

# DAILY NEWSP APER ANALYSIS

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**CHANAKYA IAS ACADEMY  
SECTOR 25 CHANDIGARH**

# Central authorities working with 'full sensitivity' for all communities, says Murmu

The Hindu Bureau  
NEW DELHI

Saying that the Union government is working towards social justice, President Droupadi Murmu on Wednesday asked MPs to stand as one on issues of national security, Viksit Bharat (developed India) and the campaign for swadeshi.

In her address to a joint sitting of both Houses of Parliament, the President invoked Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, Babasaheb Ambedkar, and leaders such as Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, Jayaprakash Narayan, Rann Manohar Lohia, Deendayal Upadhyaya, and Atal Bihari Vajpayee, to note that "amid different opinions and diverse viewpoints, there has been unanimity about nothing being greater than the nation".

## 'Reform express'

She said that the government was accelerating the "reform express" for achieving a developed India by 2047.

"Amid unease over certain sections of the University Grants Commission's regulations to promote equity in higher education institutions, the President said the government was working with "full sensitivity" for all – for Dalits, Backward Classes, the mar-



Amid different opinions and diverse viewpoints, there has been unanimity about nothing being greater than the nation.

ginalised, and tribal communities. In 2014, social security schemes could reach only 25 crore citizens, she said, adding that efforts of the government had seen 95 crore Indians receiving social security cover currently. Ms. Murmu said the architect of the Constitution, B.R. Ambedkar, had always laid emphasis on equality and social justice.

"Our Constitution inspires us in the same spirit," she said, underlining that social justice means every citizen gets to exercise full rights, without discrimination.

The President said the world saw the valour of Indian armed forces through Operation Sindoor.

Terror camps across the border were destroyed, she said and asserted that any terrorist attack would be responded to with decisive action. India had proved that power could

be used with responsibility and wisdom, she said.

The President referred to British official Thomas Macaulay and his policies during the colonial rule in the 19th century. "Through Macaulay's conspiracies, a sense of inferiority was instilled among the people of India during the colonial period. Now, for the first time since Independence, my government has shown the courage to strike a blow on this," the President said.

She said 2026 also marks the completion of 75 years since the reconstruction of the Somnath Temple in Gujarat's Saurashtra.

"The thousand-year journey since the attacks on the Somnath Temple stands as a symbol of India's religious devotion, Sannatan culture and enduring faith. The enthusiasm with which people across the country participated in the Somnath Swabhimaan Parv has been truly unmatched," she said.

She further mentioned the Free Trade Agreement between India and the EU in her address. She said that the conclusion of negotiations will give impetus to India's manufacturing and service sectors and create new employment opportunities.

OPPOSITION PROTEST  
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## KEY HIGHLIGHTS

### Context of the News

- Droupadi Murmu addressed a joint sitting of Parliament at the beginning of the Budget Session.
- The address highlighted the Union government's commitment to social justice, national security, swadeshi, and Viksit Bharat by 2047.
- Emphasis was placed on unity beyond ideological differences, invoking national leaders across the political spectrum.
- The speech came amid debates on UGC equity regulations, cross-border terrorism, and India-EU Free Trade Agreement negotiations.

### Key Points

- Viksit Bharat 2047: Government accelerating reforms ("reform express") to transform India into a developed nation by the centenary of Independence.
- Social Justice & Inclusion:
  - Social security coverage expanded from 25 crore (2014) to 95 crore beneficiaries.
  - Focus on Dalits, Backward Classes, tribals, and marginalised communities.
- Constitutional Values:
  - Reiteration of equality and social justice as core constitutional principles, inspired by B. R. Ambedkar.
- National Security:
  - Reference to Operation Sindoor, projecting India's policy of decisive yet responsible use of force against terrorism.

- Decolonisation of Mindset:
  - Critique of colonial-era policies associated with Thomas Macaulay, highlighting efforts to overcome historical inferiority complexes.
- Cultural Civilisational Narrative:
  - 75 years of reconstruction of Somnath Temple; linked to cultural resilience and civilisational continuity.
- Economic Diplomacy:
  - India-EU FTA expected to boost manufacturing, services, exports, and employment.

### Static Linkages

- Preamble's commitment to Justice (social, economic, political) and Equality
- Directive Principles promoting welfare state and reduction of inequalities
- Fundamental Rights ensuring non-discrimination and equal opportunity
- National security doctrine of strategic restraint with deterrence
- Post-Independence reconstruction of cultural heritage sites
- Trade liberalisation as a tool for export-led growth
- Social security as part of inclusive development model

### Critical Analysis

#### Positive Dimensions

- Reinforces constitutional nationalism over partisan politics.
- Expansion of social security aligns with inclusive growth.
- Clear signalling of zero tolerance towards terrorism enhances deterrence.
- India-EU FTA supports Make in India and global value chain integration.

#### Concerns & Challenges

- Social security expansion faces issues of quality, fiscal sustainability, and last-mile delivery.
- UGC equity regulations raise concerns on institutional autonomy and federal balance.
- Cultural-civilisational narrative risks politicisation of heritage if not handled inclusively.
- FTAs may expose MSMEs and agriculture to import competition without adequate safeguards.

### Way Forward

- Strengthen outcome-based monitoring of social security schemes.
- Ensure consultative federalism in higher education reforms.
- Balance security doctrine with international law and diplomatic engagement.
- Complement FTAs with domestic competitiveness reforms (skills, logistics, MSME support).
- Promote cultural heritage through inclusive, non-exclusionary frameworks.
- Anchor Viksit Bharat goals in human development indicators, not just GDP growth.

# No notice to 88% T.N. voters facing deletion: DMK

**Krishnadas Rajagopal**  
NEW DELHI

Around 88% of those voters in Tamil Nadu in the draft electoral rolls facing exclusion in the name of logical discrepancies and mapping during the special intensive revision (SIR) had not received hearing notices, ruling party leaders in the State submitted before the Supreme Court on Wednesday.

The petitioners urged the top court to schedule a hearing on Thursday in the presence of the Election Commission (EC) for giving an explanation. A Bench headed by Chief Justice of



Out of the required 1.7 crore notices, 32,19,752 have not even been generated or printed yet. C. VENKATACHALAPATHY

India Surya Kant agreed to the request.

Appearing before the Bench, senior advocate Kapil Sibal, representing the petitioner-leaders from the

Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK), submitted that the objections-and-claims phase in Tamil Nadu was coming to a close on Friday.

An application filed by DMK leader R.S. Bharathi for the State's ruling party said electoral registration officers (EROs) had issued "logical discrepancy forms" to 1.7 crore voters. "However, the statistics regarding the issuance of these notices of logical discrepancy are alarming," the application filed through advocate Vivek Singh noted.

It said out of the required 1.7 crore notices, 32,19,752 were not even generated or printed yet. Of the notices generated, only 18,25,739 were formally served.

A staggering 88%, or

1,21,05,441, of the voters have not yet received their notices, the application noted. "Notices have been generated only for 18 lakh people. There is a gap of 88%. These people have not received notices. The phase is ending on January 30. If a hearing is delayed, the situation would become *fait accompli*," Mr. Sibal said.

He suggested that the court extend the directions issued in the January 19 order in the West Bengal SIR case to Tamil Nadu as well. "It is the same reasons for excluding people – logical discrepancies, mapping, etc," Mr. Sibal submitted.

## KEY HIGHLIGHTS

### Context

- Special Intensive Revision (SIR) of electoral rolls conducted in Tamil Nadu.
- Ruling party leaders alleged mass exclusion of voters due to "logical discrepancies" and mapping errors.
- Petition filed before the Supreme Court seeking urgent hearing.
- Supreme Court agreed to hear the matter with the Election Commission present.
- Objections-and-claims phase nearing closure, raising risk of irreversible voter deletion.

### Key Facts / Data

- 1.7 crore voters flagged for "logical discrepancies".
- 32.19 lakh notices not generated/printed.
- Only 18.25 lakh notices formally served.
- About 1.21 crore voters (~88%) received no notice.
- Grounds for exclusion: data mismatch, address mapping, booth rationalisation.
- Petition sought extension of safeguards earlier applied in West Bengal SIR case.

### Static Linkages

- Universal Adult Franchise under Article 326.
- Free and fair elections as part of Basic Structure Doctrine.
- Principles of Natural Justice – right to notice and hearing.
- Judicial review over constitutional authorities.
- Independence and accountability of constitutional bodies.
- Distinction between electoral roll accuracy and voter disenfranchisement.

### Critical Analysis

#### Issues

- Mass exclusion without notice violates due process.
- Digitisation increases risk of systemic errors.
- Short objection window disadvantages migrants, elderly, urban poor.
- Perceived arbitrariness undermines trust in electoral machinery.

#### Institutional Concerns

- Accuracy vs inclusiveness dilemma in electoral roll management.
- Risk of *fait accompli* if judicial intervention is delayed.

#### Constitutional Angle

- Possible violation of Articles 14 and 326.
- Procedural lapses invite judicial correction.

### Way Forward

- Mandatory prior notice before any voter deletion.
- Minimum uniform objection window across states.
- Independent audit of SIR exercises.
- Use of technology with human verification.
- Clear SOPs and public disclosure by ECI.
- Judicially enforceable safeguards for electoral revisions.

# NHRC discusses rights violations during disability certificate re-verification

The Hindu Bureau  
NEW DELHI

Citing the human rights violations emerging from the re-verification or re-assessment of certificates of government employees with disabilities, Justice V. Ramasubramanian (retd.), Chairperson of the National Human Rights Commission, on Wednesday, said that scrutiny should be done only in cases of a specific suspicion instead of mass re-verification of all employees with disability.

The recommendation of the NHRC Chief came during a core group meeting of the body following an advisory issued by the Centre on disability verification in government jobs/education.

Stating that it is understandable that the government's advisory and revised standard operating protocol (SOP) for handling disability verification in government jobs/education, issued in October 2025, was meant for applying prospectively only for the new applicants and not retrospectively to reassess all existing beneficiaries, he said applying the SOP retrospectively for all of them may have legal implications.

"Therefore, instead of



Therefore, instead of mass verification, the scrutiny should be limited to cases where there is a specific suspicion

JUSTICE V. RAMASUBRAMANIAN (RETD.)  
NHRC Chairperson

mass verification, the scrutiny should be limited to cases where there is a specific suspicion," he said.

**'Chances of misuse'**  
He highlighted concerns that some eligible persons with disabilities might miss out on benefits, or that beneficiary legislation could be misused.

Vijaya Bharathi Sayani, NHRC member, said, "disability is not something that should be repeatedly proven. Repeated re-verification of persons with disabilities is causing anxiety, fear and insecurity, particularly about job continuity."

During the meeting, the NHRC members gave suggestions to ensure no injustice happens with employees with disabilities, which includes prohibition on blanket or mass medical reassessment of all government employees with disabilities. The NHRC members also suggested that government must

adopt UDID-based digital verification as the default mechanism, with medical reassessment only as an exception, based on clearly defined and evidence-based suspicion.

It is advised to incorporate safeguards in any verification exercise, including written reasons, opportunity to respond, time-bound decisions and a clear right to appeal along with protection from adverse service action during the process.

The NHRC also recommended adopting dignity-centred protocols during verification, including providing a reasonable accommodation, improved accessibility, digital options, and exemptions from redundant testing for permanent and irreversible disabilities.

Others recommendations include elimination of the need to re-issue certificates to the employees living with irreversible disabilities.

- Safeguards such as:
  - Written reasons for verification
  - Opportunity to respond
  - Time-bound decision-making
  - Right to appeal
  - Protection from adverse service action during verification

- For permanent and irreversible disabilities:
  - Exemption from repeated medical testing.
  - Elimination of requirement for re-issuance of certificates.

## Static Linkages

- Equality before law and non-arbitrariness are core constitutional principles.
- Protection of livelihood forms part of the right to life with dignity.
- Reasonable accommodation is an accepted principle in disability rights.
- Beneficiary-oriented legislation requires liberal interpretation.
- Administrative actions must comply with:
  - Natural justice
  - Proportionality
  - Non-discrimination

## Critical Analysis

### Positive Aspects

- Protects dignity and mental well-being of persons with disabilities.
- Prevents administrative arbitrariness.
- Strengthens trust in welfare governance.
- Aligns with inclusive and rights-based policy approach.

### Concerns

- Possibility of misuse of disability benefits.
- Lack of clear criteria for defining "specific suspicion".
- Digital divide may affect UDID accessibility.
- Implementation depends on administrative sensitivity.

## Way Forward

- Define clear legal thresholds for initiating verification.
- Strengthen and universalise UDID infrastructure.
- Sensitisation and training of officials on disability rights.
- Independent grievance redressal mechanisms.
- Regular oversight by human rights institutions.
- Ensure dignity-centred, rights-based verification protocols.

## KEY HIGHLIGHTS

### Context of the News

- The National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) raised concerns over mass re-verification of disability certificates of government employees with disabilities.
- The issue arose after a Central Government advisory and revised SOP (October 2025) on disability verification in government jobs and educational institutions.
- NHRC clarified that the advisory was prospective in nature, meant for new applicants, and not for retrospective reassessment of existing beneficiaries.
- NHRC recommended verification only in cases of specific suspicion, not blanket reassessment.

### Key Points

- Mass re-verification may:
  - Violate dignity and mental well-being of persons with disabilities.
  - Create fear regarding job continuity and livelihood.
- Retrospective application of SOP:
  - May have legal and constitutional implications.
- NHRC recommendations include:
  - Prohibition of blanket medical reassessment.
  - UDID-based digital verification as default.
  - Medical reassessment only as an exception, based on evidence-based suspicion.

# India, the beautiful – but first, India the functional

India is a land of astonishing contrasts. It offers snow-capped peaks and sun-drenched beaches, ancient temples and cutting-edge tech parks, spiritual retreats and bustling bazaars. Yet, despite this kaleidoscope of experiences, India welcomed just 5.6 million foreign tourist arrivals till August 2025 – a modest figure for a country of 1.4 billion. Singapore, with a population smaller than Delhi's, drew 11.6 million by August 2025. Thailand earned over \$60 billion from tourism; India made barely a third of that.

These numbers are not just statistical curiosities. They reflect a deeper malaise in India's tourism strategy – one that demands urgent attention if we are to unlock the sector's full potential. Tourism is not merely about showcasing monuments or selling sunsets; it is about creating experiences that are seamless, safe, and memorable. And on that front, India has work to do.

## Three main problems

India's problems can be summarised in three "I"s: image, infrastructure and 'India itself'. Let us analyse each. First, image: the perception of the country abroad. India's 'Incredible India' campaign is evocative, but branding alone cannot overcome the weight of negative headlines. Concerns about safety, especially for women, with many foreigners considering India to be unsafe for women travelling alone; scams; sanitation; and bureaucratic hassles often shape the global imagination more than our cultural richness. Tourists want to feel welcome, not wary. Singapore and Thailand have succeeded not just by being clean or affordable, but by being consistent in their messaging as safe, efficient, and, especially in Thailand's case, fun.

India's vastness makes a single narrative difficult, but that does not mean marketing the country is impossible. We must segment our appeal – Spiritual India, Adventure India, Luxury India – and market each with clarity and conviction to different audiences abroad. It is time for 'Incredible Indias', in the plural, to be sold to the world. The Buddhist circuit, the Ramayana circuit, even the cricketing circuit should all be marketed to appropriate foreign constituencies.

Infrastructure is the second problem area. The tourist experience begins the moment one lands. Airports, immigration counters, taxis, Wi-Fi – these are first impressions. A luxury hotel means little if the road outside is potholed and the signage indecipherable. Last-mile connectivity to remote destinations remains a challenge. Clean public toilets, reliable internet, and well-maintained heritage sites are foundational. Paradoxically, while India can be a budget



**Shashi Tharoor**  
MP (Congress) for Thiruvananthapuram (Lok Sabha), an award-winning author, a former Minister of State for Human Rights Resources Development, and a former Chairman of the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Information Technology

Until India addresses the fundamentals – image, infrastructure, and experience – it will remain a tantalising idea rather than a top-tier destination

destination, mid-range and luxury travel often comes at a premium, making the country less competitive than its Southeast Asian neighbours.

Then comes 'India itself'. The sheer scale can overwhelm the uninitiated. Crowds, noise, and a service culture that is not always tourist-friendly can cause frustration. Scammers, touts, beggars and sexual harassers exist, and they erode trust. The hospitality sector reportedly faces a 40% shortfall in trained staff, and many graduates prefer the predictability of office jobs to the unpredictability of guest relations. We need vocational training, multilingual guides, and a professional workforce that sees tourism not as a fallback, but as a calling.

Immigration, too, must evolve. While e-visas have helped, India still ranks behind many Asian countries on ease-of-travel indexes. A 'Visa on Arrival for the World' policy may sound ambitious, but it is worth exploring – though I am certain that would require a major transformation in the attitude of the Home Ministry. Stories of foreigners turned away at Indian airports because of past criticisms of the country do disproportionate damage. India is a large and confident nation; it can absorb dissent without rejecting the dissenter. We need to train immigration officers to be friendly and welcoming to foreigners. And as a nation, Indians need to accept criticism of policies as part of democratic discourse.

## Fixing the deficit

Fixing India's tourism deficit therefore requires a multi-pronged strategy that addresses both perception and reality. First, rebrand and relaunch. Let us move beyond generic campaigns and build targeted narratives. Promote well-defined circuits – the Golden Triangle, the Himalayan trail, the coastal belt – with impeccable infrastructure and safety. Invest in digital storytelling: immersive virtual tours, influencer partnerships, and user-generated content that showcases India's magic through authentic lenses. If I were to write India's tourism tagline, I would say, 'Incredible Indias: Experience the Infinite'. 'Not just a place to visit, but a world to inhabit – spiritually, culturally, and emotionally.'

Second, build infrastructure that matches ambition. Encourage public-private partnerships to adopt and maintain heritage sites. Scale up the 'Adopt a Heritage' scheme for companies to renovate and maintain sites everywhere in India. Improve roads, rail, and sustainable transport to lesser-known gems. Launch a nationwide 'Clean Tourism' campaign with clean restrooms, signage, and waste management at every major destination. Make museums more digital, more interactive, less dusty and worn.

Third, prioritise safety and training. Expand the tourist police force, especially by hiring and training large numbers of women; ensure multilingual support; and crack down on scams and harassment. Create centralised apps for verified guides and transport. Invest in skill development – not just for five-star hotels, but for homestays, eco-lodges, and local artisans.

Fourth, streamline the visa process. Make e-visas faster, simpler, and more intuitive. Offer long-term multi-entry visas for frequent travellers. Reciprocity is the usual rule, but India can identify countries whose nationals are unlikely to pose any immigration risk, and make an exception to that rule. It is important to remove bureaucratic hurdles that deter rather than protect.

Fifth, promote sustainability and authenticity. Today's global traveller seeks eco-tourism and meaningful experiences. India must balance growth with preservation. That means regulating footfalls at fragile sites, promoting community-based tourism, and ensuring that development does not come at the cost of cultural or environmental degradation.

## Economic opportunity, strategic imperative

Tourism must be a national priority. A World Tourism Organisation report notes investment on tourism creates multiple times more jobs than the same amounts spent on manufacturing. As automation reshapes industry, the differential will only increase. Tourism offers employment not just to more people, but particularly to the unskilled and semi-skilled – precisely the demographic that needs to be uplifted. In a region where youth unemployment can fuel unrest (as we have seen in Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, and Nepal), tourism is not just an economic opportunity; it is a strategic imperative. This is why it deserves to be supported by the government as a vital industry, with tax breaks and policy support.

The hospitality industry is a curator of India's image in the eyes of the world. It is a shame that the otherwise rightly hailed GST reforms have left the hospitality industry behind. The denial of input tax credit across the full range of hotels' revenue sources ironically means that they were better off at 12% GST than they now are at 5%. This must be fixed.

India has the history of Egypt, the natural beauty of New Zealand, and the cultural depth of a continent. But until we address the fundamentals – image, infrastructure, and experience – we will remain a tantalising idea rather than a top-tier destination.

India doesn't need to reinvent itself. It needs to refine itself. The world is waiting. Let us give it a reason to come – and to stay.

- GST on hotels at 5% without Input Tax Credit, reducing sector competitiveness.
- Existing initiatives:
  - Incredible India campaign
  - E-Visa facility
  - Adopt a Heritage Scheme
  - Tourist Police deployment (limited coverage)

## STATIC LINKAGES

- Tourism as part of tertiary (service) sector.
- High employment elasticity compared to manufacturing.
- Concept of multiplier effect in services.
- Soft power and cultural diplomacy.
- Sustainable development and carrying capacity of destinations.
- Cooperative federalism in tourism governance.

## KEY HIGHLIGHTS

### CONTEXT OF THE NEWS

- India recorded 5.6 million Foreign Tourist Arrivals (FTAs) till August 2025, significantly lower than regional peers.
- Singapore attracted 11.6 million FTAs in the same period despite a much smaller size.
- Thailand earned over USD 60 billion from tourism, while India earned roughly one-third.
- Highlights structural gaps in India's tourism ecosystem despite cultural and natural advantages.
- Tourism identified as a high employment-generating sector in policy discussions.

### KEY POINTS

- Tourism contributes about 5% to India's GDP and 8%+ to total employment (Economic Survey).
- India ranks lower on:
  - Safety perception
  - Ease of travel and visa processes
  - Tourist infrastructure quality
- Key challenges identified:
  - Poor global image due to safety, sanitation, scams
  - Weak last-mile connectivity
  - Inadequate tourist-friendly services
- Hospitality sector faces ~40% shortage of trained manpower (Ministry of Tourism).

## CRITICAL ANALYSIS

### Pros / Potential

- Rich cultural, spiritual, natural diversity.
- Strong domestic tourism base.
- Tourism creates more jobs per unit investment (UNWTO).
- Digital payments and e-visa improve accessibility.

### Cons / Challenges

- Negative international perception on safety and hygiene.
- Poor last-mile infrastructure.
- Fragmented branding strategy.
- Skill deficit in hospitality services.
- GST structure discourages investment.
- Restrictive and inconsistent immigration practices.

## WAY FORWARD

- Destination-based and circuit-based branding.
- Improve last-mile connectivity and urban amenities.
- Expand tourist police with women personnel.
- Skill development through vocational and language training.
- Rationalise GST and restore input tax credit.
- Simplify and liberalise visa regime for low-risk countries.
- Promote sustainable and community-based tourism.

# The new logic of the Chinese economy

As the global economic and trade order suffers a severe blow, the giant ship of the Chinese economy once again demonstrates its strong resilience, with its GDP exceeding 140 trillion yuan (approximately \$20 trillion) in 2025. This represents a year-on-year increase of 5%. China's contribution to global economic growth is expected to reach around 30%. This hard-won achievement has drawn significant global attention. I would like to share some views on several specific issues that Indian friends are concerned about.



Xu Feihong  
Chinese Ambassador  
to India

**What drives China's economic growth?**  
In 2025, China's economy moved forward, driven by consumption, exports, and investment, but its internal structure is undergoing a profound and positive transformation.

Domestic demand is the primary engine of China's growth. In 2025, final consumption expenditure contributed 52% to economic growth. Some people may conclude that China has "insufficient consumption" simply because the prices of Chinese goods and services are significantly lower than the global average. In fact, measured by internationally accepted standards of physical consumption, China ranks among the world's top countries in terms of total basic consumption. Among these, the average number of mobile phones owned per person is 1.28, which is among the world's leading levels. The average daily protein intake is 124.6 grams, which is higher than that of the U.S. and Japan. The average annual vegetable consumption is 109.8 kilograms, the highest in the world.

China's exports of goods and services demonstrated strong resilience, contributing 32.7% to economic growth and becoming a key booster. Despite an unfavourable international trade environment, "Made in China", especially high-tech products, were widely popular thanks to its complete industrial chain and continuously improving innovation capabilities, with high-tech

product exports growing by as much as 13.2% throughout the year. Exports to major markets such as ASEAN and the European Union maintained stable growth, effectively offsetting market fluctuations in other regions.

In contrast, gross capital formation contributed 15.3% to growth, which reveals that the Chinese economy is undergoing a difficult but necessary transformation of growth engines: from relying on investment and exports to a better model in which domestic consumption takes the lead, while export and innovation add impetus. Amid this transition, breakthroughs have been consistently achieved in cutting-edge fields such as AI, quantum technology, and brain-computer interfaces. The output of high-end manufacturing, including servers and industrial robots, has maintained rapid growth. Green industries such as renewable electricity and clean energy have flourished. These emerging drivers are clearly outlining the future course of the Chinese economy.

**Why export production capacity?**

China is not exporting "overcapacity" but rather high-quality production capacity and advanced solutions that are widely welcomed by developing countries. From the supply side, there is no "overcapacity" in China. In 2025, the capacity utilisation rate of China's above-designated size industry stood at 74.4%, equivalent to that of the U.S. and the EU across all sectors. The global competitiveness of Chinese products stems from long-term, high-intensity R&D investment, robust domestic competition, and the most comprehensive industrial system, rather than subsidies or dumping.

From the demand side, the fundamental driving force behind the booming development of China's production capacity is the real demand from the global market. Many developing countries have enhanced their infrastructure, achieved energy transition and embarked on

industrialisation by introducing high-quality Chinese equipment and technology. As the American economist Jeffrey Sachs, pointed out, the Western labeling of Chinese manufacturing as "overcapacity" is out of "jealousy."

**Mitigating India's trade deficit with China**

According to data from General Administration of Customs of China, China-India trade reached a historic high of \$155.6 billion in 2025. Many of the goods imported from China are raw materials and components that are much needed in India and that are conducive to India's economic development. This fully demonstrates the strong economic complementarity and great potential for cooperation between the two countries.

Meanwhile, India's exports to China have shown positive momentum, reaching \$19.7 billion in 2025 and marking a year-on-year increase of 9.7%. Notably, growth rates in the last two months of 2025 were particularly strong, reaching 90% and 67% respectively. China has never deliberately pursued a trade surplus and is willing not only to be the world's factory but also the world's market. China's tariff level remains low by international standards at 7.3%. The negative list for foreign investment access has been continuously shortened, and China's visa-free policy keeps expanding. In particular, the Central Economic Work Conference identified "expanding domestic demand" as the top priority for economic work in 2026. With a population of over 1.4 billion, including more than 400 million in the middle-income group, China offers huge opportunities for high-quality Indian products.

We welcome more Indian enterprises to leverage platforms such as the China International Import Expo to bring more premium Indian products to the Chinese market, transforming trade deficits into cooperative surpluses. By moving towards each other, we can share dividends of development and jointly create a brighter future for Asia.

It provides new opportunities for China-India cooperation

## Static Linkages

- Consumption-led growth and Keynesian demand theory.
- Trade deficit vs welfare gains from imports.
- Capacity utilisation as indicator of over/under production.
- Global Value Chains (GVCs) and intermediate goods trade.
- Comparative advantage and economic complementarity.
- South-South trade cooperation model.
- Balance of Payments adjustment mechanism.

## Critical Analysis

### Positives

- Consumption-driven growth improves economic resilience.
- High-tech exports strengthen technological leadership.
- Affordable Chinese inputs aid Indian manufacturing and infrastructure.
- Large Chinese market offers export potential for Indian goods.

### Concerns

- Persistent India-China trade deficit.
- Strategic dependence on Chinese intermediates.
- Market access barriers for Indian pharma, IT, agri-products.
- Risk of deindustrialisation for MSMEs.

## Way Forward

- Diversify India's export basket to China.
- Improve standards compliance (SPS/TBT).
- Align PLI with export competitiveness.
- Reduce critical import dependence.
- Use trade diplomacy for market access.
- Strengthen domestic manufacturing ecosystems.

## KEY HIGHLIGHTS

### Context

- China's GDP crossed 140 trillion yuan (~USD 20 trillion) in 2025 with 5% growth despite global slowdown.
- China claims ~30% contribution to global economic growth.
- Statement addresses concerns related to:
  - Growth drivers
  - Export "overcapacity"
  - Trade imbalance with India
- Relevant amid global trade fragmentation, protectionism, and supply-chain reorientation.

### Key Exam-Oriented Facts

- Growth composition (2025):
  - Final Consumption Expenditure: 52%
  - Net Exports: 32.7%
  - Gross Capital Formation: 15.3%
- Structural shift:
  - From investment-led to consumption-led growth.
- Exports:
  - High-tech exports growth: 13.2%
  - Key markets: ASEAN, EU.
- Industrial capacity utilisation:
  - 74.4% (comparable to US/EU).
- India-China trade (2025):
  - Total trade: USD 155.6 billion
  - India's exports: USD 19.7 billion (+9.7% YoY).
- Tariff level:
  - China's average tariff: 7.3%.
- Demographics:
  - Middle-income group: 400+ million.

## Mature and pragmatic

India did well to negotiate a fair deal with the European Union

The free trade agreement (FTA) between India and the European Union (EU) is significant not just on account of the sizes of the economies involved, but also because it showcases Indian negotiators' skill and maturity when dealing with a powerful counterparty. India has managed to negotiate favourable terms in each of the previous eight FTAs of the last four years or so, but those were with much smaller economies or groupings. For context, the other eight FTAs together accounted for about 16% of India's total trade in 2024-25, while the EU itself accounted for nearly 12%. Under the latest deal, the EU will drop tariffs on 99.5% of the items that India exports, with most going down to zero immediately upon implementation. India has given tariff concessions on 97.5% of Europe's exports. Both sides did well to address issues that were previously intractable. India ensured that strategic agricultural sectors and dairy were excluded from the deal. The EU too managed to exclude several of its sensitive agricultural sectors. What stood out was how the two sides arrived at a workable solution on automobiles. It had been disagreements over auto and auto parts that had derailed negotiations in 2013. The quota-based system now arrived at not only protects India's domestic manufacturers at the lower end of the price band, but also provides a big opportunity for Europe's luxury carmakers. Similarly, the quota-based wine tariffs not only give French wine-makers an opportunity – a fervent demand on their part – but also provide protections to India's burgeoning domestic industry. Such a mature and pragmatic approach to persistent hindrances is the way large economies must negotiate with each other. This is further illustrated by the mobility, defence, and technology agreements that were signed separately.

That said, there are some concerns. India could not negotiate any concessions under the Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM). At the moment, this tariff applies to only six products, but is designed to include all industrial goods in some years. The upside is that CBAM applies to all countries equally, and India has done well to negotiate a deal wherein any concession granted to a third country would automatically apply to it as well. Second, if India is to attract foreign investors looking to take advantage of a cheaper export route to Europe, it will have to quickly implement reforms that encourage large-scale manufacturing. Finally, with the FTA document to be translated into 27 European languages before it can be cleared by each country and finally the European Parliament, actual implementation will likely take a while. India must push for as speedy a clearing process as possible. Otherwise, the gains so painstakingly bargained for will be too late to offset the U.S. tariff pain.

## KEY HIGHLIGHTS

### Context

- India concluded a comprehensive FTA with the European Union after negotiations spanning ~19 years (since 2007).
- EU accounts for ~12% of India's total trade; other 8 recent FTAs together ~16%.
- Deal assumes significance amid rising global protectionism and US tariff pressures.

### Key Features of the Agreement

- EU to eliminate tariffs on 99.5% of Indian exports (majority at zero duty immediately).
- India to grant tariff concessions on 97.5% of EU exports.
- Sensitive sector protection:
  - India excluded agriculture and dairy.
  - EU excluded select sensitive farm products.
- Automobiles:
  - Quota-based tariff liberalisation.
  - Protects India's mass-market manufacturers.
  - Market access for EU luxury carmakers.
- Wine & spirits:
  - Quota-based tariff cuts.

- Balances EU export interest and Indian domestic industry protection.
- Parallel agreements signed on mobility, defence cooperation, and technology.

### Strategic & Economic Significance

- Largest and most complex FTA negotiated by India with a developed bloc.
- Reflects India's shift from defensive to calibrated trade liberalisation.
- Enhances India's credibility as a rule-based trade partner.
- Diversifies export markets amid US-China trade uncertainties.
- Strengthens India's position in global value chains (GVCs).

### Static Linkages

- FTAs permitted under Article XXIV of GATT (WTO).
- Tariffs and quotas are instruments of trade policy under customs regulation.
- Preferential Trade Agreements vs MFN principle.
- Quota-based liberalisation used to protect infant industries.
- Trade-environment interface and climate-linked trade measures.

### Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM)

- No India-specific exemption secured.
- CBAM currently applies to 6 sectors (steel, cement, aluminium, fertiliser, electricity, hydrogen).
- Designed to expand to all industrial goods.
- Non-discriminatory: applies uniformly to all trading partners.
- India secured automatic extension of concessions granted to any third country.

### Challenges / Concerns

- CBAM may increase compliance costs for Indian exporters.
- Stringent EU standards (SPS, TBT, ESG norms) may hurt MSMEs.
- Implementation delay due to:
  - Translation into 27 EU languages.
  - Ratification by national parliaments and the European Parliament.
- Risk of India becoming an assembly base without deep manufacturing reforms.

### Way Forward

- Accelerate reforms in:
  - Land, labour, logistics, power.
- Align manufacturing with EU sustainability and carbon norms.
- Build domestic capacity in:
  - Carbon accounting
  - Green technologies
- Support MSMEs through technology upgradation and standards compliance.
- Push for early ratification to counter short-term export shocks.

# Abysmal failure

The Kolkata warehouse fire is a telling indictment of the State government

When 14 people died in a massive hotel fire in the Burrabazar area of central Kolkata last April, it seemed that devastating fires had become a disturbingly routine phenomenon in the city. The tragedy on the eve of this year's Republic Day, in which 11 are reported dead so far, has only confirmed that inference. Seventeen missing persons complaints have been filed, and the toll is likely to climb as agencies clear the area. The bodies are charred beyond recognition and DNA tests would be required to identify them. The dead were mostly migrant workers from faraway places such as Purba Medinipur and the makeshift warehouses were their night shelters. A year ago, the hotel accident highlighted the poor fire safety aspects of inner cities of India's metropolises. This time, the devastating fire broke out in two large warehouses stretched over 12,000 sq. ft. in Anandpur. The State fire department has declared that the warehouses were not approved for fire safety and had no fire safety features. One of the outlets belonged to a popular momo eatery chain and the second to a local "decorator". Decorators help furnish events such as weddings and may have stored fabrics, chairs, and various accessories. Those who escaped the fire reported foul smells and thick smoke that can be a quick killer. The fire raged until Tuesday afternoon, requiring 12 engines to put it out. This indicates the extent of storage of flammable material and the lack of attention given to constructing the structures in a way that would facilitate efficient firefighting.

The State agencies that generally amp up their visibility after such accidents have been reticent. Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee, who typically rushes to such spots, has not visited the site yet. Social media channels of State agencies have been silent. It may well be that the ruling Trinamool Congress does not want to draw too much attention to the tragedy just ahead of Assembly elections. A compensation of ₹10 lakh per person has been announced. So far, not even a perfunctory noise has been made regarding the larger issues – the cause of the accident and how such tragedies can be avoided in the future. That such large unapproved structures with little attention to fire safety had come up at an ecologically sensitive area in Kolkata indicates the abysmal state of civic administration in what used to be the foremost city of India.

## KEY HIGHLIGHTS

### Context

- Deadly fire in unauthorised warehouses in Kolkata (Anandpur area) around Republic Day.
- Over 11 deaths, many migrant workers; casualties likely to rise.
- Warehouses lacked fire safety approval and basic firefighting systems.
- Incident follows Burrabazar hotel fire (2024) → indicates recurring urban fire disasters.
- Structures located in an ecologically sensitive area.

### Key Issues Highlighted

- Proliferation of illegal commercial structures in urban areas.
- Storage of highly inflammable materials without safety norms.
- Use of warehouses as informal night shelters by migrant labourers.
- Toxic smoke inhalation as major cause of death (not burns).
- Weak enforcement by urban local bodies and fire departments.

- Absence of preventive action despite past fire tragedies.

### Static Linkages

- Rapid urbanisation outpacing regulatory capacity.
- Informal economy and informal housing nexus.
- Disaster risk increases due to regulatory invisibility.
- Fire disasters classified as man-made disasters.
- Urban wetlands and sensitive zones vulnerable to encroachment.
- Right to Life includes right to safe living and working conditions.

### Governance and Administrative Concerns

- Poor coordination between:
  - Urban Local Bodies
  - Fire Services
  - Environmental authorities
- Reactive governance focused on compensation, not prevention.
- Political-administrative accountability deficit.
- Weak compliance monitoring and inspection mechanisms.

### Disaster Management Perspective

- Failure of prevention and mitigation stages of disaster management cycle.
- Emphasis remains on response and relief, not preparedness.
- Inadequate urban risk mapping and safety audits.
- Fire safety norms exist but implementation gap persists.

### Social Dimensions

- Migrant workers forced into unsafe shelters due to:
  - Lack of affordable housing
  - Informal employment conditions
- Urban planning largely excludes migrant populations.
- Disproportionate impact of disasters on vulnerable groups.

### Environmental Dimension

- Illegal constructions in ecologically sensitive zones.
- Violation of land-use planning norms.
- Increased disaster risk due to environmental degradation.

### Way Forward

- Mandatory periodic fire safety audits for all commercial buildings.
- Linking fire safety clearance with:
  - Building permits
  - Trade licenses
- GIS-based identification of unauthorised structures.
- Strengthening capacity of Urban Local Bodies.
- Dedicated urban migrant housing policy.
- Fixing accountability of officials for regulatory failures.
- Public disclosure of fire safety compliance status.
- Community-level fire awareness and evacuation planning.

# Urban is the new political, better cities need good politics



AMRITA SHAH

**L**AST MONTH marked 20 years since the launch of the Jawaharlal Nehru National Urban Renewal Mission (JNNURM). The anniversary of one of the earliest in a slew of 21st-century Indian urban regeneration programmes passed by unnoticed, in contrast to the extensive coverage of the recent municipal corporation elections in Mumbai. While Indians have always been fascinated by elections, the predictable hoopla around them has turned Indian politics into a roll call of adversarial encounters.

This article is an attempt to break out of the stranglehold of current politics and the news cycle to stretch the framework of what we understand as political. I am referring to the important phenomenon of urbanisation.

Since 1980, the world has been on an unprecedented drive towards urbanisation with 55 per cent of the world's population now inhabiting urban spaces. Prodded by the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, post-liberalisation India, too, initiated a series of urban upgradation policies. The 1993 Mega-cities scheme, JNNURM (2005), the 2015 Atal Mission for Rejuvenation and Urban Transformation (AMRUT) and the Smart Cities Mission (SCM) were landmarks in the process.

From 1990 when it comprised 25 per cent of India's population, the urban population has risen to a third and is expected to rise to 40 per cent by the end of the decade.

This is a dramatic reorientation for a primarily agrarian society and a country famously said by Gandhi to live "in her villages". How has this shift affected the national consciousness? What has been the impact on our social mores, on our youth? On our aspirations? On phenomena such as, for instance, communal violence which is associated with urban spaces?

These are just a few of the many significant questions thrown up by the urban shift that need attention. But the shift has even more significant political implications.

Over 500 million Indians live in towns and cities today. But it is not only its substantial size that gives the urban population an increasing influence in the national scenario. It is the adoption of the urban as an ideal that gives the city its surging power. I am not talking about

numbers and election outcomes but about the power of the conceptual.

To understand this better, one needs to first understand how the city has evolved. Once perceived as simultaneously a site of economic opportunity and a space of progressive possibilities, working-class empowerment and bourgeois refinement, the city has acquired a more singular purpose today. The primary impulse shaping the contemporary city according to urban scholars is the goal of attracting global capital, either as investment or as circulating capital from mobile populations. This has given rise to a model adopted by cities, regardless of size, featuring gentrified colonies, privileged business enclaves, extravagant urban beautification projects, new highways for cars, elite cultural festivals and so on. The purchase of rural land by non-residents has further spread the reach of the urbanite.

This top-down approach, favouring the wealthy, the cosmopolitan and the entrepreneurial at the cost of other parts of the citizenry is accompanied by a brutal urgency and normalised as an essential feature of the prevailing economic model.

The Nehruvian vision of dams and heavy industry, which displaced communities of tribals and farmers, has been succeeded by the glass tower-and-highway, corporate-friendly path taken by post-liberalisation India. The latter has a greater reach and a more sweeping mandate that is opening up new fault lines closer to home.

In the last few weeks alone, we have seen agitations against the commercial exploitation of the Aravalli hills, concern over the Great Nicobar Island Development Project and complaints of poor pay and endangerment by gig workers against service aggregators.

The project of urbanising India is not about a material transformation alone but about a new political consensus privileging market-led development that in turn reshuffles existing priorities and redefines the relationship of the citizen to the state, perpetuating a new understanding of democracy. The urban is the new political and needs to be reckoned with.

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It is not only its substantial size that gives the urban population an increasing influence in the national scenario. It is the adoption of the urban as an ideal that gives the city its surging power

- Urban planning increasingly driven by:
  - Real estate
  - Infrastructure-led growth
  - Global capital flows

## Static Linkages

- 74th Constitutional Amendment Act
- Urban Local Bodies and decentralisation
- Fiscal federalism and conditional grants
- Right to life: housing, livelihood, environment
- Sustainable development and inclusive growth
- Environmental governance and land-use planning

## Critical Analysis

### Pros

- Improved urban infrastructure coverage
- Cities as engines of economic growth
- Professionalisation of urban governance

### Cons

- Elite-centric urban development and gentrification
- Marginalisation of informal sector and migrants
- Environmental degradation of sensitive regions
- Weak fiscal and functional autonomy of ULBs
- Reduced democratic participation in urban planning

## Way Forward

- Strengthen fiscal and functional autonomy of ULBs
- Shift from project-based to people-centric urban planning
- Integrate environmental safeguards in urban missions
- Formalise and protect gig and informal workers
- Enhance participatory mechanisms (ward committees, area sabhas)
- Align urban growth with climate resilience and SDGs

## KEY HIGHLIGHTS

### Context of the News

- Completion of 20 years of Jawaharlal Nehru National Urban Renewal Mission (JNNURM).
- Renewed focus on urbanisation as a political, economic and social force.
- Urban issues gaining prominence amid environmental protests and labour agitations.
- Marks transition from welfare-oriented planning to market-led urban development.

### Key Points

- India's urban population:
  - ~25% in 1991
  - ~34% at present
  - Projected ~40% by 2030 (UN DESA, Census projections)
- Urban areas contribute ~65% of India's GDP (Economic Survey).
- JNNURM (2005–2014):
  - First large-scale urban reform-linked funding programme
  - Focus on infrastructure + governance reforms
- Subsequent missions:
  - AMRUT: basic services (water, sewerage, green spaces)
  - Smart Cities Mission: technology, PPPs, investment attraction

# Birds, ants, trees are nature's workers, let's listen to them



AREFA  
TEHSIN



The Aravallis are old. Old enough to know better than to expect gratitude. Older than the Himalayas, older than our arguments. The low hills with no interest in grandeur. That, perhaps, is their biggest mistake

Tehsin is a Colombo-based author and environmentalist

ALONELY as a tree, someone recently remarked during a conversation. But is a tree — rooted, breathing, hosting entire worlds — lonely, I wondered. And if it is not lonely, then are we? Or, is loneliness a modern myth?

There are growing scientific theories and philosophical explorations on shared consciousness. The concept has existed in religions and indigenous cultures for centuries — the non-dualism of Advaita Vedanta, the interbeing and Sunyata of Buddhism, the Wahdat al-Wujud (Unity of Being) that is one of the core ideas of Sufism. I distrust anything that sounds too cosmic, too New Age, too eager to comfort. Shared consciousness? Universal fields binding all beings? I am tempted to roll my eyes and ask for peer-reviewed journals. But once in a while it does make sense. The recent debate on the Aravallis — on whether low hills are dispensable — made me question my scepticism.

The Aravallis around Udaipur have been an extension of who I am: The weekly family outing to their streams, the summers spent in their forests. The Aravallis are old. Old enough to know better than to expect gratitude. Older than the Himalayas, older than our arguments. The low hills with no interest in grandeur. That, perhaps, is their biggest mistake. Existence in the new world order must justify itself constantly. The bigger a building or statue, the greater the declaration of pride. The Aravallis stand apart from this attitude. They have been ecological shock absorbers for a civilisation riding without brakes. What makes the Aravallis especially tragic is that they were never asking for reverence. No temples on every peak. No pilgrimage circuits. Just the courtesy of being left alone.

We are told that development and ecology can coexist. To understand why this is such a fragile lie, take one single tree. It is a full-fledged republic. On its trunk, creepers climb with breathless ambition. They slowly tighten their grip, whispering sweet nothings about "mutual support". In time, the tree can barely breathe. This is "strategic partnership". Then there are parasites like fungi, insects and borers. They don't even pretend affection. They hollow the tree from inside until it collapses during an unremarkable storm. Sometimes, like institutions. Sometimes, like you and me. A tree also shelters birds. These are your opinion-makers. They conduct dawn-to-dusk debates, and occasionally forget why they started shouting. Lower down, ants march in disciplined lines, carrying crumbs 10 times their size. Nobody interviews them. These are your workers. Delivery executives cycling through heat waves while we argue about nationalism in air-conditioned rooms.

So how many worlds exist in the Aravallis? Thousands? Millions? Each hillock hosting overlapping republics: Some noisy, some ancient, some newly arrived. Leopard corridors crossing human boundaries. Aquifers remembering rain from decades ago. Countless trees, rocks, streams, animals.

Loneliness, I think now, is a symptom of the disconnection we manufacture ourselves. What if we feel increasingly isolated because we are actively severing links with land, with non-human life, with memory? The Aravallis are custodians. And like all custodians, they are noticed only when something breaks. The tree was never lonely. We were. And in treating parts of our living world as dispensable, we are not asserting power, only announcing how profoundly alone we have chosen to be.

- Urban expansion and infrastructure projects.
- Reclassification of forest land.
- Weak enforcement of environmental regulations.

## Static Linkages

- Physical Geography:
  - Fold mountains and erosion-resistant ancient ranges (NCERT Geography).
- Environment & Ecology:
  - Ecosystem services: regulating, supporting and provisioning services.
  - Habitat fragmentation and biodiversity loss.
- Constitutional Provisions:
  - Article 48A – Protection and improvement of environment.
  - Article 51A(g) – Fundamental duty to protect natural environment.
- Environmental Laws:
  - Forest (Conservation) Act, 1980.
  - Environment (Protection) Act, 1986.
- Ethics:
  - Environmental stewardship and inter-generational equity.

## KEY HIGHLIGHTS

### Context of the News

- Recent public and legal debates regarding developmental activities, mining, urbanisation and dilution of protections in the Aravalli Range.
- Concerns raised over treating low hills and forested landscapes as dispensable in the name of economic growth.
- Highlights broader issue of ecological ethics, sustainable development and human-nature disconnect.

### Key Points

- Aravallis are among the oldest fold mountain ranges in the world, older than the Himalayas.
- Geographical spread: Rajasthan, Haryana, Delhi NCR, Gujarat.
- Key ecological functions:
  - Acts as a barrier against desertification from the Thar Desert.
  - Major groundwater recharge zone for north-west India.
  - Supports biodiversity and wildlife corridors.
  - Regulates local climate and rainfall patterns.
- Major threats:
  - Illegal mining and quarrying.

## Critical Analysis

### Significance

- Long-term ecological security for arid and semi-arid regions.
- Ensures water availability through aquifer recharge.
- Supports biodiversity and ecological balance.
- Acts as a natural climate buffer.

### Challenges

- Development-centric planning ignores cumulative ecological impacts.
- Economic valuation of ecosystems remains weak.
- Fragmented governance across states.
- Low public visibility reduces political priority.

### Ethical Dimension

- Anthropocentric development model marginalises non-human life.
- Conflict between short-term economic gains and long-term sustainability.

## Way Forward

- Declare comprehensive Eco-Sensitive Zones (ESZs) across Aravalli landscapes.
- Shift from project-based clearance to landscape-level environmental assessment.
- Integrate ecosystem service valuation in development planning.
- Strengthen monitoring and enforcement against illegal mining.
- Promote nature-based solutions in urban and regional planning.
- Enhance public participation and local stewardship.

# UGC regulations force a needed reckoning

THE UNIVERSITY Grants Commission's new regulations against discrimination in higher education — the UGC (Promotion of Equity in Higher Education Institutions) Regulations, 2026 — are significant and welcome. They have sparked protests on the grounds of overreach and there are accusations that it ignores upper-caste concerns. Yet, the context that produces them shows why they are much needed. UGC data provided to the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Education in 2025 shows that over the last five years, the number of reported complaints of caste-based discrimination on educational campuses has gone up exponentially — from 173 in 2019-20 to 378 in 2023-24. It makes the regulations, which replace those from 2012, both urgent and necessary. If the 2012 regulations officially recognised social discrimination, the new ones call out caste discrimination in classrooms by its name and move the needle by institutionalising mechanisms of redress.

Certainly, the framework they put in place is not beyond critique. Despite Union Education Minister Dharmendra Pradhan's assurance that misuse will "not be allowed against anybody", there will be challenges. The inclusion of Other Backward Classes (OBC), while welcome, will need to be addressed with rigour. Concerns have also been raised about the possibility of false complaints of discrimination, and over the feasibility of timelines prescribed for inquiries, which may strain under-resourced institutions. The threat of punitive action for non-compliance, including derecognition, has stoked anxieties. For the regulations to succeed, checks and balances and safeguards against misuse, and a commitment to due process, will be critical.

The backlash against the regulations, however, cannot mask the reality that had forced an overdue recognition in the Mandal moment. The fact is that privilege reproduces itself through access, language and cultural capital, that inequality is often due to historical exclusion. Ever since the implementation of affirmative action, classrooms have become more diverse. But caste prejudice still operates in covert and less recognisable registers. The UGC's new regulations are not perfect, but they force a reckoning with that reality. Addressing entrenched inequities always provokes discomfort. But pretending they no longer exist would mean shirking the constitutional obligation of equality for all.

## KEY HIGHLIGHTS

### Context of the News

- University Grants Commission notified UGC (Promotion of Equity in Higher Education Institutions) Regulations, 2026.
- Regulations replace the UGC Regulations on Curbing the Menace of Ragging and Social Discrimination, 2012.
- Triggered by rising cases of caste-based discrimination in higher education institutions.
- UGC data to Parliamentary Standing Committee on Education (2025):
  - Complaints increased from 173 (2019–20) to 378 (2023–24).
- Regulations faced protests citing overreach, misuse, and institutional capacity concerns.

### Key Points

- Explicit recognition of caste-based discrimination (earlier only "social discrimination").
- Mandatory Equity Committees / Grievance Redressal Mechanisms in HEIs.
- Coverage extended to SCs, STs, and OBCs.
- Time-bound inquiry and disposal of complaints.
- Provision for penal action, including derecognition for non-compliance.

- Focus on discrimination in classrooms, hostels, evaluation, and administration.
- Institutional accountability shifted from advisory to regulatory enforcement.

### Static Linkages

- Equality before law.
- Prohibition of discrimination on grounds of caste.
- Abolition of untouchability.
- Special provisions for socially and educationally backward classes.
- State obligation to promote educational interests of weaker sections.
- Doctrine of substantive equality.
- Natural justice and due process.
- Regulatory powers of statutory bodies.
- Constitutional morality in governance.

### Critical Analysis

#### Strengths

- Addresses structural and covert caste discrimination.
- Aligns higher education governance with constitutional mandates.
- Moves from symbolic recognition to institutional enforcement.
- Responds to empirical evidence of rising complaints.

#### Concerns

- Risk of false or frivolous complaints.
- Capacity constraints in smaller and under-funded institutions.
- Strict timelines may affect quality of inquiry.
- Fear of excessive centralisation and reduced autonomy.
- Need for clarity on procedural safeguards.

### Way Forward

- Clear procedural safeguards and appeal mechanisms.
- Capacity building of institutions through training and funding.
- Phased implementation with graded penalties.
- Independent review and audit of equity committees.
- Sensitisation programmes alongside regulatory enforcement.
- Periodic public disclosure of compliance data by UGC.

# Baramati tragedy, churn in its wake

**T**HE TRAGIC death of Ajit Pawar, Deputy Chief Minister of Maharashtra, in an air crash Wednesday leaves an empty space, bringing to an abrupt end the career of a politician of his time. As part of different parties — from Congress to the Sharad Pawar-founded NCP to the NCP splinter he steered into the BJP-led NDA — and as six-time Deputy CM and eight-term MLA, Ajit Pawar embodied the dominant strand of a pragmatic politics that criss-crosses ideological red lines, while keeping alive a direct connect to the ground. His death also forecloses the possibilities that still lay ahead, perhaps, for the man who wanted to be chief minister. The churn in Maharashtra that began with the splitting of the NCP and Shiv Sena into two parties each, and that rearranged the two main coalitions, MVA and Mahayuti, is not yet done. Municipal polls nearly a fortnight ago saw the two NCPs join hands for the civic elections in Pune and Pimpri-Chinchwad, amid talk of tensions within the Mahayuti.

From the time he entered politics, getting elected to the Lok Sabha in 1991 from Baramati, a seat he later vacated for Sharad Pawar to settle down in state politics, Ajit Pawar earned a reputation, amid allegations of corruption, as an administrator who got things done, and as a finance minister who underlined fiscal discipline. He was also the politician whose unvarnished bluntness and impatient streak courted controversy — be it his swearing-in as Devendra Fadnis's deputy, after the 2019 assembly polls, in a hurried early-morning ceremony in Raj Bhavan to form a government that lasted 80 hours, or his comments during a period of acute water shortage that were seen to be off-key. Power came to him as a family bequest, but at the same time, as uncle Sharad Pawar started spending more time in national politics in Delhi, he moulded it in his own image in western Maharashtra's sugar belt. "Ajit *dada*" kept the organisation intact, engaged with milk unions and sugar cooperatives and coordinated with other players and parties. When the NCP split in 2023, the majority of NCP workers saw their future with him. His faction's performance in the 2024 assembly election seemed to cement his claim to leading the real NCP.

With his premature exit from the political field, Ajit Pawar joins leaders like Madhavrao Scindia, Y S Rajasekhara Reddy, Pramod Mahajan, and more recently, Vijay Rupani, all gone in their political prime. In a party and polity dominated by family and personality, he leaves behind the question of the future of the NCP. His going will sharpen the tumult in the fluid politics of his state, his party — and his family.

## KEY HIGHLIGHTS

### Context of the News

- Sudden demise of Ajit Pawar, senior leader of the Nationalist Congress Party (NCP) and six-time Deputy Chief Minister of Maharashtra.
- Event occurs amid continuing political realignment following the split of NCP (2023) and Shiv Sena (2022).
- Raises questions on coalition stability, leadership succession, and party legitimacy in Maharashtra politics.

### Key Points

- Eight-time MLA; represented Baramati region, a cooperative-dominated political economy.
- Known for administrative decisiveness and emphasis on fiscal discipline as Finance Minister.
- Central figure in 2019 Raj Bhavan swearing-in episode and later realignment with BJP-led NDA.
- Maintained organisational control through cooperatives, sugar mills, and rural institutions.
- Majority of NCP legislators aligned with his faction after the 2023 split.
- His death creates leadership vacuum within NCP and uncertainty in Mahayuti coalition.

### Static Linkages

- Political parties recognised under Election Symbols (Reservation and Allotment) Order, 1968.
- Party splits adjudicated by Election Commission of India, not the Speaker.
- Anti-defection governed by Tenth Schedule of the Constitution.
- Coalition politics linked to multiparty system and federal structure.
- Cooperative institutions historically influence state-level political mobilisation.

### Critical Analysis

#### Strengths

- Strong grassroots mobilisation through cooperative networks.
- Administrative efficiency and fiscal management experience.
- Ability to navigate complex coalition politics.

#### Concerns

- Weakening of ideological politics due to frequent realignments.
- Personalised leadership limiting institutional party growth.
- Allegations of corruption impacting public trust.
- Dynastic influence affecting internal democracy.

### Way Forward

- Strengthen internal democracy within political parties.
- Reform anti-defection law to prevent opportunistic splits.
- Reduce politicisation of cooperative institutions.
- Promote transparent leadership succession mechanisms.
- Encourage ideology-based rather than personality-centric politics.