

# DAILY NEWSP APER ANALYSIS

**DATE - 06/02/2026**

**SOURCE  
THE HINDU & INDIAN EXPRESS**

**CHANAKYA IAS ACADEMY  
SECTOR 25 CHANDIGARH**

# Reduction in air pollution isn't a victory, but a positive signal'

Development and employment in NCR, home to eight crore people, must be balanced with the need for clean air, says Central pollution panel official

## INTERVIEW

**Tarun Kumar Pithode**

Nikhil M. Babu

**T**arun Kumar Pithode, Member Secretary of the Commission for Air Quality Management in the National Capital Region and Adjoining Areas, says there is a shift of focus from farm fires to the transport sector when it comes to tackling pollution. Edited excerpts:

**How do you assess anti-pollution efforts this winter season?**

Actions taken by the commission and other stakeholders have brought positive changes that are evident. One of the biggest



The CAQM Member Secretary said the transport sector, industries and road dust are the panel's focus areas.

changes has been in the practice of stubble burning. The number of farm fires has declined.

We have not seen many days with an AQI [air quality index] beyond 450. That gives us positive signals.

**What worked?**

We conducted numerous inspections of industrial facilities and construction

sites. We also acted against industries in non-conforming areas, violating norms.

**What is the target for reducing air pollution?**

Over the next five years, we can work hard to achieve a significant reduction. But we don't want to spell out a specific target.

**Why has the issue not been solved despite two SC-monitored panels – the CAQM, constituted in 2020, and its predecessor, founded in 1998 – working on it?**

Eight crore people live in the NCR, which is more than the population of many countries. We must strive for a fine balance between concerns such as development and employment, and the need to keep the air clean.

Many gains have been made over the years, but some of those have been offset by the spike in population and vehicles.

**What are the main challenges in reducing pollution?**

Ensuring a concerted effort involving every stakeholder, from the person who sweeps the road to the most senior bureaucrat. It is a humongous effort. Data suggest a trend of reduction in pollution. But we are not claiming it as a victory. It is an encouraging trend that shows reducing air pollution is possible.

**Initially, there was a lot of focus on stubble burning and less on the transport sector. Will that change now?**

There has already been a

shift of focus. We're focusing on the public transportation system and controlling vehicular emissions. Road dust and industries are the other focus areas.

**The CAQM said 2025 was the cleanest year in Delhi in eight years, except for 2020. However, there are allegations of 'data manipulation' at air quality measuring stations by spraying water near the sensors.**

We receive daily AQI data from the CPCB (Central Pollution Control Board). The CPCB and the Delhi Pollution Control Committee maintain the air quality monitoring stations in Delhi. They can better explain the functioning of these stations.

**A question has also**

been raised about the reliability of claims of a reduction in stubble burning, with reported instances of such activities being carried out in ways that evade satellites. Also, as per official data, the burnt areas increased in Punjab and Haryana in 2023 and again in 2024 in Punjab.

We don't rely only on stubble burning data. Data on burnt areas also show a reduction in Punjab and Haryana. I'm not going into specific data.

Yes, the reduction in 'burnt area' is not as significant as the 'fire counts', which indicates that there have been evasions (by farmers).

However, there is regular feedback from our ground teams about a decrease in stubble burning.

- Structural Constraints
  - NCR population ~8 crore.
  - Rapid urbanisation and vehicle growth offset pollution-control gains.

## KEY HIGHLIGHTS

### Context of the News

- The Commission for Air Quality Management (CAQM) has highlighted a policy shift in air pollution control strategy in Delhi-NCR, from primary focus on stubble burning to transport-sector emissions.
- CAQM noted that recent winter seasons have recorded fewer 'severe' AQI days, indicating partial improvement.
- The statement comes amid debates on data credibility, effectiveness of stubble-burning controls, and rising vehicular pollution.

### Key Points

- Air Quality Trends
  - Fewer days with AQI > 450 (Severe category).
  - 2025 projected as the cleanest year in eight years (excluding 2020).
- Stubble Burning
  - Decline in fire counts in Punjab and Haryana.
  - Burnt-area reduction less significant → indicates evasive practices.
  - Ground-level verification suggests improvement.
- Transport Sector
  - Vehicles now a major contributor to PM2.5 in Delhi-NCR.
  - Focus on public transport strengthening and vehicular emission control.
- Regulatory Measures
  - Inspections of industries and construction sites.
  - Action against industries in non-conforming zones.
  - AQI data sourced from Central Pollution Control Board (CPCB).

### Static Linkages

- National Ambient Air Quality Standards (NAAQS).
- Air (Prevention and Control of Pollution) Act, 1981.
- Graded Response Action Plan (GRAP).
- Sustainable Development principle.
- Negative externalities and state regulation.
- Urban transport emissions as a key pollution source.

### Critical Analysis

#### Strengths

- Shift to transport emissions reflects updated source apportionment studies.
- Decline in extreme AQI days shows policy impact.
- Stronger enforcement against industrial violations.

#### Limitations

- No time-bound pollution reduction targets.
- Data credibility concerns weaken public trust.
- Fragmented Centre-State-Local coordination.
- Continued stubble-burning evasions.

### Way Forward

- Set sector-wise emission reduction targets aligned with NAAQS.
- Strengthen public transport and last-mile connectivity.
- Expand electric mobility and stricter vehicular emission norms.
- Promote in-situ crop residue management with incentives.
- Independent auditing of air-quality monitoring stations.
- Adopt airshed-based regional governance.

# SC flags States' preference for 'ad-hoc' DGP appointments

CJ-led Bench says States are opting for 'Acting' police chiefs of their choice in violation of 2006 verdict, directs UPSC to approach top court if process for appointing regular DGPs is delayed

Krishnamadas Rajagopal  
NEW DELHI

The Supreme Court on Thursday observed that States were avoiding appointment of regular Directors-General of Police (DGPs) with a fixed tenure of two years, opting instead for "Acting" police chiefs of their choice in violation of a 20-year-old top court judgment.

The court, in a 2006 judgment in the Prakash Singh case, had made it clear that the office of DGP should be divested from political or other external pressures and cautioned governments against mixing politics and law enforcement.

It had invoked its extraordinary powers under Article 42 to direct that DGPs must be selected by States from among the three senior-most and meritorious officers empanelled by the Union Public Service Commission (UPSC). The court had thrown out the "concept" of Acting DGPs. It had held that State police chiefs should have a minimum fixed tenure of two years.

There are several States which keep on delaying the submission of proposals for appointment of regular DGPs in total disregard of the direction of the Supreme Court in the Prakash Singh case... An ad-hoc arrangement by appointing an Acting DGP is preferred

SUPREME COURT



Subsequent top court orders in July 2018 and March 2019 detailed the appointments mechanism, which included the State concerned sending a proposal to the UPSC three months ahead of the retirement of the incumbent DGP. The UPSC would prepare a panel of suitable officers. The State would appoint one of the empanelled officers as DGP "immediately".

On Thursday, the UPSC informed a Bench headed by Chief Justice of India Surya Kant that the reality on the ground hardly resembled the process envisaged in the 2006 judgment.

The Bench was hearing the case of Telangana, where the UPSC said the

last regular DGP retired about nine years ago, in November 2017. The State had not forwarded any proposals to initiate the appointment of a regular DGP, choosing to carry on with "Acting" DGPs. "A State will send a proposal only when it wants to appoint a certain officer," Chief Justice Kant said.

Meritorious officers

The court said many meritorious and senior police officers had lost their opportunity at becoming DGPs owing to the "inordinate delay" shown by State governments to send proposals to the UPSC. "There are several States which keep on delaying the submission of proposals for

appointment of regular DGPs in total disregard of the direction of the Supreme Court in the Prakash Singh case... An ad-hoc arrangement by appointing an Acting DGP is preferred," the Bench observed.

The court said the UPSC should not fall into ploy of the States. The Bench directed the Commission to write to States to send timely proposals for appointment of regular DGPs whenever such an occasion arises in the future. The Bench gave the UPSC liberty to approach the Supreme Court in case the States chose to ignore such communication.

"Then necessary consequences, including accountability of those responsible for the delay would follow," the court observed in its order.

Noting that there was a "serious lapse" on the part of Telangana in not sending a timely proposal to the UPSC, it gave the Commission four weeks to hold meetings and make the recommendations to the Telangana government on the appointment of a regular DGP.

- Court observations:
  - Delays deprive senior officers of legitimate career progression.
  - Ad-hoc appointments allow political interference in policing.
- Directions:
  - UPSC to proactively remind States to send proposals.
  - UPSC may approach the Supreme Court if States ignore communications.
- Telangana:
  - UPSC given four weeks to finalize recommendations for appointment of a regular DGP.

## Static Linkages

- Police and Public Order: State List (List II), Seventh Schedule.
- Article 142: Power of Supreme Court to do complete justice.
- Rule of Law: Requires impartial and politically neutral police.
- National Police Commission (1977–81):
  - Recommended fixed tenure for police leadership.
- Second Administrative Reforms Commission (ARC):
  - Emphasized insulating police from political and bureaucratic interference.

## Critical Analysis

### Advantages of SC Directions

- Strengthens institutional autonomy of police.
- Enhances professionalism and continuity in leadership.
- Reinforces constitutional morality and judicial authority.

### Issues and Challenges

- States cite federal autonomy concerns.
- Absence of statutory backing leads to weak compliance.
- Political reluctance to surrender control over police leadership.
- Over-reliance on judicial intervention instead of legislative reform.

## Way Forward

- States should enact comprehensive police reform laws in line with SC directions.
- Make fixed tenure provisions statutory and enforceable.
- Strengthen State Security Commissions and Police Establishment Boards.
- Periodic judicial review of compliance with police reform directives.
- Promote a governance culture prioritizing rule of law over political expediency.

## KEY HIGHLIGHTS

### Context of the News

- The Supreme Court observed that several States are deliberately avoiding the appointment of regular Directors-General of Police (DGPs).
- Instead, States are continuing with "Acting DGPs", violating the Prakash Singh vs Union of India (2006) judgment.
- The issue surfaced during proceedings related to Telangana, where no regular DGP has been appointed since 2017.
- The UPSC informed the Court that States selectively delay sending proposals to retain preferred officers.

### Key Points

- Prakash Singh Judgment (2006):
  - Issued under Article 142 of the Constitution.
  - Mandated:
    - Selection of DGPs from three senior-most meritorious officers empanelled by UPSC.
    - Minimum fixed tenure of two years for DGPs.
    - Rejection of the concept of "Acting DGPs".
- Subsequent Supreme Court Orders (2018 & 2019):
  - States must send proposals to UPSC three months before retirement of incumbent DGP.
  - UPSC to prepare a panel of eligible officers.
  - State must appoint one of the empanelled officers immediately.

# The fading of India's environmental jurisprudence

From its Aravalli ranges to its mangroves, India is at the same moral crossroads that Amartya Ghosh captures in *The Hungry Tide*, where the tides remember what the law chooses to forget. If environmental justice continues to be diluted in the name of development, the Constitution of India risks becoming a silent witness to ecological loss, where the consequences, like the tide itself, will return with unrelenting force.

On December 18, 2025, for non-coal mining projects, the policy of land acquisition first and Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) later was changed. Now, an EIA can be done without details about the location and area. The Supreme Court of India helped in the dilution of environmental justice by recalling the case, *Vanashakti vs Union of India* (2025) that banned retrospective environmental clearances. Within five months, a Bench led by (then) Chief Justice of India (CJI) B.R. Gavai, recalled the progressive judgment.



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Hills and ridges at a low altitude are of significant importance in the preservation of groundwater and soil stability in the semi-arid landscapes. The Aravallis are not just a cluster of isolated peaks but are a geomorphological system.

Unfortunately, the latest height-centric definition does not pay attention to crucial factors such as hydrology, biodiversity and ecological interdependence. It was due to the need to circumvent this reductionist strategy that the Court relied on the precautionary principle, in *Vellore Citizens' Welfare Forum vs Union of India and Others* (1996), rejecting the idea of any artificial limit.

The strange acceptance by the top court of the 100-metre definition, in *In Re: Issue Relating to Definition of Aravalli Hills and Ranges* (2025), marked a clear departure from the position taken in 2010. In trying to keep landforms above a predetermined elevation as the sole subject of legal protection, the Court has efficiently deprived the Aravalli ranges of any statutory and judicial protection over large portions. Such a change has serious constitutional implications.

The right to a clean and healthy environment, which has been broadly understood in the application of Article 21, is directly involved.

Article 48A, which requires the state to ensure the conservation and the enhancement of the environment, is now a hollow proclamation in instances where the interpretation of the law by the judiciary can promote rather than safeguard ecological exclusion. In fact, India's courts have been more enthusiastic about cow slaughter

(Article 48) and uniform civil code (Article 44). The discriminatory protection or preservation of some landforms in relation to their height creates an absurd classification that has no rational nexus to ecological goals. An interpretation of a law that safeguards outstanding hills and exposes the surrounding ecosystems to exploitation contravenes the principle of non-arbitrariness that forms the core of Article 14.

### A leniency

This watering down of environmental protection is seen not only in the case of the Aravallis. This has been the case over years with courts and regulatory bodies supporting development projects based on the assurance of mitigation instead of their enforcing environmental norms to the letter. This is evident in the undermining of the EIA process and the legalisation of post-facto and conditional clearances, even after the judicial warnings. In *Common Cause vs Union of India* (2017), the Court had made it clear that the legalisation of illegal mining and environmental offences could not be done after the fact, and that judicial leniency later in regard to lapses in procedure corresponds to a slow weakening of this principle.

The results of this kind of dilution are seen in cases of coastal urban ecology, especially the mangroves of Mumbai. Mangroves are multi-layered ecosystems which act as natural flood control systems, sinks of carbon and reservoirs of biodiversity. They protect against

storm surges and tidal flooding. Continued judicial authorisations to fell (and transplant) about 34,000 mangrove trees to build infrastructure are a setback. Allowing mangrove destruction on a large scale on the 'promise of compensatory afforestation' marks the destruction of ecological science and constitutional responsibility. It requires decades to develop mature mangrove ecosystems, which cannot be compensated by having a plantation drive in some other place.

Another example is the Char Dham highway project in Uttarakhand. A June 2025 study identified 81 landslide zones along the Char Dham project. The Himalayan ecosystem is one of the most delicate in the world, and the road widening project on such a large scale has grave dangers – triggering landslides and disturbing rivers.

In *Citizens for Green Doon vs Union of India* (2020), the Court recognised the ecological importance of the area, but still allowed wider roads on the grounds of strategic defence needs. The flash floods and ecological disturbances that affected Uttarakhand raise questions about the 'balancing act'. The ill-effects of the current infrastructural rush affect future generations, especially when the constitutional obligations on the government and the citizen, under Article 48A and Article 51A(g), make it clear that it is the responsibility of citizens to safeguard the environment.

### Strong players and the issue of fairness

Environmental clearances of corporations and large-scale infrastructure projects, especially those supported by serious capital in mining, highways or urban redevelopment, can pass through regulatory barriers rather easily. If there is a hearing, it is cut short, objections raised are considered obstructionist, and environmental compliance becomes a mere checklist. This casts grave doubts on procedural fairness and transparency which are contained in Article 14. When it disproportionately gives more privileges to economically strong players, environmental governance can destroy the trust of the populace and constitutional equality.

The changing stance of the judiciary in this dismal picture is crucial. Traditionally, courts have been the custodians of environmental rights as they have broadened the constitutional interpretation on issues of environmental damage. Judgments such as *M.C. Mehta vs Kamal Nath and Ors.* (1996) held that the public trust doctrine was deeply rooted in the belief that natural resources belonged to the state, were held in the trust of the people and could not be sold to be exploited privately. When such definitions or clearances are approved by the courts to promote the degradation of the environment, they basically go against the court's own jurisprudence. The Green Bench of the Supreme Court must sit regularly. Similar Benches must be set up in all the High Courts. Ease of business should not make destruction of the environment easy.

*The views expressed are personal*

- Aravalli Ecosystem:
  - Aravallis act as barriers against desertification, aid groundwater recharge, and regulate regional climate.
  - Earlier judicial interpretation treated Aravallis as a continuous geomorphological system, not merely height-based hills.
- Mangroves:
  - Classified under CRZ-I as ecologically sensitive areas.
  - Provide coastal protection, carbon sequestration, and biodiversity support.
- Himalayan Ecology:
  - The Himalayas are geologically young and highly prone to landslides.
  - Infrastructure expansion increases disaster vulnerability.
- Economic Survey 2025–26:
  - Critically noted environmental risks arising from unregulated infrastructure and private investment.

## KEY HIGHLIGHTS

### Context of the News

- In December 2025, the Union Government modified the procedure for non-coal mining projects, allowing Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) after land acquisition, even without detailed location and area particulars.
- In 2025, the Supreme Court recalled its judgment in *Vanashakti vs Union of India*, which had prohibited retrospective environmental clearances.
- The Supreme Court, in *In Re: Issue Relating to Definition of Aravalli Hills and Ranges* (2025), accepted a height-based (100-metre) definition of the Aravalli ranges.
- Judicial approvals were granted for:
  - Felling of mangroves for industrial and infrastructure projects.
  - Large-scale infrastructure projects such as the Char Dham Highway in Uttarakhand.
- These developments raise concerns regarding environmental protection, constitutional obligations, and sustainable development.

### Key Points

- EIA Framework:
  - EIA is governed under the Environment (Protection) Act, 1986 and EIA Notification, 2006.
  - Post-facto and conditional clearances weaken preventive environmental regulation.

### Static Linkages

- Constitutional Provisions:
  - Article 21 – Right to life includes the right to a clean environment.
  - Article 48A – State obligation to protect and improve the environment.
  - Article 51A(g) – Fundamental duty of citizens to protect the environment.
  - Article 14 – Protection against arbitrariness and unequal classification.
- Environmental Principles:
  - Precautionary Principle
  - Sustainable Development
  - Polluter Pays Principle
  - Public Trust Doctrine
- Legal Framework:
  - Environment (Protection) Act, 1986
  - Forest (Conservation) Act, 1980
  - Coastal Regulation Zone Notifications

### Critical Analysis

#### Issues Identified

- Dilution of the precautionary principle through post-facto clearances.
- Height-based ecological classification lacks scientific and ecological basis.
- Over-reliance on mitigation and compensatory mechanisms instead of prevention.
- Procedural fairness concerns in public hearings and environmental clearances.
- Increased ecological risks for future generations.

## Constitutional Concerns

- Potential violation of Article 21 due to environmental degradation.
- Arbitrary classifications undermining Article 14.
- Weak enforcement of Articles 48A and 51A(g).

## Way Forward

- Reinstate EIA prior to land acquisition as a mandatory norm.
- Adopt ecosystem-based definitions for ecologically sensitive areas.
- Strengthen judicial consistency in environmental jurisprudence.
- Ensure meaningful public participation in environmental decision-making.
- Integrate disaster risk assessment in infrastructure planning.
- Promote development aligned with sustainable development goals (SDGs).

# More money for defence, now fix the process

The Finance Minister has been rather generous. The new defence budget is being touted as being the first double digit jump in India's defence expenditure in decades, ever since its steady decline from 2017. At 2% of the Budget, it sends a signal of strategic determination in a more than unusually turbulent world. The funds will have to be used prudently and expeditiously, which demand systemic change, not tinkering, in the Budget process. As 'frenemies' abound and a tenuous 'rules-based order' collapses, there is no time to lose.

**The good and the bad**  
The most talked about aspect is the Budget's 15% hike hitting 2% of GDP (up from 1.9% last year). Second, in a notable shift, capital expenditure has outpaced the revenue budget, up more than 22%, reversing years of neglect. Third, there is a clear thrust toward modernisation. The Indian Air Force gets a hefty 32% rise, while the Indian Army has got a 30% hike for heavy vehicles and weapons.

Oddly, the Indian Navy, with its ambitious commitments in the Indian Ocean, gets 3%. Ironically, this is probably due to its success in indigenisation, and a proven capability to absorb allotted funds.

All this is good. But the rupee has weakened substantially against the dollar, which means that payment for capital goods such as aircraft has become more expensive. It is not all bad news. Defence exports are rising – ₹23,000 crore last year as against ₹1,000 crore in 2014. A chunk of the Indian Army's mobility equipment is made here by the Tatas, Ashok Leyland and others. But this does eat into the 'double digit' increase. There are also the pension payments which



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A defence budget has to also be seen as a tool that powers growth

rose by 6.56% but it is still at 21.84% when compared to 27.95% for capital expenditure of the Ministry of Defence (MoD)'s allocation. Before FY1987-88, they came under central government pensions and were not clubbed with the defence budget. Despite this, the Budget was still 3.31% of GDP. The size of the economy then was less than half of what it is today, but it still provides a certain perspective.

It might be time to reinvent that wheel.

## Bureaucracy and delays

A welcome aspect is that 75% of the capital acquisition budget for procurement has been earmarked for domestic industries, which includes private players. The government's thrust in this direction has been consistent, with defence production recording a 174% surge from 2014-15. But beyond this is the reality of a complex bureaucratic system, one aspect of which is the L-1 (lowest cost) rule which favours large industries rather than innovators who are vital for a tech-intensive industry. They cannot compete, especially when transitioning to manufacturing. This needs not only hand holding but also clarity in forward planning and promised volumes.

The next factor is this – the interminable delays in vital programmes such as Project 75 for submarines approved in 1997. Expected delivery times are now in the mid 2030s. The Rafale fighter aircraft deal which was envisioned in the 1990s, saw results only 2019-20. It is unsurprising then that the MoD had to return ₹2,500 crore of its capital allocation in FY2024-25.

It is time to re-examine the repeated demand for a Non-Lapsable Defence Modernisation Fund, which was announced in the FY 2004-05 Budget

speech but never implemented. Financial convenience cannot result in the defence industry being held hostage.

## R&D lies scattered

A key area is research and development (R&D). Funds for the Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO) and a slew of research organisations have been increased; many have potential benefits for defence production. But research is segmented. Despite often being dual use, it seldom translates into better defence capabilities. India's overall research budget also remains 0.66% of GDP. Compare that to Japan at 3.70%, funded primarily by the private sector. In India, there is a near absence of private sector R&D. Those in the big league must loosen up and unify research and its direction.

A 'pacifist' country such as Japan has now allocated 2.2% for its defence. So has Australia with a far lower threat profile. Europe too is moving to larger allocations. At issue here is the 'guns vs butter' lens through which the defence budget is viewed. Instead, it needs to be melded with the vision of Viksit Bharat's \$30 trillion economy. The Border Roads Organisation, for instance, delivers the connectivity for 'Vibrant Villages' programme which is vital to border development.

In another example, the Prime Minister remarked that indigenous shipbuilding has a 6.5 multiplier effect on employment, with its multiple ancillary industries. This applies almost across the board. The Budget has to be seen as a tool for powering growth, rather than being a 'non development' section. Once this is done, the processes will follow.

## KEY HIGHLIGHTS

### Context of the News

- Union Budget 2025–26 announces a double-digit increase (~15%) in defence expenditure.
- Defence outlay reaches around 2% of GDP, reversing a declining trend since 2017.
- Capital expenditure exceeds revenue expenditure, indicating renewed focus on modernisation.
- Budget announced amid heightened global security uncertainty and regional strategic challenges.

### Key Points

- Total defence allocation: ~₹6.2 lakh crore (BE).
- Capital outlay increased by over 22% (MoD, Budget Documents).
- Service-wise capital allocation increase:
  - Indian Air Force: ~32%
  - Indian Army: ~30%
  - Indian Navy: ~3%
- 75% of capital procurement earmarked for domestic industry (Atmanirbhar Bharat).
- Defence exports: ₹23,000 crore (FY 2023–24) vs ₹1,000 crore in 2014 (MoD).
- Pension expenditure: ~21.8% of defence budget.
- Capital allocation worth ₹12,500 crore lapsed in FY 2024–25 due to procedural delays (PRS India).

### Static Linkages

- Defence budget presented under Article 112 of the Constitution.
- Capital vs Revenue expenditure classification (NCERT – Public Finance).
- Defence procurement governed by Defence Acquisition Procedure (DAP).

- Role of defence industrial base in national power (NCERT – Security Studies).
- R&D expenditure and economic growth relationship (Economic Survey).

### Critical Analysis

#### Positive Aspects

- Higher capital spending strengthens long-term military capability.
- Emphasis on indigenous procurement boosts domestic defence manufacturing.
- Export growth supports foreign exchange earnings and strategic autonomy.
- Defence infrastructure spending has spillover effects on regional development.

#### Concerns

- Rupee depreciation increases cost of imported defence equipment.
- Procedural delays lead to underutilisation of capital funds.
- L-1 procurement system limits participation of innovative firms.
- Fragmented defence R&D ecosystem reduces technology absorption.
- Rising pension liabilities reduce fiscal space for modernisation.

### Way Forward

- Establish Non-Lapsable Defence Modernisation Fund for continuity of projects.
- Reform procurement norms to include quality-cum-cost based selection.
- Strengthen long-term defence planning and assured order pipelines.
- Integrate public and private sector defence R&D.
- Rationalise pension expenditure through structural reforms.
- Align defence expenditure with economic growth and industrial policy.

## Intent and outcome

### India must match its climate ambitions with higher allocations

Union Budgets began reflecting greater climate concerns from 2021, in the thick of the COVID-19 pandemic, with a modest ₹4,500 crore to localise solar photovoltaic production and to reduce India's dependence on Chinese imports. But there has been a cautious, disjointed approach to the scale and allocations. While five broad sectors (cement, steel, aluminium and fertilizers; decentralised solar power; greening irrigation pump sets; green hydrogen; and nuclear energy) received attention in Budget 2026-27, the most prominent announcement was the proposed five-year outlay of ₹20,000 crore for Carbon Capture, Utilisation and Storage (CCUS). This is a modest provision for a suite of costly and complex technologies. The allocation signals that India is entering a pilot and demonstration phase, rather than embarking on immediate industrial deployment. While operational examples exist in Norway, Canada and the U.S., scaling CCUS has proven expensive and uneven. The technology is primarily relevant to sectors where emissions are embedded in the production process. The EU's Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM) will impose carbon costs on imports of high-emission products, so for India, decarbonising industrial production is no longer only a climate imperative. It is now a question of export competitiveness, particularly for steel and aluminium, which form the bulk of India's CBAM-exposed exports to the EU.

The Budget also substantially scales up the PM Surya Ghar Muft Bijli Yojana rooftop solar scheme – ₹22,000 crore in 2026-27 from ₹17,000 crore (RE) for the current year. It is a welcome push towards decentralised energy systems that reduce land pressure, transmission losses and household energy costs. However, implementation challenges remain, including discom cooperation and upfront finance. Similarly, allocations for PM-KUSUM (solar irrigation pumps), have been sustained at ₹5,000 crore. Revised estimates suggest stronger-than-anticipated absorption. For nuclear energy, the government has extended zero basic customs duty on imports of nuclear plant equipment until 2035. While this reduces input costs, nuclear power remains capital intensive, with long construction timelines and financing risks. Recent legal changes permit private participation, but whether private capital will enter a sector entwined with national security, safety and liability concerns remains uncertain. Green hydrogen, despite budgetary support, continues to see modest actual spending, highlighting the persistent gap between policy ambition and execution. Overall, India's climate budget for 2026-27 repeats a pattern: big on intent, cautious on allocations, and uncertain in its ability to mobilise the private capital required to accelerate decarbonisation across vital sectors.

## KEY HIGHLIGHTS

### Context of the News

- Since Union Budget 2021–22, climate-related allocations have gradually increased, coinciding with post-COVID recovery and global energy transition.
- Union Budget 2026–27 focuses on selective climate-linked sectors rather than economy-wide decarbonisation.
- A major announcement is a ₹20,000 crore five-year outlay for Carbon Capture, Utilisation and Storage (CCUS).
- The budget is framed amid emerging global trade pressures such as the EU's Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM) affecting carbon-intensive exports.

### Key Points

- Carbon Capture, Utilisation and Storage (CCUS)
  - ₹20,000 crore over five years; indicates pilot and demonstration phase.
  - Applicable mainly to hard-to-abate industrial sectors: cement, steel, fertilisers, aluminium.
  - High capital costs, energy penalty, and infrastructure needs limit rapid scaling.

- Trade and Competitiveness
  - EU's CBAM will impose carbon-linked levies on imports of steel, aluminium, cement and fertilisers.
  - India's exports to the EU are significantly concentrated in steel and aluminium, increasing vulnerability.
- Decentralised Renewable Energy
  - PM Surya Ghar Muft Bijli Yojana allocation increased to ₹22,000 crore in 2026–27.
  - Benefits include reduced transmission losses, lower land requirements, and household energy savings.
- Solar Irrigation
  - PM-KUSUM allocation sustained at ₹5,000 crore; revised estimates show improved absorption.
- Nuclear Energy
  - Zero basic customs duty on nuclear plant equipment extended till 2035.
  - Private participation enabled through legal changes; concerns remain regarding safety, liability, and financing.
- Green Hydrogen
  - Budgetary support continues, but actual expenditure remains limited, indicating implementation challenges.

### Static Linkages

- India's Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) under the Paris Agreement:
  - Reduction in emissions intensity of GDP.
  - 50% of installed electricity capacity from non-fossil sources by 2030.
- Hard-to-abate sectors identified in:
  - Economic Survey (Energy Transition sections).
  - NITI Aayog's long-term low-emission development strategy.
- Decentralised renewable energy emphasised in:
  - National Electricity Policy.
  - India Year Book (Energy chapter).
- Nuclear power categorised as non-fossil energy in India's climate accounting.

### Critical Analysis

#### Strengths

- Acknowledges the need for industrial decarbonisation.
- Encourages decentralised energy systems.
- Aligns climate policy with export competitiveness concerns.

## Limitations

- CCUS funding inadequate for commercial-scale deployment.
- Sector-specific approach lacks an integrated climate finance framework.
- Persistent gap between budget announcements and actual utilisation.
- Heavy dependence on private investment without adequate risk-sharing mechanisms.
- Nuclear expansion constrained by long gestation periods and liability concerns.

## Way Forward

- Establish a National CCUS Mission with clear sectoral prioritisation.
- Develop blended finance and risk-mitigation instruments to mobilise private capital.
- Integrate climate spending into a medium-term green fiscal strategy.
- Strengthen discom reforms and credit access for rooftop solar.
- Align industrial, trade and climate policies to address CBAM-related risks.

## More, and less

The health-care component of Budget 2026 is a mixed bag

While this year's health-care allocations are aggressive in certain key sectors, it has failed expectations that Budget 2026 would be a milestone for increased health-care spending as a percentage of GDP. The total allocation this year is over ₹1.05 lakh crore, marking an increase of about 10% over the previous year's revised estimates. However, experts have pointed out that the 2026 health budget is approximately 1.9% of the total government expenditure, and about 0.26% of GDP. Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman fronted the Biopharma SHAKTI scheme, among the projects with the single highest budgetary allocations this year. This ₹10,000 crore government initiative will transform India into a manufacturing hub for biologics and biosimilars over the next five years, she said. A pan-country clinical state-of-the-art trial infrastructure will also be created, through a network of 1,000 accredited clinical trial sites. No doubt, this will take care of an angle that has long been languishing in India – research and development. Additionally, the government will set up three new National Institutes of Pharmaceutical Education and Research (NIPER) and modernise seven existing units, besides establishing a second NIMHANS campus in north India and two upgraded national mental health institutes. The government has set itself a target of training one lakh allied health professionals over the next five years, while another 1.5 lakh care workers will also be trained to take care of the health needs of the elderly; this is appreciable at a time when India is well on its way towards becoming a grey nation, with fertility levels falling. In the area of making care affordable, the government has exempted 17 cancer medicines and several treatments for rare diseases from customs and import duties, while also reducing the tax collected at source on medical and educational remittances from 5% to 2%. For patients suffering from these conditions, and their families, this will no doubt lead to better affordability for treatments.

Primarily under fire was the Union government's stodgy refusal to increase the allocation for health care to reach 2.5% of GDP by 2025, as committed in the National Health Policy of 2017. Public health activists have lambasted the drop in funding for the National Health Mission, despite the fact that funds have been consistently well utilised here. While fiscal devolution has enabled States to invest more heavily in the health sector, there are concerns, however, that the Centre steadily reducing its share will result in patchy outcomes, not even improvements, in the health-care sector of the country.

## KEY HIGHLIGHTS

### Context of the News

- Union Budget 2026 allocated ₹1.05 lakh crore to the health sector.
- This reflects a ~10% increase over the previous year's revised estimates.
- Health expenditure remains ~1.9% of total Union expenditure and ~0.26% of GDP.
- The allocation falls short of the National Health Policy (2017) target of 2.5% of GDP public health spending by 2025.

### Key Points

- Overall Health Spending
  - India's total public health expenditure (Centre + States): ~2.1% of GDP (Economic Survey).
  - WHO recommends minimum 5% of GDP for health.
- Biopharma SHAKTI Scheme
  - Allocation: ₹10,000 crore over 5 years.
  - Objective: Develop India as a global hub for biologics and biosimilars.
  - Establishment of 1,000 accredited clinical trial sites nationwide.

- Institutional Expansion
  - Establishment of 3 new NIPERs.
  - Modernisation of 7 existing NIPERs.
  - Creation of a second NIMHANS campus in North India.
  - Upgradation of 2 national mental health institutes.
- Human Resource Development
  - Training of 1 lakh allied health professionals.
  - Training of 1.5 lakh elderly care workers over five years.
- Affordability Measures
  - Customs duty exemption on 17 cancer medicines.
  - Duty exemptions on selected rare disease treatments.
  - Reduction of TCS on medical and education remittances from 5% to 2%.
- Concern Area
  - Reduction in Central allocation to National Health Mission (NHM) despite high fund utilisation.

### Static Linkages

- National Health Policy, 2017:
  - Target of 2.5% of GDP public health expenditure.
  - Emphasis on primary health care and preventive services.
- Economic Survey of India:
  - Health investment as a key driver of human capital formation.
- NCERT (Class XII – Indian Economy):
  - Government's role in correcting market failure in health sector.
- NITI Aayog Health Index:
  - Highlights inter-State disparities in health outcomes.

### Critical Analysis

#### Strengths

- Increased focus on health R&D and pharmaceutical manufacturing.
- Expansion of mental health infrastructure, aligning with National Mental Health Policy.
- Measures to reduce out-of-pocket expenditure on critical diseases.

### Limitations

- Health spending remains significantly below policy targets.
- Declining Central share may widen inter-State inequities in health access.
- Budgetary focus tilted towards tertiary care and manufacturing over primary health care.
- Reduced NHM funding may weaken grassroots public health delivery.

### Way Forward

- Adopt a time-bound roadmap to achieve 2.5% of GDP public health spending.
- Strengthen primary health care and NHM financing.
- Ensure equitable Centre–State fiscal sharing in health.
- Link health allocations with outcome-based performance indicators.
- Integrate preventive care with emerging biotech initiatives.

# The Budget has delivered a googly—the retrospective tax

**M**OST OF the comments on Budget 2026 were laudatory, if not euphoric. A collection of some of the summary comments: Businesslike, calm-collected, short, boring and good. Over 95 per cent approval rating — something I have not witnessed in over 36 years of active Budget-watching. I was asked to write this article on Budget day, but politely refused. Reason: Bitter experience that there was always a wicket-taking googly in the budget.

Only after the dust of euphoria had settled did the googly emerge in the form of yet another retrospective tax — starting April 2026, there will be a new tax on capital gains made via the purchase of SGBs or sovereign gold bonds. The SGBs were introduced in 2015-16 when gold prices were low and stable (even declining from their local peak in 2011-12). This scheme of annual issuance of gold bonds was stopped in 2024 — well before the parabolic surge in international gold prices. The terms of the SGB agreement with the citizen and voter was that you buy paper gold, and you are returned paper money when you sell. Capital gains, and losses, with the investor. No tax was to be paid if the price of gold went up, and if the price of gold went down, your loss. Now, retrospectively, because gold prices have shot up, you will pay a long-term capital gains tax of 12.5 per cent. Paraphrasing Khushchev, the government's attitude is: What is mine is mine — what is yours is also mine.

Besides being greedy and unfair — retrospective taxes should be illegal — the government is also being petty, and can

one dare say it, stupid and counterproductive. Nothing is gained and much is lost in terms of investor confidence via this new tax. It will net about Rs 200 crore a year — about .005 per cent of our tax receipts in 2025-26.

Several benefits have accrued to the government via gold bonds. SGBs lowered imports (less physical gold imports), and via a higher current account balance, helped keep the rupee stable. If not to appreciate. And don't cry for the government because of the trivial tax loss. My estimate is that the government made upwards of Rs 50,000 crore from borrowing from the investor (at an annual rate of 2.5 per cent) rather than 7 per cent from the market. And it wants to get Rs 200 crore more — I give up. A simple Occam's razor rule for the Finance Minister: Any retrospective tax is bad policy, by definition, morally, and otherwise.

Retrospective taxes reflect very badly on the process of Budget- and decision-making in India. As I have been shouting to whoever has been within earshot, the secret decision-making of the Budget is a relic of several bygone eras. We did so when we were ruled by a colonial power, and we are doing it today when we are ostensibly on the road to Viksit Bharat.

For the last decade or so, I have advocated an open policy towards Budget presentation. There is no need to follow the 200-year-old legacy of secret preparation (though the halwa should stay). Budget preparation should be an open, collaborative



SURJIT S BHALLA

effort, with the final decision resting, obviously, with the policymakers.

Excluding the retrospective tax, Budget 2026 is a very good example of good policy-making. Major policies were announced before the Budget. Income tax reform was announced last year. GST reform in September. The latter is still incomplete, with promises to keep. And for all the bravado (and incorrect and inappropriate) talk of self-reliance, India has acted in a welcome opposite direction. In the short space of a few months, it has become considerably more open — look at the just-announced trade deals! Major trade reforms are now outside the Budget (unlike 1991). And major deregulation, as advocated in a NITI Aayog report (again, outside the Budget), is likely to become policy.

In the run-up to the Budget, most commentators, both within and outside the government, expected the Centre to take significant steps towards addressing the number one ailment of the Indian economy — lack of growth of private investment. The share of private investment in GDP is down about 10 percentage points from its earlier peak of 30 per cent. Indian investment is going abroad and foreign investment is not coming to India. Net FDI is falling, is barely positive, and is at the lowest level (as a percentage of GDP) since our mega-crisis year, 1990. The last three months' net FDI has been negative. Stated bluntly, the investment climate is bad — and the new retrospective tax makes it worse. Indians want to invest abroad, and for-

eigners don't want to invest in India. And don't blame US President Donald Trump's tariffs or the unstable global environment for this. Indeed, world growth is higher this year and world inflation is lower. Further, many countries have managed the uncertainty extraordinarily well. So, Indian policymakers do not deserve the extra credit heaped on them by domestic experts for "good" growth.

Private investment is down big time because of the UPA's retrospective taxation in 2012 and the BJP's Model Bilateral Investment Treaty of 2015 (an extraordinarily bad model). The latter stipulated that a divorce agreement between a foreign and a domestic firm could only be achieved if two conditions were met — a five-year cooling and negotiation period, falling which, adjudication by an Indian judge. Seeing these requirements, the foreign investor decided to vote with her feet. (The new, revised BIT recommends a three-year cooling period and maybe an international judge — some improvement). Do we know of any divorce that faces these stringent conditions? No. Then why did two bad laws made by the two leading and contrasting political parties happen? Because the source of these decisions was the same — Indian politicians, advised by our Yes Minister all-powerful bureaucrats, who believe that India will and can do as it pleases because the world cannot do without us. It would be funny if it weren't so sad.

Bhalla is chairperson of the Technical Expert Group for the first official Household Income Survey for India. Views are personal

- Investment indicators:
  - Private investment share in GDP declined by ~10 percentage points from peak (~30%)
  - Net FDI inflows at lowest level (as % of GDP) since 1990
  - Recent quarters recorded negative net FDI

## Static Linkages

- Retrospective taxation:
  - Criticised in Vodafone tax case (2012)
  - Undermines certainty and rule of law
- Fiscal policy principles:
  - Certainty, predictability, transparency (Economic Survey)
- Gold and macroeconomy:
  - Gold imports widen Current Account Deficit
  - SGBs reduce physical gold demand

- Public borrowing:
  - Internal debt preferred to reduce forex risk
- Investment treaties:
  - Model BIT 2015 restricted international arbitration
  - Adversely affected FDI inflows

## Critical Analysis

### Positives

- Marginal expansion of tax base
- Aligns SGB taxation with other financial assets
- Short-term revenue augmentation

### Negatives

- Violates principle of legitimate expectation
- Retrospective taxation weakens policy credibility
- Revenue gain negligible compared to confidence loss
- Deters both domestic and foreign investors
- Contradicts "Ease of Doing Business" objectives

### Stakeholder Perspective

- Retail investors face trust deficit
- Foreign investors perceive regulatory unpredictability
- Government credibility affected in long term

### Ethical and Constitutional Dimensions

- Breach of implicit contract between State and citizen
- Retrospective taxation raises concerns of fairness and equity
- Conflicts with principles of good governance

## Way Forward

- Legally restrict retrospective taxation except under extraordinary circumstances
- Restore tax exemption for SGBs issued under earlier terms
- Institutionalise transparent and consultative Budget-making
- Strengthen investor protection mechanisms
- Reform BIT framework to ensure neutral dispute resolution
- Focus on investment-led growth rather than short-term revenue
- Align fiscal policy with long-term macroeconomic stability

## KEY HIGHLIGHTS

### Context of the News

- Union Budget 2026 introduced long-term capital gains tax (12.5%) on Sovereign Gold Bonds (SGBs) effective from April 2026.
- This marks a retrospective change to the original tax-exempt redemption promise made at the time of issuance.
- SGB scheme was launched in 2015-16 and discontinued in 2024.
- The measure emerged post-Budget scrutiny and was not highlighted during Budget presentation.
- The decision has raised concerns regarding policy certainty, investor confidence, and investment climate.

### Key Points

- Sovereign Gold Bonds (SGBs):
  - Issued by Government of India under RBI
  - Denominated in grams of gold
  - Interest rate: 2.5% per annum
- Original tax structure:
  - Capital gains on redemption exempt from tax
  - Investor bore both price appreciation and depreciation risk
- New provision:
  - 12.5% long-term capital gains tax imposed retrospectively
- Estimated revenue gain:
  - ~₹200 crore annually
  - ~0.005% of total tax receipts (2025-26)
- Fiscal background:
  - Government borrowed via SGBs at 2.5% instead of ~7% market rate
  - Estimated interest savings: ₹50,000 crore+

# To be future ready, healthcare system has to ensure quality



INDU BHUSHAN

**W**ITH THE Lancet Commission on Reimagining India's Health System being launched last month, it is worth pausing to ask: Are we building a health system for yesterday's diseases or tomorrow's India? Soon after Ayushman Bharat was rolled out, a beneficiary asked me something that has stayed with me: "Card toh mil gaya hai, par ilaaj ka raasta kaha dikhaiyega (We have got the card, but who will guide us towards treatment)?" That goes to the heart of India's health challenge — not just paying for care, but ensuring that people are guided through the system with dignity and continuity.

As the founding CEO of Ayushman Bharat, I have seen both the promise and the limits of health reform at close quarters. When the scheme was launched, many doubted whether India could pull off the world's largest government-funded health insurance programme. Eight years on, the outcomes are hard to ignore. More than 10 crore hospital treatments have been provided, and by one estimate, households have saved nearly Rs 2 lakh crore in out-of-pocket expenditure. India's health outcomes have undoubtedly improved over the decades. Yet progress has slowed, and gains remain deeply unequal. A child born in a poor district or marginalised community still faces far worse health prospects than one born into an urban middle-class household. At the same time, NCD and mental health conditions are rising steadily, while climate change and antimicrobial resistance pose new and serious risks.

Public health spending as a share of GDP has remained largely stagnant for two decades. Compounding this is the way money is spent — fragmented across schemes, departments, and line items, with limited flexibility

As proud as I am of what Ayushman Bharat has achieved, I am conscious of its limitations. While physical access to care has expanded, the experience of care remains fragmented and often poor in quality. Our system continues to be hospital-centric and curative. Primary care, which should anchor prevention, continuity, and trust, remains underpowered. It is evident that even the best health insurance scheme cannot compensate for weak primary care.

Chronic underinvestment lies at the root of many of these problems. Public health spending as a share of GDP has remained largely stagnant for two decades. Compounding this is the way money is spent — fragmented across schemes, departments,

and line items, with limited flexibility or accountability. Line-item budgeting in the public sector and fee-for-service payments in the private sector reward volume, not outcomes. They encourage episodic treatment rather than long-term health.

This is why the Lancet Commission argues that incremental change is no longer sufficient. India must move from a fragmented, facility-driven system to one that is comprehensive, coordinated, and people-centred. Quality, dignity, and respect must count as much as coverage numbers.

One of the Commission's messages is the need for decentralisation. States, districts, and blocks face very different disease burdens, capacities, and social contexts. A reimagined health system must therefore empower states with greater financial flexibility, better data, and real autonomy — while holding them accountable for outcomes. Technology offers an opportunity to support this transformation. India's DPI can enable continuity of care, real-time surveillance, and learning health systems. But digital tools can strengthen coordination and decision-making only if they are underpinned by trust, sound governance, and strong ethical safeguards.

The Commission also squarely addresses the role of the private sector. India cannot achieve universal health coverage without private providers. Managed care principles, emphasising prevention, gatekeeping, defined provider networks, and rational payment systems, must replace volume-driven incentives. Regulation should enable innovation while protecting the public interest. Many of the Commission's recommendations are already reflected in policy intent. The challenge lies in execution. Health governance reform is never purely technocratic; it is inherently political.

Yet, moments of crisis also open windows of possibility. India's ambition to become a developed nation by 2047 cannot be realised without a health system that is fair, resilient, and people-centred. Ayushman Bharat demonstrated that bold reform at scale is possible. The Lancet Commission is a reminder that the next phase must go deeper.

The writer was founding CEO, Ayushman Bharat (AB-PMJAY) and is commissioner, Lancet Citizens' Commission.

- Fragmented financing across schemes and departments.
- Governance & Technology:
  - Need for decentralisation to states and districts.
  - Digital Public Infrastructure (DPI) can enable continuity and surveillance, subject to safeguards.
- Private Sector:
  - Essential for achieving Universal Health Coverage (UHC).
  - Requires regulation and shift from volume-based to outcome-based payments.

## Static Linkages

- Article 21 – Right to life includes right to health (Judicial interpretation).
- Article 47 (DPSP) – Duty of the State to improve public health.
- Three-tier public healthcare system – Sub-centres, PHCs, CHCs.
- Epidemiological Transition Theory.
- Human Capital Theory – Health as a driver of economic growth.
- Fiscal Federalism – Role of states in social sector delivery.

## Critical Analysis

### Strengths

- Expanded financial risk protection.
- Large-scale implementation capacity demonstrated.
- Use of digital platforms for service delivery.

### Limitations

- Weak primary healthcare limits preventive care.
- Fragmented governance and financing.
- Quality and continuity of care remain uneven.
- Inequities across regions and socio-economic groups.
- Volume-based payment systems incentivise episodic care.

## Way Forward

- Increase public health expenditure towards 2.5% of GDP.
- Strengthen primary healthcare as system foundation.
- Transition to outcome-based and managed care payment systems.
- Enhance decentralisation with accountability.
- Strengthen regulation of private healthcare.
- Ensure ethical, secure use of digital health data.

## KEY HIGHLIGHTS

### Context of the News

- The Lancet Commission on India's Health System was launched recently.
- The Commission evaluates India's health reforms, including Ayushman Bharat, in the context of future disease burden.
- Focus on system preparedness for Non-Communicable Diseases (NCDs), mental health, climate change impacts, and antimicrobial resistance.
- Relevant to India's goal of becoming a developed nation by 2047.

### Key Points

- Ayushman Bharat-PMJAY:
  - Over 10 crore hospitalisation episodes covered since launch (PIB).
  - Estimated ₹2 lakh crore reduction in out-of-pocket expenditure (NITI Aayog estimates).
- Disease Burden:
  - Rising share of NCDs in total morbidity and mortality.
  - Persistent regional and socio-economic health inequalities.
- Health Expenditure:
  - Public health spending around 1.3–1.5% of GDP.
  - Below National Health Policy (2017) target of 2.5% of GDP.
- Systemic Issues:
  - Hospital-centric and curative approach.
  - Weak primary healthcare and poor continuity of care.

# Loneliness epidemic needs a policy response

IN THE fragments pieced together in the aftermath of the death by suicide of three minor sisters in Ghaziabad is a portrait of a constrained childhood: Economic precarity, fractured family relationships and an overarching immersion in the online world of Korean dramas and games that promised escape but deepened isolation. But the tragedy is far from being an outlier. It portends a broader rupture in the way adolescence is experienced now, where screens are both babysitters and battlegrounds, where the digital world is increasingly the organising principle of many youngsters' lives, magnifying feelings of exclusion while offering little reprieve. A widening gap separates this first generation of true digital natives from their parents and teachers, who lack fluency in the online cultures their children inhabit. It makes monitoring onerous, often fragile.

In a report last year, the WHO estimated that globally, one in seven 10 to 19-year-olds experiences a mental disorder. Across countries, surveys tell stories of a thinning sense of belonging. In India, nearly one in four adolescents reports symptoms consistent with anxiety or depression, while the NCRB has documented a steady rise in students' suicides over the past decade. There is growing evidence that early, unsupervised immersion in online social ecosystems carries psychological risks. The Ghaziabad sisters, aged 16, 14 and 12, had dropped out of school after Covid. In the eight-page note they left behind, they write, "Korean is our life, how did you even dare to make us leave our life?"

The deep sense of unease around social media and children has begun to crystallise in policy. Australia has legalised minimum-age thresholds for social-media use; European countries have tightened protections for minors. In India, too, there is growing discussion on safeguards. These conversations are necessary, but regulation alone cannot mend what has frayed. It also requires the patient work of connection and the creation of safe spaces that allow children to feel seen, heard and loved.

## KEY HIGHLIGHTS

### Context of the News

- Recent incidents and official data have highlighted rising mental health concerns among adolescents in India, including increasing cases of student suicides.
- Post-COVID school disengagement and prolonged exposure to unsupervised digital platforms have emerged as significant contributing factors.
- Global institutions and governments have initiated policy discussions on child safety in digital ecosystems, prompting similar debates in India.

### Key Points

- WHO (2023):
  - One in seven individuals aged 10–19 years globally suffers from a mental disorder.
  - Depression, anxiety, and behavioural disorders are major contributors.
- India-specific data:
  - NCRB – Accidental Deaths & Suicides in India:
    - Student suicides have increased steadily over the past decade.
    - Key causes include family problems, academic stress, and social isolation.
  - NFHS-5 (indirect indicators):
    - High prevalence of anxiety-related symptoms among adolescents.

- Digital exposure:
  - Early, prolonged, and unsupervised engagement with online platforms is associated with:
    - Social withdrawal
    - Sleep disorders
    - Cyberbullying and comparison-induced stress
- International responses:
  - Australia: Statutory minimum age for social media usage.
  - European Union: Enhanced digital child protection norms under GDPR.

### Static Linkages

- Adolescence as a critical stage of psychological and social development.
- Family and school as primary institutions of socialisation.
- Article 21: Right to life includes mental well-being (judicial interpretation).
- Directive Principles: State responsibility towards children's development.
- Community-based mental healthcare models under national health frameworks.

### Critical Analysis

#### Advantages of Policy Attention

- Mainstreaming mental health as a governance issue.
- Expansion of school-based counselling initiatives.
- Increased public awareness on digital risks.

#### Challenges

- Regulatory focus without parallel social engagement.
- Low digital literacy among parents and teachers.
- Inadequate adolescent mental health infrastructure.
- Commercial algorithms intensifying psychological vulnerability.

#### Ethical and Constitutional Dimensions

- Balance between regulation and freedom of expression.
- State obligation to ensure dignity and well-being of children.
- Digital platforms' responsibility towards minors.

### Way Forward

- Integrate adolescent mental health services into primary healthcare.
- Institutionalise school counselling systems with trained professionals.
- Promote digital literacy programmes for parents, teachers, and students.
- Develop child-centric digital safety regulations with accountability mechanisms.
- Strengthen family-school-community collaboration frameworks.