial independence .

*4. Suppression of Independent Content & Documentaries*

− In January 2025, Delhi Police blocked the screening of AAP's documentary Unbreakable, which later leaked online, citing election regulation. This act raised questions about public interest vs.censorship.

*5. Expansion of Central IT Powers*

− The government's SAHYOG portal (IT Ministry) centralises takedown orders across platforms, which X alleges creates "unrestrained censorship." X is currently challenging this in court
− A fact-checking unit inserted into IT Rules (Intermediary Guidelines & Digital Media Ethics Code) was blocked by Bombay High Court in 2024 for being unconstitutional
− The Broadcasting Services (Regulation) Bill 2023, intended to regulate digital media, was withdrawn after raising alarm over vague, authoritarian controls—though remains under consideration.

**Policy Interventions & Pushback**

*Judicial Restraint:*

− Supreme Court quashed an FIR against MP Imran Pratapgarhi over a poem, affirming constitutional speech limits (Mar 28, 2025)
− Bombay HC struck down the government's fact-checking amendment (Sep 2024)
− Madras HC and Karnataka HC restored blocked content and dismissed cases against media figures on free speech grounds

- Editors Guild, DigiPub, and other bodies condemned state-levied digital media rules and arrests
- CPJ publicly warned against AI-backed media monitoring by Maharashtra
- Free Speech Collective recorded 329 violations from January to April 2025, including murders and aggressive police action.

The Indian government has intensified digital censorship by blocking accounts and content through executive portals, prompting platforms like X to challenge these actions in court, with the Supreme Court intervening in cases such as X vs SAHYOG. Concurrently, state-level regulations have imposed penalties for "anti-national" content, employing AI monitoring, which has drawn protests from journalists and objections from the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ). Additionally, journalists face repression through arrests under defamation and anti-terror laws, as well as financial sanctions, though judicial bail orders and press body protests have provided some pushback. Institutional overreach has further expanded via new bills and digital codes, leading to judicial resistance and eventual policy revisions or withdrawals amid growing criticism.

The NDA-3 regime has significantly tightened its grip on media through a blend of digital censorship, legal action, institutional frameworks, and state-level control—all under the banner of national security and "regulating misinformation." That said, courts, digital rights advocates, and journalist organizations continue to resist, providing intermittent safeguards for free expression.

## Privatisation of Media Leading to Malpractices

Media has now been hijacked by private players for profit and influence. The privatisation of mass media in India has raised massive concerns about journalistic integrity and has clearly given rise to yellow journalism. It has significantly contributed to the shrinking of public interest journalism and replaced it with a round the clock propaganda machinery. The media industry in India has also grown exponentially. As per the FICCI - EY Report the media and entertainment industry is set to grow by 7.2 per cent in the year 2025 with INR 2.7 trillion. Digital media is set to cross INR 1 trillion in ad revenues in 2026.

Various media conglomerates have clocked in record profits. According to the Economic Times, the total revenue of the top 5 broadcasting companies in 2024 in India reported a growth of 5 per cent with the total reaching INR 41,412 crore from 39,288 crore. Another Economic Times article published in January, 2025 highlighted how the news media has increasingly been spreading random fake news, it also mentioned "conflict of interests involving media owners, journalists and political entities affects the credibility of news and that ethical boundaries are crossed many a time...."

Cases of yellow journalism, fabrication and falsification of news have been evident in cases like the sensationalization of actor Sushant Singh's death by suicide and a trial of Rhea Chakroborty by the media. Similarly, the news media has played a significant role in spreading communalism, islamophobia, casteism and misogyny. According to an article published in the Free Press Journal "Given the way several social media news platforms and television channels have been weaponized by the government to control the political narrative, both have become increasingly sensational and theatrical in recent years..." A brazen example of this media coverage was during Operation Sindoor (India's response to the heinous Pahalgam Terror Attack) in 2025. Media channels including Zee News and Aaj Tak falsely claimed that the Karachi Port had been destroyed by Indian Forces. This was not only debunked by fact checking sites like BOOM News but also by the Indian government.

## Media : An Institution or Machinery

Malpractice of spreading false news, misinformation and propaganda has contributed to the shifting social fabric of Indian society. The Government has intensified the weaponization of media, occupying almost all aspects of mass media from news to cinema, to further its own political agenda, even more brazenly. The ruling BJP aired an ad stigmatizing Muslim people – portraying

them as 'infiltrators', unkempt, unruly, edging to uncivilized, forcefully entering homes occupying them. An objectionable advertisement portraying Muslims was released as a part of BJP's election campaign in Jharkhand. It was asked to be taken down by the Election Commission after the opposition raised objections and complained.

According to a report by Al Jazeera, nearly ten movies that glorify PM Modi's 'new India image' were released or were slated for release before the 2024 Lok Sabha elections. [2] Films like Jahangir National University, Godra, Swatantra Veer Savarkar, and similar such movies are carefully crafted to push the anti-secular, hindutva politics into the masses. In fact, on February 20th, 2024, while on tour for election campaign, Modi urged people to watch 'Article 370' which is based on revoking Kashmir's special status. "Jai Jai Kaar is going to be heard in the whole country" were his words before he won the election for the third consecutive term.

Movies are just one strategy to influence collective conscience. The policing and surveillance, compounded by the continuous attacks of the ruling BJP's IT cell and its footsoldiers, on dissenters and public figures on social media is not alien either. Independent content creators who are critical of the government have flagged violent surveillance, hate speech and censorship, like taking down their respective social media accounts has been a systemised strategy. In fact independent content creators like @drmedusa and others recently received complaints threatening them with legal action for promoting 'anti-indian' sentiments for commenting on the escalating India-Pakistan conflict in June 2025.

Journalists, independent content creators, film makers and actors have been surveilled by the right wing on various accounts when they perceive their national and religious sentiments 'hurt'. According to a report published by the International Journalist Network, since 2014, the government has charged at least 15 journalists under the stringent anti-terrorism law, the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act (UAPA). During this timeframe, 36 journalists have been imprisoned[3] in the country, thereby paralysing the role of the media in challenging the status quo, pushing audiences to reflect critically and make informed decisions.

## Conclusion

India is witnessing an unprecedented institutional crackdown on media, eroding its constitutional role as a democratic watchdog. The World Press Freedom Index by Reporters Without Borders reflects this decline, with India ranking a dismal 151 out of 180 countries due to concentrated media ownership by political elites, stifling pluralism. Regulatory measures like the Data Protection Bill (2025), though aimed at enhancing digital privacy, raise concerns over government overreach in accessing citizen data and ambiguities in defining data fiduciaries. Similarly, the IT Amendment Rules (2021) impose unreasonable restrictions on online speech, undermining freedom of expression and privacy. Despite this repression, independent journalism persists through platforms like Newslaundry, The Wire, and Alt News, alongside journalists such as Ravish Kumar and Bhasha Singh, who have turned to YouTube to bypass corporate media control. Social media, too, has become a vital space for grassroots accountability, challenging systemic oppression and keeping press integrity alive through decentralized, citizen-driven reporting. While state repression looms large, these emerging voices signify resilience in India's media landscape.

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# Challenges persist for Human Rights, Peace, Security and Access to Justice

*The government always has an opportunity to break away from its past. It only needs to earnestly, sincerely and honestly try and believe that human dignity is universal, equal and inalienable.*

At the outset, it is imperative to acknowledge that the NDA-III government was formed against a backdrop of repression of peaceful protests and relentless discrimination against religious minorities. Amongst such repression, the inauguration of the Hindu Ram Temple in Ayodhya town of Uttar Pradesh state on the site of Babri Masjid, a medieval-era mosque that was demolished by a Hindu mob over three decades ago, by Prime Minister Narendra Modi takes precedence. The event was marked by religious tensions across the nation and led to incidents of violence against Muslims.

## Forced Evictions

However, such violence is not a new phenomenon. The violence and oppression against religious minorities and human rights defenders has manifested in different forms over the past few years. One such way has been through unlawful demolition of properties belonging to religious minorities as a means of meting out extrajudicial, collective and arbitrary punishment, especially following episodes of communal violence and protests. Between 2020 and 2022, over 2840 properties, including homes and places of worship, mostly belonging to Muslims, in various states across India were demolished. While the Supreme Court, through two landmark judgements in 2023, ruled that arbitrary demolitions of properties were unconstitutional and laid down a series of due process guidelines, municipal authorities in various NDA-governed states continued to unlawfully demolish properties.

## Freedom of Expression and Association

In this ecosystem of hate, built meticulously over the last decade, those standing up for such violence continue to face repression. Key methods include imposing travel restrictions on academics, journalists and human rights defenders by suspending their work visas, denying them entry to the country and cancelling their Overseas Citizen of India status. overseas citizenship of India (OCI) status. To illustrate, the OCI status of Vanessa Dougnac, a former South Asia correspondent for various international media organizations, was cancelled for her "malicious and critical" reporting. Avani Das, South Asia bureau chief of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, and French journalist Sébastien Farcis were forced to leave India after the authorities refused to extend their work permits. On 11 September, Australian filmmaker David Bradbury was denied entry into India without any explanation. He was interrogated about his documentary on the protests against the Kudankulam nuclear plant in Tamil Nadu state.

## Weaponisation of Central Agencies

The ruling government has been unrestrained in weaponizing national financial and investigation agencies against those who speak up against such violence along with members of the opposition. In the lead-up to the general elections, the Enforcement Directorate, India's primary financial crime investigation agency, arrested Arvind Kejriwal, Delhi's chief minister, and Hemant Soren, Jharkhand's chief minister. They were both members of opposition political parties. The Supreme Court granted them bail in September. The Foreign Contribution (Regulation) Act licences of at least seven NGOs were cancelled, preventing the organizations from accessing essential funds.

On 25 September the Income Tax Department cancelled the tax-exempt registration of Aman Biradari, an NGO founded by activist Harsh Mander. On 1 July a Delhi court sentenced human rights activist Medha Patkar to five months imprisonment in a politically motivated 23- year-old criminal defamation case filed by the Lieutenant Governor of Delhi. The sentence was later suspended on appeal. Along with the financial and investigative agencies, India's counterterrorism apparatus was also enforced at the expense of human rights. Towards this, sixteen human rights activists were arrested and eight continued to remain imprisoned without trial in this case. On 14 June, Delhi's lieutenant governor sanctioned the prosecution of Arundhati Roy, an internationally celebrated writer, and Sheikh Showkat Hussain, a Kashmiri academic. They were charged under the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act, India's primary counter-terrorism law.

## Legislative Oppression

In the service of the infernal cycle of violence that has been key to the NDA government, using law to undermine rule of law and accountability and to criminalise marginalised populations has been a common theme. For instance, three laws – Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, Bharatiya Sakshya Adhiniyam and Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha Sanhita came into force in July 2023. These replaced the Indian Penal Code, 1860; the Indian Evidence Act, 1872; and the Code of Criminal Procedure, 1882. Claimed to overhaul colonial-era laws, the new laws retained problematic provisions, including sedition.

In February, the Uttarakhand state passed the Uniform Civil Code, without adequate legislative and public consultation. It replaced religion-specific civil laws on personal matters. The law was seen as targeting the customary rules followed by Muslims while not changing any customary rules employed for the Hindu community. In March, the Indian authorities operationalized the Citizenship Amendment Act, 2019. The Act legitimized discrimination on the basis of religion by failing to recognize Muslims as asylum seekers and refugees. In July, the Uttar Pradesh state legislative assembly amended the Uttar Pradesh Prohibition of Unlawful Conversion of Religion Act. The amendment effectively criminalised consensual inter-faith marriages and raised the maximum punishment to life imprisonment.

Some legislative attempts to stifle freedom of expression were also successfully thwarted. Following a public backlash, in August the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting withdrew a draft of the Broadcasting Services (Regulation) Bill, which sought to expand the scope of "digital news broadcasters" to include content creators on social media channels. In September, the Bombay High Court struck down the Information Technology (Intermediary Guidelines and Digital Media Ethics Code) Amendment Rules, 2023 – that had allowed authorities to label online content as "fake or false or misleading" – as unconstitutional.

## Discrimination

Systematic discrimination against religious minorities remained a key aspect of the NDA government – III. In March, ahead of the general elections, the Assam state government suspended the granting of no-objection certificates for land sales between people belonging to different religions for a period of three months. This raised concerns about discrimination against Muslims as it effectively restricted them to living in religiously segregated areas.

In September, the Uttar Pradesh government directed that the names and addresses of operators, proprietors and managers must be displayed at all food centres. This directive was despite a Supreme Court ruling in July that refused to enforce a similar directive in Uttar Pradesh state, holding that it perpetuates identity-based discrimination. On 6 July, Uttar Pradesh police filed a first information report against journalist Zakir Ali Tyagi and three others. They were accused of "promoting enmity between different groups" and "making statements conducive to public mischief" for posting messages on social media about the lynching of a Muslim man in Shamli district on 5 July.

## Conflict regions

The government's response to conflict regions remained far from adequate. Between 18 September and 1 October, and in compliance with the 2023 Supreme Court judgment, the Election Commission conducted the first legislative assembly elections in Jammu and Kashmir since the elected government was dissolved in 2019. In June and July, in the lead-up to the elections, four renowned Kashmiri lawyers and members of the Jammu and Kashmir Bar Association were arrested in Srinagar under the Jammu and Kashmir Public Safety Act (PSA). On 12 July the lieutenant governor of Jammu and Kashmir appointed by the central government was given absolute control over state governance, including local administrative officials, prisons, prosecutions and law offices.

In Manipur, the state government failed to end continued ethnic violence between the dominant Meitei community and the minority Kuki and other tribal hill communities. At least 32 reported incidents of gender-based violence were committed against those belonging to ethnic tribal communities by members of armed vigilante groups Arambai Tenggol and Meitei Lippun. No vigilante group members faced prosecution.

According to the media platform, *The Wire*, a 48-minute audio file was submitted to the Ministry of Home Affairs allegedly containing discriminatory remarks made by the state's chief minister, N. Biren Singh, against the Kuki tribal community and evidence of his official complicity in the ongoing ethnic violence. On 22 September, Meitei Lippun threatened human rights activist Babloo Loitongbam and his family for allegedly collaborating with the tribal Kuki community during the ethnic violence.

### International human rights obligations

In the meantime, India continued to call for fair representation to the United Nations Security Council despite falling short of its domestic and international human rights obligations. To illustrate, India's membership of the United Nations Human Rights Council came to an end after two consecutive three-year terms. Between 2019 and 2024 the country received a total of 83 communications from various UN experts and responded to only 20. It had accepted only one visit request since 2019 and had 19 pending, including from the UN Special Rapporteur on torture, dating back to 1999.

These deeply disturbing events and developments are a major blow to rule of India and make it abundantly clear that the past year has been an extension and intensification of the systemic discrimination and oppression suffered by religious minorities and human rights defenders from NDA-I and NDA-II. The government always has an opportunity to break away from its past. It only needs to earnestly, sincerely and honestly try and believe that human dignity is universal, equal and inalienable.

# Undermining the anti-corruption framework

*Without an effective information access law, and an anti-corruption and grievance redress legislative framework which is properly implemented, the tall promises of eradicating corruption made to the electorate by the BJP, remain mere jumlas.*

The BJP came to power in the 2014 general elections on the back of a popular anti-corruption movement. While promises of *Bhrashtachar mukt Bharat* and *"Na khaunga, na khane dunga"* have been repeatedly made, the last 11 years of the BJP rule have seen a systematic undermining of the anti-corruption regime in the country.

In a democracy as vast as India's, the only effective way to fight corruption is to empower citizens with appropriate tools and institutions to hold the government and its functionaries accountable. These include an effective law for people to access information and a framework of laws and institutions to investigate allegations of corruption in an independent manner.

### Attacks on the Right to Information (RTI) law

The RTI Act has empowered people in India to meaningfully participate in democracy and hold their governments accountable. Estimates suggest that every year around 60 lakh RTI applications are filed across the country. The law has been used extensively in the last 19 years to hold governments and functionaries accountable for corruption and lapses in the delivery of essential services. It has been used by people to not only access their basic rights but also to question the highest authorities of the country on their performance, their decisions and their conduct.

The Information Commissions (ICs) are the final appellate authority under the RTI law and have wide-ranging powers, including the power to require public authorities to provide access to information and penalise errant officials for violations of the transparency law.

In truth, however, the functioning of information commissions has been consistently hindered by the non-appointment of commissioners in a timely manner, which has resulted in large vacancies in commissions leading to a huge backlog of cases. Currently there are over 4 lakh cases pending in information commissions across the country[1]. People have to wait for inordinately long periods of time to have their cases heard – research[2] shows that in 14 commissions it would take more than one year for an appeal or complaint to be disposed of. This renders the RTI Act ineffective. In the Central Information Commission, the central government has not appointed a single commissioner since May 2014 till people have approached the courts! As of May 2025, there are eight vacancies in the CIC – it is functioning with only one chief and two commissioners, while it has a backlog of nearly 25,000 cases! In October 2023, the Supreme Court had noted that the RTI Act will become a 'dead letter' if vacancies in information commissions are not filled. (Order dated October 30, 2023 in Miscellaneous Application No.1979/2019 In W.P.(C) No.436/2018 in Anjali Bhardwaj & Ors. Vs Union Of India & Ors.)

Another setback for the transparency watchdogs came in 2019 in the form of an amendment to the RTI Act. The Central government, without any pre legislative consultation, introduced amendments to the RTI Act in Parliament to empower the central government to decide the tenure, salaries and post-retirement benefits of all commissioners in the country. The amendments which were passed in 2019, completely undermine the independence and autonomy of information commissions.

In August 2023, another blow was dealt to peoples' right to information. The government pushed the Digital Personal Data Protection (DPDP) Act through Parliament. The Act includes a provision to

amend the right to information law. In January 2025, the government published draft rules of the DPDP Act for public comments, and as per news reports[3], the law is going to be operationalised soon. Section 44(3) of the Digital Personal Data Protection Act (DPDP Act) has amended the RTI Act, adversely impacting the ability of people to access information. The amendment made to section 8(1)(j) of RTI Act seeks to exempt all personal information from disclosure. It does away with the exceptions carved out within the RTI Act wherein personal information could be denied only if it had no relationship to any public activity or public interest; or would cause unwarranted invasion of privacy. Furthermore, the amendment has also done away with an important proviso to section 8(1) of the RTI Act which stated that "information which cannot be denied to the Parliament or a State Legislature shall not be denied to any person".

To seek accountability from the government, people need access to information, including various categories of personal data. For example, the Supreme Court has held that citizens have a right to know the names of wilful defaulters and details of Non-Performing Assets (NPAs) of public sector banks. Democracies routinely ensure public disclosure of voters' lists with names, addresses and other personal data to enable public scrutiny and prevent electoral fraud. Experience of the use of the RTI Act in India has shown that if people, especially the poor and marginalised, have any hope of obtaining the benefits of government schemes and welfare programs, they must have access to relevant, granular information. For instance, the Public Distribution System (PDS) Control Order recognises the need for putting the details of ration card holders and records of ration shops in the public domain to enable public scrutiny and social audits of the PDS. By making regressive amendments to section 8(1)(j) of the RTI Act, the DPDP law has severely restricted peoples' ability to access this kind of personal information.

The amendments will potentially block disclosure of the names of government functionaries involved in corruption or wrongdoing. Information, including: names of loan defaulters; electoral bond purchasers; voter lists; assets of public servants – may all be protected against disclosure.

### Undermining the Lokpal

The Lokpal and Lokayuktas Act, 2014 was passed by Parliament as a result of a strong public campaign demanding the setting up of an independent and empowered anti-corruption ombudsman, which would work without fear or favour to tackle cases of big-ticket corruption involving high level government functionaries.

The NDA government which came to power in May 2014 failed to take necessary steps to appoint any Lokpal for nearly five years. The appointments were finally made after the matter was taken to the Supreme Court. These appointments came three weeks prior to the commencement of the 2019 general elections. An important principle for ensuring independence of institutions is that the selection committee responsible for making appointments should not have a majority of members from the ruling party. However, the manner in which appointments have been made to the Lokpal in 2019 and again in 2024, raise serious questions about the independence of the Lokpal as the selection committee had a preponderance of the government and its representatives. The deliberations on the appointment process have also remained shrouded in secrecy with the government refusing to disclose the minutes of the Lokpal selection committee meetings under the RTI Act.

The anti-corruption ombudsman has clearly been a non-starter. In recent times, the Lokpal has hit the headlines only for initiating investigations and proceedings against leaders of opposition parties. The nation is yet to see any serious investigation against a leader of the ruling dispensation, despite several serious allegations of corruption in recent years.

### Non-implementation of the Whistle Blowers Protection Act

Nearly a hundred whistleblowers have been killed across the country for exposing corruption and wrongdoings in the government. Showing complete lack of political will to provide a robust anti-

corruption framework in the country, the government has taken no steps for over nine years to implement the Whistle Blowers Protection (WBP) Act passed in 2014 which provides for the protection of identity of whistleblowers and safeguards against their victimisation. As a result, whistleblowers who show truth to power, often at great risk, have no statutory mechanism for seeking protection.

### Failure to re-introduce the grievance redress bill

Providing a legal framework for grievance redress was a commitment made in the sense of House resolution passed unanimously in Parliament in August 2011. The 'Right of Citizens for Time Bound Delivery of Goods and Services and Redressal of their Grievances Bill, 2011' (GR Bill), which was introduced in Parliament in 2011, lapsed with the dissolution of the 15th Lok Sabha. It had support of Members of Parliament across party lines.

The current government repeatedly stated its commitment to re-introducing and passing the GR Bill. In a communication dated June 24, 2014, the PMO stated that passing the GR Bill was "part of immediate thrust areas of the government". However, 11 years later, the Bill is yet to see the light of day.

Without an effective information access law, and an anti-corruption and grievance redress legislative framework which is properly implemented, the tall promises of eradicating corruption made to the electorate by the BJP, remain mere *jumlas*.

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# Progressive judicial pronouncements should not remain mere promises

*A thorough grassroots-level understanding of the working of the justice delivery system shows that human resources issues, lack of transparency and accountability, a lack of clarity of the law and the compliance with procedure need to be addressed.*

Despite the centrality of justice to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), current frameworks for evaluating justice delivery – such as the SDG India Index – fail to reflect the lived experiences of marginalised groups. The absence of vulnerability-focused indicators, such as performance metrics for the *Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act, 2012* (POCSO) or the *Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989*, limits the ability to assess how justice systems respond to structural inequities. Current metrics – murders per lakh population, cognizable crimes against children, human trafficking cases – capture only reported offenses which obscures the true extent of injustice while potentially discouraging the registration of complaints. This measurement gap necessitates examining actual legislative, executive and judicial responses to vulnerable communities rather than relying on inadequate statistical frameworks.

## The Performance of the Executive: Infrastructure Deficits and Systemic Gaps

The Department of Justice continues to operate with a vision document from 2009, demonstrating institutional inertia amid significant legal reforms including the implementation of new criminal codes announced by the government. This outdated framework inadequately addresses contemporary challenges in court management, infrastructure development and digitisation initiatives.

The India Justice Report 2025 exposes alarming vacancy rates across justice institutions.[1] High Courts face 33 per cent judicial vacancies while district courts operate with 21 per cent shortfalls. Police forces lack 28 per cent of officers and 21 per cent of constables. Prison systems struggle with 28 per cent officer vacancies and 44 per cent correctional staff shortages. Forensic departments are particularly understaffed, with 45 per cent administrative and 49 per cent scientific staff positions unfilled.

Infrastructure improvements show mixed results. Prison video-conferencing facilities increased by 86 per cent, court hall shortages decreased by 45 per cent, and legal aid service clinics per jail expanded. However, rural areas suffered disproportionately: village-level legal service clinics reduced significantly, rural police stations decreased and paralegal appointments with District Legal Services Authorities dropped by 38 per cent.

Gender representation remains critically low despite marginal improvements. Women constitute only 12 per cent of police forces, with a mere 8 per cent at officer levels and 89 per cent concentrated in constabulary positions. The judiciary shows stark disparities: only one woman Chief Justice across 25 High Courts, 38 per cent women judges in district courts compared to 14 per cent in High Courts and only 6 per cent in the Supreme Court.

Caste representation further reflects systemic exclusion. At the district judiciary, only 5 per cent of judges belong to Scheduled Tribes and 14 per cent to Scheduled Castes. Among 698 High Court judges appointed since 2018, merely 37 represent SC and ST categories.

Budget allocations reveal skewed priorities. Per capita legal aid spending struggles to reach ₹7 annually while police expenditure grew 55 per cent over six years to nearly ₹1,300 per capita. Training budgets remain severely constrained at 1.25 per cent of police budgets nationally. Prison

spending averages ₹57 per capita, with per-prisoner expenditure rising from ₹38,028 to ₹44,110 between 2021 and 2023.

The Executive's performance reveals significant gaps in personnel capacity, infrastructure development and resource allocation that limit justice accessibility. Urgent measures including accelerated human resource recruitment, enhanced rural legal aid infrastructure and rebalanced budget priorities toward legal aid and training are essential to bridge these deficits.

### Legislative and Judicial Responses to Vulnerable Communities

*Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes*

The Supreme Court upheld the power of state governments to create sub-classifications within the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes for reservation.[2] Following the ruling, both Parliament and various state legislatures revised their reservation policies through enactments, [amendments](#) and gazette notifications. The Court declared caste-based segregation and discrimination in Indian prisons to be unconstitutional[3] and the Hindu Succession Act was held to not automatically apply to Scheduled Tribes without government notification.[4]

*Child Rights*

Section 15 of POCSO on child pornography was elaborated to add the requirement of intention to circulate such material as *mens rea*, along with clarifying the threshold of the burden of proof on the prosecution under Section 30's reversal of burden of proof as applicable to Section 15.[5] It was held that sexual assault cases (under Section 7 of POCSO) cannot be quashed on the basis of a compromise between the parties – a crucial protection against impunity.[6] Stating that child betrothals take away individual agency, the Court said that Parliament 'may consider' outlawing them under the *Prohibition of Child Marriage Act, 2006* and issued comprehensive guidelines for enforcement of the Act.[7]

*Labour Rights*

Judicial intervention secured important worker protections. Ministries were directed to constitute a committee to consider the desirability of a legal framework for the benefit, protection and regulation of the rights of domestic workers.[8] In directing the regularisation of long-standing 'part-time *ad hoc*' workers of a government body, the Court called on the government to be a model employer.[9] Balancing road safety with the livelihoods of gig workers, the Court permitted LMV license holders to operate transport vehicles without additional authorisation.[10]

*Religious Minorities*

Laying down parameters to identify a minority educational institution, the Court clarified that Under Article 30(1), which guarantees the religious and linguistic *special right* to establish and administer educational institutions, both establishment and administration rights were essential for an institution to qualify as a minority institution. The Court further stated that even institutions given legal status by a statute before the Constitution receive protection under Article 30 and can retain their minority status.[11] The constitutionality of the *Uttar Pradesh Board of Madarsa Education Act 2004* was upheld.[12] Section 6A of the Citizenship Act, 1955, which grants citizenship to Bangladeshi immigrants who entered Assam before March 1971, survived constitutional challenge.[13]

The Central Government notified rules under the 2019 amendment to the Citizenship Act, 1955 which provides citizenship based on religion to six undocumented non-Muslim communities who entered India before December 31, 2014, from Pakistan, Afghanistan or Bangladesh by granting them immunity from prosecution under the *Foreigners Act, 1946* and the *Passport Act, 1920* and lowering the residency requirement from 11 years to 5 years. An amendment to the *Waqf Act, 1995* was passed which removes elected representations from State Waqf Boards, significantly reduces the Muslim and community-based control and centralises authority with the government and bureaucracy, including powers to Collectors to determine waqf status. Uttar Pradesh[14] and

Rajasthan[15] introduced bills to amend state laws regulating religious conversions, further constraining minority rights.

*Persons with Disabilities*

Judicial intervention eliminated discriminatory distinctions between Persons with Disabilities (PwD) and Persons with Benchmark Disabilities (PwBD), especially for the purposes of employment. The Court struck down, as unconstitutional and discriminatory, Rules 6A and 7 of the *Madhya Pradesh Judicial Service (Recruitment and Conditions of Service) Rules, 1994* which excluded visually impaired and low vision candidates from appointment in the judicial service and prescribed additional requirements for disabled persons.[16] In multiple cases involving disqualification of disabled candidates from admission to educational institutions, the Court directed the National Medical Commission to revise its guidelines to ensure inclusive practises.[17] The Reserve Bank of India was directed to make Know Your Customer (KYC) processes accessible for persons with disabilities.[18]

*Queer Rights*

The Supreme Court issued mandatory guidelines to protect queer couples – including those in inter-faith and inter-caste relationships – and to ensure that minors detained by their natal families can access *habeas corpus* relief, and proscribed the use of counselling as conversion therapy by Courts. [19]

*Undertrial Prisoners*

Immediate retrospective application of Section 479 of the *Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha Sanhita, 2023*, which contained more favourable provisions than that the erstwhile *Code of Criminal Procedure, 1971,* was ordered for the release of undertrial prisoners who had served a major part of the maximum possible sentence.[20] While ruling arbitrary demolition of the houses of citizens accused of crimes to be unconstitutional, the Court issued extensive directions on demolition of private property.[21] 'Undue delay' on part of the Executive in processing death row convicts' mercy petitions was held to be violative of Article 21 and ground enough for a commutation of their sentence. All states were further directed to set up a special cell to deal with mercy petitions.[22]

Police using technology to constantly track the accused's movements was held to violate Article 21.[23] In a slew of high-profile cases where undertrial politicians, academicians and activists were granted bail, the Supreme Court moved to protect personal liberty under Article 21, reiterating that bail is the rule while jail is the exception and that prolonged incarceration should not be a punishment without trial.[24]

*Women's Rights*

The Court's jurisprudence on women's rights during this period addressed workplace equality and safety through interconnected constitutional principles. The Court held that a mother's participation in the workforce is a constitutional entitlement and directed the State of Himachal Pradesh to form a committee to review its impugned Child Care Leave policy obligations keeping in mind the *Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016*. [25] While ordering the reinstatement of two women civil judges, the Court stated that a sensitive work environment is crucial to ensuring gender parity and representation in the judiciary.[26] Building on workplace safety concerns, in the *suo motu* matter concerning the rape and murder of a doctor at the RG Kar Medical College Hospital at Kolkata, the Court ordered the constitution of a nine-member National Task Force to give recommendations to ensure dignified and safe working conditions for all medical professionals.[27] The Court clarified that Section 13(1) of the *Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013,* which mandates that the inquiry report must be shared with all the concerned parties, includes the complainant and failure to do so will result in penal consequences.[28]

In April 2024, the Court, stating that the 'interest of the child is paramount,' recalled its earlier decision to allow a 14-year-old victim of sexual assault to terminate her 30-week pregnancy after her parents informed the Court that proceeding with the abortion would lead to health concerns and that both they and the girl wanted to take the pregnancy to term.[29] The Court, relying on precedents, laid down detailed guidelines to be followed when calculating permanent alimony in divorce cases.[30]

## Conclusion

The review period reveals that judicial interventions have offered meaningful protections to vulnerable communities but these gains have often been reactive rather than systemic and remain precariously dependent on judicial interpretation rather than robust, forward-looking policies from the Legislature and Executive.

Structural deficits in personnel, infrastructure and budgetary allocations undermine justice delivery effectiveness. It is also noteworthy that legal developments at the national level do not capture the full picture for understanding law's working. A thorough grassroots-level understanding of the working of the justice delivery system shows that human resources issues, lack of transparency and accountability, a lack of clarity of the law and the compliance with procedure need to be addressed.[31] Without addressing these foundational challenges, even progressive judicial pronouncements risk remaining mere promises on paper rather than turning into reality for India's most marginalised. Justice administration must evolve from a reactive, deficit-driven approach to one that is proactive, inclusive and grounded in constitutional values.

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28.  Ms. X v. Union of India and Ors., Writ Petition (Criminal) 284/2020, Order dated December 4, 2024.
29.  A (Mother of X) v. State of Maharashtra, 2024 INSC 371.
30.  Parvin Kumar Jain v. Anju Jain, 2024 INSC 1026.
31.  Centre for Social Justice, Assessing the Effectiveness of the Justice Delivery Mechanism in Ensuring Access to Justice, (2024)

# 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.

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