DAILY NEWSPAPER ANALYSIS

DATE - 10/02/2026

SOURCE
THE HINDU & INDIAN EXPRESS

'Restrictive' software tools used for SIR: SC

| Court extends deadline for Bengal's SIR, calls for clarification on the allegations of violence | 70 lakh people called for hearings over minor disparities in names, says counsel for State | The computer has become the tyrant, ruling on who is purged, says CM's lawyer Divan |

Krishnadas Rajagopal
NEW DELHI

The Supreme Court on Monday said the Election Commission (EC) was using "very restrictive" software tools, at least in the special intensive revision (SIR) exercise in West Bengal, with scant tolerance for "natural" differences and inconsistencies commonly found in India, including Bengali households.

"Tools applied by you in your software appear to be very restrictive tools. They are eliminating natural differences. Surnames are of various forms – 'Roy', 'Ray'... There is a common practice of 'Kumar' being a middle name in Bengali households. Now, if there is an omission of 'Kumar', notice is given?" Justice Joymalya Bagchi asked the EC's counsel, senior lawyer Dama Seshadri Naidu.

Senior lawyer Shyam Divan, for Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee, submitted that of the nearly 1.4 crore people who came under the 'logical discrepancies' category, 70 lakh were called to explain minor disparities in their names and even surnames.

'Logical discrepancies' included name mismatches, inconsistencies in the age gaps of their parents and grandparents and even persons with six children were called for hearing. He said all these electors were issued hearing notices despite being mapped, that is, they could be traced to the 2002 electoral roll.

The Bench headed by Chief Justice of India (CJI) Surya Kant asked the poll body to extend the deadline for the claims-and-objections phase of the West Bengal SIR for a week beyond the current deadline of February 14.

The Bench further directed the State's Director-General of Police (DGP) to file a personal affidavit, responding to allegations of orchestrated violence and burning of documents at SIR verification centres.

The court asked the EC to temporarily deploy a fresh batch of 8,505 personnel provided by the State government, on the basis of an assurance given to the Bench personally by Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee during her personal appearance before it on the February 4 hearing, for SIR work.

The court also clarified that micro-observers, whose appointment had drawn objection from the State, would only assist the Electoral Registration Officers (EROs). It would be solely up to the EROs to take a final decision on inclusion or exclusion of voters from the final electoral roll of the State.

The court said the poll body could deploy suitable officers from the fresh batch for duties as EROs and Assistant Electoral Registration Officers (AEROs). The remaining could be made to work along with micro-observers to assist in the scrutiny of documents.

The hearing commenced with Mr. Divan submitting that micro-observers were superseding EROs and AEROs to decide the fate of electors on the voters' list. Senior advocate A.M. Singhvi, for the West Bengal government, said micro-observers were drawn from Central government services and public sector undertakings with no ground knowledge of West Bengal or its idiosyncrasies.

"They just ran a computer programme... There have been mass exclusions in the name of logical discrepancies. Here, the computer has become a tyrant, deciding with the use of some software, who remains and who has to be purged," Mr. Divan submitted.

'Policy challenge'

Mr. Naidu, for the EC, remarked orally that the petitioners – State of West Bengal, its Chief Minister and leaders of the ruling Trinamool Congress Party – were making a "mountain out of a molehill".

But Justice Bagchi agreed with Mr. Divan that even those mapped had been called for presentation of documents to verify citizenship. The judge said the programme used by the EC in certain cases has created a "policy challenge" without understanding the ground realities, resulting in notices going out to a "wider net of people".

Mr. Naidu said the court was only seeing the "tip of the iceberg".

He illustrated that the EC scrutiny of the electoral roll had instances of 200 people being linked to a single parent. "Is that possible?" he asked the Bench. Mr. Naidu denied sending notices to persons mapped to the 2002 rolls. "No questions were asked, My Lords," he stressed.

"But questions were asked, Sir. Notices were sent to mapped people," Justice Bagchi persisted.

Mr. Naidu changed tack to submit that then those "mapped incorrectly". He insisted that no clarification had been sought from electors whose particulars "synced perfectly".

"You definitely have a right to send a hearing notice to people found with 50 grandchildren. But you are issuing notice to even persons with five or six children," Justice Bagchi said.

Clearing the air

Bench headed by Chief Justice of India Surya Kant on Monday extended the claims-and-objections phase of the West Bengal SIR for a week beyond the current deadline of February 14

Directions from the Supreme Court:

- West Bengal DGP should file an affidavit responding to allegations of orchestrated violence at revision centres
- EC can temporarily deploy a fresh batch of personnel provided by the State government for the revision exercise

Top court clarifies that micro-observers would only assist the EROs, and will not take calls on inclusion or exclusion of voters in the final electoral roll of the State

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KEY HIGHLIGHTS

Context of the News
- The Supreme Court of India examined the legality and methodology of the Special Intensive Revision (SIR) of electoral rolls conducted in West Bengal.
- The Court questioned the Election Commission of India over the use of restrictive software tools that flagged "logical discrepancies" in voter data.
- Concerns were raised regarding mass issuance of notices to electors for minor inconsistencies such as name variations and family details.
- The Court extended the claims-and-objections deadline and clarified the limited role of micro-observers in the SIR process.

Key Points
- "Logical discrepancies" included:
  - Minor name/surname variations
  - Omission of middle names
  - Parent–grandparent age gaps
  - Large family size indicators
- Around 1.4 crore electors flagged; nearly 70 lakh issued hearing notices.
- Even voters mapped to 2002 electoral rolls were reportedly issued notices.
- Supreme Court:
  - Extended SIR claims deadline by one week beyond February 14
  - Directed State DGP to submit affidavit on allegations of violence at verification centres
  - Allowed deployment of 8,505 additional personnel
- Micro-observers:
  - To assist only
  - No authority to decide inclusion/exclusion of voters
- Final authority rests with Electoral Registration Officers (EROs).

Static Linkages
- Article 324: Superintendence, direction and control of elections
- Article 326: Universal adult suffrage
- Representation of the People Act, 1950: Preparation and revision of electoral rolls
- Principles of Natural Justice in administrative action
- Use of technology in governance and public administration

Critical Analysis
- Positives
  - Ensures accuracy and integrity of electoral rolls
  - Identifies duplicate and fraudulent entries
- Concerns
  - Risk of disenfranchisement due to rigid algorithmic filtering
  - Cultural and linguistic diversity not reflected in software logic
  - Excessive burden on genuine voters
- Governance Issue
  - Over-dependence on technology without adequate human discretion
  - Federal friction between constitutional authority and State machinery

Way Forward
- Adopt risk-based scrutiny instead of blanket flagging
- Incorporate regional and linguistic diversity in verification tools
- Strengthen role of EROs with local knowledge
- Ensure proportionality and due process in roll revision
- Periodic audit of digital tools used in electoral processes

Opposition considering no-confidence motion to remove LS Speaker Birla

Sandeep Phukan
NEW DELHI

Opposition parties belonging to the INDIA bloc are considering moving a no-confidence motion against Lok Sabha Speaker Om Birla, accusing him of acting in a partisan manner and denying Leader of the Opposition Rahul Gandhi the opportunity to speak during the debate on the Motions of Thanks to the President for her Address to the joint sitting.

The move is based on the suspension of eight Opposition MPs from the Lok Sabha, the alleged failure to initiate action against BJP MP Nishikant Dubey for objectionable remarks against former Prime Ministers and the "unsubstantiated" charges against women MPs.

Reacting to reports of a possible resolution, Parliamentary Affairs Minister Kiren Rijiju said that while the Opposition is free to bring such a motion in a parliamentary democracy, it lacks the numbers to carry it through. "They can bring [the no confidence motion], but the issue is they [the Opposition] have insulted the institution of the Honourable Speaker. They climbed onto the table of the Chair, table of officers and stormed the Speaker's chamber," he said.

Under Article 94(c) of the Constitution, a Lok Sabha member may give a written notice of intention to move a resolution for the removal of the Speaker to the Secretary-General, with at least 14 days' notice.

Over 100 MPs, including those from the Congress, Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam and Samajwadi Party, are said to have signed such a notice, said a source. However, Congress MP K. C. Venugopal said, "I can't comment on reports. Wait for action." Separately, women Congress MPs, including Priyanka Gandhi Vadra, wrote to Mr. Birla, alleging that the ruling party forced him to make "false, baseless and defamatory allegations" against them.

Parliamentary logjam

Efforts to break the parliamentary logjam continued, with a delegation of senior Opposition leaders, including Mr. Gandhi, calling on Mr. Birla to convey their grievance that the House is being "run one-sided".

When Mr. Birla told them that it was their right to bring a notice against him, the Opposition leaders said that they wanted the House to function, but insisted on his action on four specific points. Mr. Gandhi was accompanied by Samajwadi Party chief Akhilesh Yadav, Trinamool Congress leader Abhishek Banerjee, and DMK MP T.R. Baalu when they met the Speaker. The Trinamool wants to raise the issue of the SIR, while the SP plans to discuss the alleged vandalisation of the statue of Malwa queen Ahilyabai Holkar.

However, the stand-off between the Union Government and the Opposition continued, with proceedings in the Lok Sabha remaining paralysed on Monday. A discussion on the Budget, which was listed for the day, could not be taken up due to repeated disruptions. Mr. Gandhi wanted to raise a few issues before his colleague Shashi Tharoor could speak on the Budget but he was not allowed, leading to protests and adjournments.

Later, speaking to press-persons, Mr. Gandhi said the government did not want a discussion on the Budget as it was worried about questions on the Indo-U.S. trade deal and its impact on farmers. He also listed out four issues, including his not being allowed to quote from an article based on excerpts from former Army chief M.M. Naravane's unpublished memoir, that reportedly showed Prime Minister Narendra Modi's indecisiveness during the 2020 India-China conflict.

Voicing out: Congress leader Rahul Gandhi with suspended party MPs staging a protest at Parliament, in New Delhi on Monday. PTI

KEY HIGHLIGHTS

Context of the News
- Opposition MPs proposed initiating a resolution for removal of the Lok Sabha Speaker alleging partisan conduct during the Motion of Thanks debate.
- Issues cited include denial of speaking opportunity to the Leader of Opposition, suspension of Opposition MPs, and alleged inaction on objectionable remarks by a ruling party MP.
- The development has coincided with repeated adjournments and disruption of Budget discussions, leading to a parliamentary impasse.

Key Points
- Constitutional Provision: Article 94(c) allows removal of the Speaker by a resolution of the Lok Sabha after minimum 14 days' written notice.
- Majority Required: Simple majority of members present and voting.
- Presiding Officer: Speaker does not preside over proceedings related to own removal.
- Role of Speaker: Maintains order, decides admissibility of motions, interprets rules, and safeguards parliamentary privileges.
- Suspension of MPs: Governed by Rules 373, 374 and 374A of Lok Sabha Rules of Procedure.
- Motion of Thanks: Key parliamentary device for accountability; wide-ranging debate on government policies.

Static Linkages
- Speaker envisaged as impartial constitutional authority (Constituent Assembly Debates).
- Parliamentary conventions from the UK stress political neutrality of the Chair.
- Internal autonomy of Parliament under separation of powers.
- Second Administrative Reforms Commission on ethics and institutional integrity.

Critical Analysis
- Concerns Raised
  - Perceived erosion of neutrality of the Speaker's office.
  - Frequent suspensions affecting deliberative role of Parliament.
- Counter-Concerns
  - Risk of politicising a constitutional post.
  - Continued disruptions weaken legislative oversight and Budget scrutiny.
- Institutional Impact
  - Prolonged deadlock undermines public trust and parliamentary efficiency.

Way Forward
- Codify conventions ensuring Speaker's neutrality and transparent reasoning of decisions.
- Strengthen role of Rules Committee and Business Advisory Committee for consensus-building.
- Adopt graded disciplinary measures to minimise suspensions.
- Encourage dialogue between Chair and floor leaders to ensure smooth functioning.

New species of dragonfly discovered in Kerala's rubber plantations, named *Lyriothemis keralensis*

The Hindu Bureau
KANNUR

Researchers have discovered a new species of dragonfly from Kerala and named it *Lyriothemis keralensis*, recognising the State's exceptional biodiversity. The species was recorded from Varapetty near Kothamangalam in Ernakulam district, where it inhabits vegetated pools and irrigation canals within shaded pineapple and rubber plantations.

The study was conducted by Dattaprasad Sawant of the Indian Foundation for Butterflies, Bengaluru, A. Vivek Chandran of the Department of Wildlife Science College of Forestry, Kerala Agricultural University, Renjith Jacob Mathews of the Society for Odonate Studies, Kerala, and Krushnamegh Kunte of the National Centre for Biological Science, Bengaluru. The findings have been published in the International Journal of Odonatology.

According to Dr. Chandran the newly described dragonfly is seasonally visible only during the Southwest monsoon from later May to the end of August.

Researchers stressed the importance of careful land-use practices to ensure the survival of the species. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

During the remaining months of the year, the species is believed to persist in its aquatic larval stage, surviving in the network of canals and pools inside shaded plantation landscapes.

He said *Lyriothemis keralensis* is a small dragonfly with distinct sexual dimorphism. The males are bright blood-red with black markings, making them visually striking, while the females are bulkier and yellow with black markings.

Although the species has been known to be found in Kerala since 2013, it had remained misidentified for over a decade as *Lyriothemis acigastra*, a species previously thought to be restricted to northeast India. The researchers confirmed its distinct identity through detailed microscopic examinations and comparisons with museum specimens, which revealed clear difference, including a more slender abdomen and distinctly shaped anal appendages and genitalia.

Dr. Chandran and other researchers highlighted the conservation concerns, nothing that most population of the species occur outside the protected area network.

They stressed the importance of careful land-use practices, especially in plantation-dominated landscapes, to ensure the survival of the species.

KEY HIGHLIGHTS

Context
- Researchers have identified a new species of dragonfly, Lyriothemis keralensis, from Kerala.
- The discovery highlights India's rich but under-documented insect biodiversity, especially in the Western Ghats region.

Key Facts
- Scientific name: Lyriothemis keralensis
- Location: Varapetty near Kothamangalam, Ernakulam district, Kerala
- Habitat:
  - Vegetated pools and irrigation canals
  - Shaded pineapple and rubber plantations
- Seasonal visibility:
  - Adult stage: Southwest monsoon (May–August)
  - Remainder of the year: Aquatic larval stage
- Distinct features:
  - Sexual dimorphism
  - Males: Bright blood-red with black markings
  - Females: Yellow, bulkier, with black markings

Scientific Significance
- Misidentified for over a decade as Lyriothemis acigastra (earlier believed restricted to northeast India).
- Correct identification achieved through:
  - Microscopic examination
  - Comparison with museum specimens
  - Differences in abdomen shape, anal appendages, and genitalia
- Emphasises the importance of taxonomic research in biodiversity conservation.

Conservation Concerns
- Majority of populations lie outside the protected area network.
- Species depends on human-modified landscapes (plantations, canals).
- Vulnerable to:
  - Changes in land use
  - Pesticide use
  - Drainage of water bodies

Broader Issues & Static Linkages
- Western Ghats: Global biodiversity hotspot with high endemism.
- Insects as bioindicators:
  - Dragonflies indicate freshwater ecosystem health.
- Conservation beyond protected areas:
  - Aligns with landscape-level conservation approach.
- Supports India's commitments under:
  - Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD)
  - Kunming–Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework

Way Forward
- Promote biodiversity-sensitive plantation management.
- Integrate conservation into agricultural landscapes.
- Strengthen taxonomic capacity and funding for lesser-known species.
- Include insects in biodiversity monitoring and environmental impact assessments.

The next big commodity is the mineable self

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A global market in a new commodity is growing exponentially in front of our eyes. It is not artificial intelligence (AI). It is not rare earths. It is not some new source of energy. It is not even in pharmaceuticals, media, or finance. It is integral to each of them and might determine the future of all of them. It is an infinitely renewable resource, which will last at least for as long as human beings and our planet continue to exist.

This commodity is the self, in which a global market has gradually emerged. It cuts across all domains of human life, from entertainment to journalism, from streaming to gender transitions, from banking to branding, from identity politics to soft power, and from crowdfunding to the tariff wars.

Mining the self

Industrial capitalism has a marked predilection for the creation and exploitation of what Marx called surplus value, value beyond the value of the labour required to produce commodities, and floats into the mysterious form of profit for the owners and managers of capital.

Today, human beings are the new object and horizon of capitalist extraction. The new object is sociality itself. It is our friendships, our love lives, our family connections, our classmates, our children, our fellow workers, our neighbours, as well as our digital lives, our political allies, our food and drug suppliers, and more. This is profiling on steroids. It mines our deepest affinities and our most ephemeral social ties. It is a new feat of creative destruction, which renders ideas such as privacy, intimacy and trust obsolete. It makes all our sociality a resource that can be mined without permission or limit. And in this unbounded mining of sociality, our stories are the access code. There are three recent changes in the market for selves, which together drive the mineable self.

This first change is that the seduction of the global has captured the market in characters. This is evident in the global hunt for stories from Mexico to Nepal and Spain to Indonesia. Every form of local mythology, folklore and backwater is trolled by publishers, film festivals, art biennales, and literary prize committees in the ceaseless hunt for portability, local flavour, vaguely universal themes and new character types (aliens, cyber-monsters, souped up heroes, zombies, post-blobs).

The most sought-after stories of our times are about obviously mobile phenomena such as drugs, migrants or mercenaries. More precisely, they are about the local addresses of transborder volatility. And this is as true of the stories that make up the news, as it is of more obviously literary fiction. It has been a few decades since any person with a camera or a video-recorder who happens to be in a scheme of war, crime or terror becomes a photojournalist, a kind of narrative First Responder, who puts the global narrative system on alert. Syndicated news services, stringers, overseas correspondents and their metropolitan handlers become parts of a vast system of triage for these "local" incidents and images, stoking the furnace of global media. Of course, there is a vast pyramid of news organisations, media, audiences and platforms, which form an uneven hierarchy of priorities and tastes. These include media that are resolutely local in their reach. But even they imagine the larger world through their own lenses.

So, "local" news is often a prismatic refraction of global issues, in a manner that changes the texture of locality, which is no longer bound by the parochial, the proximate and the familiar. Thus, locality regarding the news is no longer what it used to be. Nor is the global its simple antonym. The market for stories, whether of the real or of the less real, occupies a new geography which cannot be captured by opposing the global and the local. This development drives the transformation of the self into the newest form of raw material, a new horizon for extraction, exploitation and commodification.

In this new market, everyone has a story, including ordinary humans (who still are the reference point of what used to be called human interest), but also hams, nations, sports teams, genders (old and new), corporations, and franchises and cities among other social forms. This multiplication of the "I" and the "Me" is discernible even in the twilight zone of AI, where Siri, ChatGPT and numerous bots are in the race to display the same emotions, intuitions and vulnerabilities as any garden variety human can do. The strange symbiosis between the mineable self, the rebooted idea of locality and the story market can be better understood by looking at the single biggest force in the story market today, which is OTT (Over the Top) streaming, the entertainment technology of choice for such giants as Netflix, Amazon Prime, Disney and other companies in this market.

The character of streaming

It is widely known that streaming, driven by OTT technologies, which rely only on the Internet, and not on prior media infrastructures, is colonising much of the market previously dominated by big studios, their business models, their modes of distribution and their approaches to branding, promotion and audience-building.

Perhaps the biggest element of this booming story economy is the rise of "unknowns", mid-market actors and characters who appear to be woven into modest parts of professional life and seem extraordinarily ordinary. In India, a streaming market that Netflix CEO Reed Hastings claimed in 2018 would bring his company a 100 million subscribers. This trend highlights a more general global trend toward the democratisation of the self, a not entirely positive phenomenon.

The rise of the self is sometimes as seen as an expression of the best of enlightenment values, another face of the rise of the individual, of personal liberty, of freedom from assigned collective identities, and of freedom to craft one's own path from the raw materials of birth, context and social stereotypes. But that potential has now become a big part of the mineable self of our digital era. The intelligence of the artificial competes with previously human monopolies over affect, judgement and intuition. The classical individual is now an unstable composite of credit scores, actuarial charts, algorithmic storehouses, and consumer profiles, with virtually no need for a unified or continuous anchor in a singular person.

Thus, what the philosopher Charles Taylor studied as "The Sources of the Self" might today be retold as the story of the "sources of the selfie". The selfie taken with a celebrity, even by photobombing, is a quintessential expression of the democratisation of the self, equal to anyone else before the lens.

The chain of storytelling

This trend is now at the cutting edge of mining the self. Everyone has the right to have a self-centered story, whether of heroism, victimhood, martyrdom, or redemption, and anyone can get help to tell their story better with the paid help of influencers, coaches, writing apps, publishing platforms or, sometimes, through selling the right to mine their stories to entertainers, journalists, publicists or scriptwriters. The great chain of storytelling always strives for more ears and eyeballs. The careers of many YouTube stars have been powered by nothing more than the lucky virality of often trivial self-narrations.

Thus, two slogans meet one another in the global market for selves. One is that every self has a story, and the other one is that every such story deserves an audience. These two pieces of recent common sense fuel the rush to drill into every living mineshaft, looking for a chunk of ourselves with the tools that we have so recently invented. What we have now is a new super-commodity, bound only by our appetite for mining ourselves.

Stories, technology platforms and digital markets are transforming humans into commodities

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KEY HIGHLIGHTS

Context of the News
- Rapid expansion of digital platforms, OTT streaming, social media and AI-driven profiling.
- Emergence of a global economy where human identity, behaviour, emotions and social relations are monetised.
- Increasing relevance of data economy, surveillance capitalism, and platform dominance.
- Linked to debates on privacy, ethics, regulation of Big Tech, and digital rights.

Key Points
- Human identity and social interactions are becoming economic assets.
- Platforms extract behavioural data from personal stories, preferences and networks.
- Shift from industrial capitalism to data-driven capitalism.
- Rise of OTT platforms and influencer economy monetising personal narratives.
- Algorithms shape consumption, opinions, and cultural trends.
- Blurring of boundaries between private life and market space.
- "Local stories" increasingly curated for global consumption.

Static Linkages
- Right to Privacy recognised as a Fundamental Right (Article 21).
- Data as a factor of production in the digital economy.
- Ethical concerns related to human dignity and autonomy.
- Role of technology in social change and cultural transformation.
- Platform-based gig and creator economy as part of new employment patterns.
- Principles of informed consent and accountability in governance.

Critical Analysis
Positives
- Greater individual visibility and expression.
- Democratization of content creation.
- New economic opportunities in digital sectors.
- Inclusion of marginal and local voices.

Negatives
- Loss of privacy and constant surveillance.
- Exploitation of personal data without full consent.
- Psychological stress due to self-branding pressures.
- Cultural homogenisation.
- Concentration of power with few global platforms.

Governance Challenges
- Regulatory lag behind technology.
- Weak enforcement of data protection.
- Cross-border data control issues.

Way Forward
- Effective implementation of data protection laws.
- Transparent and accountable use of algorithms.
- Strengthening digital literacy and awareness.
- Competition regulation for Big Tech platforms.
- Ethical AI frameworks.
- Protection of cultural diversity and individual dignity.

A chance for India to polish the Kimberley Process

India has assumed the chair of the Kimberley Process (KP) for the year 2026. The KP is a multinational mechanism or structure for governing the trade of 'conflict diamonds' – the rough (or pre-polished) diamonds which are used illegally by rebel or insurgent groups across the world to undermine or threaten legitimate governments. The KP was initiated in May 2000 when the countries of southern Africa initiated dialogues to prevent the trade in conflict diamonds. Negotiations with 37 signatory parties, in 2003, led to the Kimberley Process Certification Scheme (KPCS). Today, the KP has 60 participants, representing 86 countries, and accounts for approximately 99.8% of the global rough diamond production.

The current structure
The KPCS is the mechanism to prevent the trade of conflict diamonds, which is enforced individually by KP participant countries to ensure that rough diamonds in the legitimate supply chain are KP-compliant. Each consignment is accompanied by a KP certificate corroborated by a participant country. The rough diamonds trade is permitted only between certified KP members who comply fully with these international standards. Additionally, participant countries are obliged to share timely and accurate statistical data for diamond production and trade.

Angola, Botswana, Canada, Congo, Namibia and Russia alone account for more than 85% of the production of rough diamonds, in quantity and value terms. Though India is not a producer, it is a major importer of rough diamonds, importing roughly 40% of the total global imports, both in quantity and value. As the world's leading cutting and polishing hub, centered in Surat and Mumbai, India re-exports polished diamonds to major markets which include China, Hong Kong, Israel, the United Arab Emirates and the United States. India's strategic position, at the heart of the global diamond value chain, gives it unique leverage

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As chair of the Kimberley Process for 2026, India can steer meaningful reforms in global diamond governance

within the KP to steer meaningful reforms in global diamond governance.

The core issues for India
The KP, a tripartite setup of governments, industry organisations and civil society, faces much criticism and challenges. First, a long-standing criticism is about the definition of 'conflict diamonds'. Its scope is very narrow, capturing only the financial mechanism between rebel groups and governments, while ignoring the illicit use of rough diamonds in state-linked abuses, human rights violations and human trafficking, environmental harm, abuses in artisanal mining, and illicit trade channels.

There are also fundamental questions about the decision-making process. Civil society asks how the KP can ever identify 'conflict diamonds' if any such decision is subject to political veto. Under the current system, any determination can be blocked. What happens when the KP identifies conflict diamonds?

The case of the Central African Republic, which was banned from exporting rough diamonds in 2013 and rejoined in 2024, shows that embargoes without strong support measures tend to increase smuggling and worsen violence rather than stop it. Additionally, while many governments highlighted the need to protect the mining communities, there was less agreement on whether the KP should also address state-related violence. A more inclusive approach would better reflect the full range of challenges communities experience.

Going forward, India may broaden the agenda, without reopening political fights, by forming a technical working group on violence and human rights risks beyond rebel insurgencies. The findings/recommendations from this group may build a consensus before any re-definition of conflict diamonds.

India can leverage its technological strengths to promote digital, tamper-proof KP certificates and harmonised customs data exchange. A

blockchain-based certification system, where each shipment carries a unique, immutable and time-stamped digital record linked to key shipment details, would significantly reduce fraud, enhance transparency, and modernise KP operations.

At the same time, India can support producer countries by establishing regional KP technical hubs in key producing areas, particularly in central and eastern Africa, offering training, IT support, certification assistance and forensic capacity. Such capacity-building would make reforms more feasible and collaborative rather than punitive.

Additionally, India can advance institutional reforms by adopting independent or third-party audits in a subset of participants and push for full public release of granular KP statistics from participant countries. This is a step towards greater transparency. Since the KP's strength is its tripartite structure, India can ensure that civil society engagement remains robust by facilitating open communication channels.

Focus on Africa
To address the community challenges, India can highlight how diamonds contribute to livelihoods in Africa. It can push the KP to explicitly acknowledge this reality by aligning its work with relevant Sustainable Development Goals, such as decent work, poverty reduction and responsible consumption. India can help ensure that the KP framework channels diamond revenues toward community development, supporting health, education, and local infrastructure, rather than allowing mining revenues to be bypassed. This would help shift the KP's narrative from blocking bad diamonds to enabling a responsible and inclusive diamond trade.

India, as the KP chair and the leader of the Global South, should start pursuing the reform agenda more aggressively to make it a more inclusive, progressive, sustainable, and rule-based multilateral body.

KEY HIGHLIGHTS

Context of the News
- India has assumed the Chairmanship (2026) of the Kimberley Process (KP).
- KP is a multilateral initiative to curb trade in conflict diamonds used to finance armed rebel groups.
- The Kimberley Process Certification Scheme (KPCS) was operationalised in 2003.
- KP currently has 60 participants representing 86 countries.
- Covers ~99.8% of global rough diamond production.

Key Points
- Conflict Diamonds: Rough diamonds used by rebel groups to undermine legitimate governments.
- KPCS Mechanism:
  - Trade permitted only among KP-compliant participants.
  - Each consignment must carry a KP Certificate issued by exporting country.
  - Mandatory sharing of diamond production and trade statistics.
- Major Producers:
  - Angola, Botswana, Canada, Congo, Namibia, Russia → >85% of global production.
- India's Role:
  - Not a producer but largest importer (~40% of global rough diamond imports).
  - World's leading cutting and polishing hub (Surat, Mumbai).
  - Re-exports polished diamonds to USA, UAE, Hong Kong, Israel, China.
- KP Structure:
  - Tripartite system: Governments + Industry + Civil Society.

- Key Criticisms:
  - Narrow definition of conflict diamonds.
  - Excludes state-sponsored violence, human rights abuses, environmental harm.
  - Consensus-based decision-making allows political veto.

Static Linkages
- Multilateral institutions and global governance mechanisms (NCERT Polity).
- International trade regulation and certification systems (Indian Economy).
- Resource governance in Africa (India Year Book).
- Technology in governance – e-certification, blockchain (Second ARC, Digital India).
- Sustainable Development Goals: Poverty reduction, decent work, responsible consumption.

Critical Analysis
Strengths
- India's strategic position enables leadership in global diamond governance.
- Scope to modernise KP through digital certification.
- Capacity-building approach preferable to punitive embargoes.
- Potential alignment with SDGs and community development.

Challenges
- Resistance to expanding definition of conflict diamonds.
- Weak enforcement due to consensus-based veto system.
- Limited capacity in African producer countries.
- Risk of increased smuggling if reforms are coercive.

Way Forward
- Form technical working group on violence and human rights risks.
- Introduce blockchain-based, tamper-proof digital KP certificates.
- Establish regional KP technical hubs in African producer regions.
- Encourage independent audits and public release of granular KP data.
- Strengthen civil society participation within KP framework.
- Align KP outcomes with livelihood and community development goals.

Back on track

India and Malaysia have set about repairing ties during the Modi visit

Making amends was at the top of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's 24-hour visit to Kuala Lumpur over the weekend after he had cancelled a planned trip to Malaysia last year, at short notice, to attend the ASEAN summit in October 2025. As a result, Mr. Modi said that he made Malaysia his first destination abroad in the new year. His talks with Malaysian Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim, who had visited India in 2024, resulted in MoUs, with plans to strengthen ties. There was some strain in India-Malaysia ties in 2025 too – although Malaysia condemned the Pahalgam terror attacks, Mr. Ibrahim had called for a "full and thorough enquiry" into the perpetrators and also for "de-escalation and meaningful dialogue between India and Pakistan", which ruffled feathers in New Delhi. He had even offered his services to mediate if required, and in October 2025, had hosted Pakistan Prime Minister Shahbaz Sharif for an official visit. It is, therefore, significant that Mr. Modi set aside these concerns, and that the joint statement said India and Malaysia condemned terrorism unequivocally "... including cross-border terrorism". India and Malaysia also discussed counter-terrorism cooperation, intelligence and information sharing and coordinating positions at the United Nations and the Financial Action Task Force on the issue. Other important decisions were an MoU on semiconductors, building on cooperation between IIT Madras Global and the Advanced Semiconductor Academy of Malaysia. Building ties in trade, defence, energy and digital technologies were highlighted by the two sides, that took care not to discuss contentious issues publicly, such as the continued stay of preacher Zakir Naik, wanted in India on UAPA charges.

The two sides also side-stepped their differences over multilateral issues. Mr. Modi's decision to skip the ASEAN summit despite accepting the invitation had also dealt a blow to negotiations on reviewing the ASEAN-India Trade in Goods Agreement (AITIGA). Critical comments by Commerce Minister Piyush Goyal about the FTA, as "badly negotiated" and "silly", and his reference to ASEAN countries as "B-teams" to China still rankled. Mr. Modi's visit was an important reminder of India's commitment even as New Delhi moves ahead with FTAs with Europe and the U.S. India will chair the BRICS Summit later this year – in the joint statement, India merely "noted" Malaysia's aspirations to become a member. Mr. Ibrahim will be invited as Malaysia is a BRICS partner country, while Indonesia has become a member. Mr. Modi's visit, which was welcomed warmly by Mr. Ibrahim, may thus lead to closer coordination but also lay the ground for closer ties between India and the ASEAN region, in terms of their shared geographies, and in dealing with the larger changes in the world.

KEY HIGHLIGHTS

Context of the News
- Prime Minister Narendra Modi undertook a 24-hour official visit to Malaysia (Kuala Lumpur) in early 2026.
- Visit aimed at resetting India–Malaysia relations after diplomatic strains in 2025.
- Earlier cancellation of Malaysia visit in 2025 due to India's participation in the ASEAN Summit.
- Strains arose due to:
  - Malaysian PM's remarks on Pahalgam terror attack
  - Call for India–Pakistan dialogue and de-escalation
  - Offer of mediation and hosting Pakistan PM in 2025.
- Visit resulted in MoUs and joint statement, signalling diplomatic course correction.

Key Points
- Joint statement unequivocally condemned terrorism, including cross-border terrorism.
- Agreement on:
  - Counter-terrorism cooperation
  - Intelligence and information sharing
  - Coordination at United Nations and Financial Action Task Force (FATF).
- MoU on semiconductors:
  - Cooperation between IIT Madras Global and Advanced Semiconductor Academy of Malaysia.
- Expansion of cooperation in:
  - Trade and investment
  - Defence
  - Energy
  - Digital technologies
- Contentious issues (e.g., Zakir Naik) deliberately kept out of public discourse.
- India merely "noted" Malaysia's aspiration to join BRICS.
- Malaysia to attend BRICS Summit as partner country (Indonesia is full member).
- Visit reaffirmed India's commitment to ASEAN despite focus on FTAs with EU and U.S.

Static Linkages
- Act East Policy: Strategic, economic and cultural engagement with Southeast Asia (MEA).
- ASEAN Centrality: Core principle of India's Indo-Pacific outlook.
- AITIGA: ASEAN–India Trade in Goods Agreement (in force since 2010).
- FATF: Global body combating money laundering and terror financing.
- India Semiconductor Mission: Supply chain resilience and technology self-reliance.

Critical Analysis
Positives
- Diplomatic reset strengthens India's position in Southeast Asia.
- Clear articulation on cross-border terrorism aligns Malaysia closer to India's stance.
- Semiconductor cooperation supports Make in India and supply-chain diversification.
- Strategic silence on contentious issues prevented diplomatic escalation.

Challenges
- ASEAN concerns over India's AITIGA criticism and summit-level disengagement.
- Trade deficit issues remain unresolved.
- Malaysia's balancing between India, China and Islamic world may limit alignment.

Way Forward
- Fast-track AITIGA review with safeguards for Indian industry.
- Institutionalise India–Malaysia strategic dialogue.
- Expand cooperation in green energy, critical minerals, digital public infrastructure.
- Ensure consistent high-level participation in ASEAN-led mechanisms.
- Strengthen people-to-people and educational exchanges.

RBI tells banks not to insist on collateral for loans to MSMEs

Regulator advises banks to extend collateral-free loans up to ₹20 lakh to all units financed under PM Employment Generation Programme

Lalatendu Mishra
MUMBAI

The Reserve Bank of India (RBI) on Monday asked banks not to insist on collateral security for loans up to ₹20 lakh extended to units in the micro, small enterprises (MSE) sector.

"Banks are also advised to extend collateral-free loans up to ₹20 lakh to all units financed under the Prime Minister Employment Generation Programme (PMEGP) administered by KVIC," the central bank said in its Lending to Micro, Small & Medium Enterprises (MSME) Sector (Amendment) Directions, 2026.

"Banks may, on the basis of good track record and financial position of the MSE units, increase the limit to dispense with the collateral requirement for loans up to ₹25 lakh as per their internal policy," the banking regulator said and added that banks may avail the benefit of credit guarantee scheme cover, where applicable.

"However, accepting gold and silver as collateral pledged voluntarily by borrowers for loans sanctioned by the banks up to the collateral free limit, will not be construed as a violation of the above mandate," the Reserve Bank said in the circular.

"With a view to facilitating improved access to formal credit, support entrepreneurial activity and strengthen last mile credit delivery for MSEs with limited collateral, it has been decided to enhance the limit of collateral free loans to MSEs from ₹10 lakh to ₹20 lakh," RBI Governor Sanjay Malhotra said in a statement on development and regulatory policies on Friday.

Fund push: The move is aimed at facilitating improved access to formal credit and to support entrepreneurial activity. PERIASAMY M

KEY HIGHLIGHTS

Context
- The Reserve Bank of India issued Lending to MSME Sector (Amendment) Directions, 2026.
- Aim: Improve access to formal credit for Micro & Small Enterprises (MSEs) with limited collateral.
- Announced by RBI Governor Sanjay Malhotra.

Key Provisions
(a) Enhancement of Collateral-Free Loan Limit
- Earlier limit: ₹10 lakh
- Revised limit: ₹20 lakh
- Banks cannot insist on collateral security for loans up to ₹20 lakh to MSEs.

(b) PMEGP-Specific Provision
- All units financed under Prime Minister Employment Generation Programme (PMEGP):
  - Eligible for collateral-free loans up to ₹20 lakh
- PMEGP is administered by Khadi and Village Industries Commission (KVIC).

(c) Optional Enhancement up to ₹25 Lakh
- Banks may increase collateral-free limit up to ₹25 lakh:
  - For MSEs with good repayment record
  - Subject to bank's internal policy

(d) Credit Guarantee Coverage
- Banks may avail coverage under Credit Guarantee Scheme for MSMEs (CGTMSE).
- Purpose: Risk sharing and encouragement of collateral-free lending.

(e) Clarification on Gold and Silver
- If borrower voluntarily pledges gold or silver:
  - It will not be treated as violation of collateral-free norms.
- Banks cannot compel such collateral.

Objectives of the Measure
- Improve last-mile credit delivery
- Promote entrepreneurship and self-employment
- Reduce reliance on informal moneylenders
- Strengthen financial inclusion of MSEs

Static Linkages
- MSEs are part of the MSME sector, which:
  - Contributes ~30% to GDP
  - Is a major source of employment and exports
- Linked with:
  - Priority Sector Lending (PSL)
  - Atmanirbhar Bharat
  - Inclusive growth strategy

Challenges
- Higher credit risk for banks
- Possibility of NPAs if appraisal is weak
- Need for strong monitoring and credit assessment

Way Forward
- Shift towards cash-flow based lending
- Use of GST, digital transaction data
- Strengthen CGTMSE and borrower financial literacy

Trade framework gives India room to navigate but tilts ground in US favour

PRATAP BHANU MEHTA

THE LINE between pragmatism, giving in to the art of the possible, and abdication, abandoning judgement, accountability, or principle, is very thin. The Indo-US framework agreement on trade is a case in point.

Public discourse, of course, is dominated by the theatre of the agreement, presenting it as loud declamations of India's power and the Prime Minister's wisdom. But two framings undergird its defence. The first is the triumphalist America lobby, which believes that India's future is hitched to the United States. It sees this as a new strategic breakthrough, a deepening embrace from which neither side will be able to escape.

The second is the economic pragmatists. The agreement is better than the status quo. It removes Russia-related punitive tariffs. It gives India renewed access to the US market, potentially restoring competitiveness for Indian exports. It may consolidate India's trajectory toward openness and allow a China-plus-one strategy to come back into play. As a bonus, it might even induce reforms, shaking up entrenched positions on GMOs and non-food agriculture. How all this plays out is anyone's guess. There is no detailed agreement yet, and its success will depend as much on domestic reforms, competitor behaviour, and the evolution of Sino-US relations as on anything written on paper.

But even if we acknowledge that the agreement has some pragmatic economic potential, it does not pass the smell test. For starters, this is not a reciprocal free-trade agreement. As Trump has made clear, America is not playing for reciprocal equality; it is playing for imperial domination. Even on its own terms, the agreement reflects this asymmetry. The new tariff regime is worse for India than what existed before Trump came to power. In a manner reminiscent of 19th-century imperial trade, the tariff structure favours the United States: India cuts tariffs to zero, while the US imposes rates as high as 18 per cent. More astonishing still, India has committed to purchasing $500 billion worth of American goods over five years. Which free-trade agreement contains a one-way obligation by one party to massively purchase goods from the other?

This commitment can also distort India's policy choices. Purchase targets of this magnitude risk reshaping industrial strategy and building resilience by fiat rather than design. They are also likely to be met only through a major reorientation of defence procurement, with profound strategic consequences. This is not an agreement for free trade and openness, despite the ideologically mystifying language of our economists. It is an agreement for mercantilist extraction, one that increases vulnerability.

Trade is never just about trade. India's strategic abdications are already visible. India's position on the Ukraine war was a classic case of evasion. But being compelled under duress to do what one might have chosen on principle, namely, to stop purchases of Russian oil, is something else altogether.

Does anyone remember when our government proudly declared that no power would be allowed to define India's relations with third countries? That claim now rings hollow. We routinely allow it to happen. The ultimate repercussions for India-Russia relations will depend on many contingencies, including the outcome of the war in Ukraine. But the blunt truth is already evident: India's relations with other states are increasingly determined not by its own judgement, but by external pressure. We are now putting ourselves formally under surveillance on this score.

As long as both India and America remain open societies, the organic sinews of connection between them can be powerful. These connections are real, and they matter. But they should not be confused with strategic alignment at the level that counts for national security.

The designs and political economy of the American state are something else altogether. The United States does not see India as a strategic partner in the arenas that matter most to India's security, its immediate neighbourhood. On Pakistan, Washington has repeatedly subordinated Indian concerns to short-term American objectives, and will continue to do so. Historically, the United States has frequently had an interest in managing, rather than resolving, regional conflict, keeping them below the threshold of explosion while retaining leverage over all parties.

Even on China, the supposed cornerstone of Indo-US convergence, the jury remains out. The United States' primary objective is not to secure India's rise, but to manage China's power on terms favourable to itself. India figures in this strategy less as an autonomous pole and more as an instrument, useful when pressure is needed, dispensable when expedient. The history of great-power politics suggests that such instrumental alignments are reversible, and often abruptly so. To call this agreement a strategic breakthrough is a gross abuse of language.

Liberal internationalist wars in the name of democracy promotion have indeed receded. But this should not be mistaken for a retreat from imperial power. What has replaced them is a more arbitrary and transactional assertion of dominance, one that relies on sanctions, tariffs, regulatory coercion, financial leverage and even military intervention. The United States increasingly demands regulatory conformity even in domains that ought to fall squarely within domestic jurisdiction: Regulatory regimes, trade standards, data regimes. In its engagement with others, sovereignty is not denied in principle, but hollowed out in practice.

American agreements are no longer anchored in stable institutional commitments. The framework agreement reflects this reality. Formally, it gives both sides room to renegotiate. Substantively, however, it embeds asymmetries that favour American leverage. Recent experience has shown that when pressure is applied, it is India that blinks.

Acknowledging power asymmetry is realism. To internalise it so completely that one relinquishes independent judgement is something else. We might want to, in the name of pragmatism, give in; we could even make the best of this deal in a way that the consequences are not bad. But this is not a triumph. The perfume of official announcements cannot disguise the stench of our own diminishment.

The writer is contributing editor, The Indian Express

> The United States does not see India as a strategic partner in the arenas that matter most to India's security, its immediate neighbourhood. On Pakistan, Washington has repeatedly subordinated Indian concerns

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KEY HIGHLIGHTS

Context of the News
- India and the United States announced a framework agreement on trade and economic cooperation.
- The framework is not a Free Trade Agreement (FTA) but a broad, non-binding arrangement.
- It follows prolonged trade frictions, tariff disputes, and sanctions-related pressures.
- The agreement is positioned as part of India's evolving trade and strategic engagement with major powers.

Key Points
- The agreement:
  - Does not ensure full tariff reciprocity.
  - Includes expectations of large-scale Indian purchases of US goods.
  - Allows renegotiation but embeds asymmetric leverage.
- The tariff structure:
  - India reduces tariffs on select items.
  - The US retains higher tariff flexibility on Indian exports.
- Strategic context:
  - Russia–Ukraine conflict.
  - US–China rivalry.
  - Global supply chain realignments (China-plus-one).

Static Linkages
- Principle of reciprocity in trade agreements.
- Concept of strategic autonomy in foreign policy.
- Use of sanctions and tariffs as instruments of economic statecraft.
- Defence procurement and external dependence.
- WTO norms: non-discrimination and fairness.

Critical Analysis
Positive Aspects
- Potential restoration of Indian export competitiveness.
- Improved access to the US market.
- May support supply chain diversification.
- Signals policy continuity towards trade openness.

Concerns
- Non-reciprocal nature undermines equal partnership.
- Purchase commitments may:
  - Distort industrial policy.
  - Constrain defence and energy choices.
- Risk of external pressure influencing foreign policy decisions.
- Weakens India's bargaining position in future negotiations.
- May erode strategic autonomy in practice.

Way Forward
- Ensure reciprocity in tariff concessions.
- Avoid rigid purchase obligations.
- Strengthen domestic manufacturing competitiveness.
- Maintain diversified strategic and trade partnerships.
- Subject major trade commitments to parliamentary scrutiny.
- Anchor agreements in multilateral, rule-based frameworks.

An urban tragedy created by many abdications

SUDHIR VOHRA

IT'S BEEN a little more than three weeks since the tragic incident in Noida, where a young man drove his car into a deep water-filled pit and drowned while waiting for help — he was, reportedly, standing atop the sinking vehicle. While we hope the administration will perform its mandated task, some aspects of this horrendous incident need to be considered dispassionately to understand why such incidents keep recurring.

One, the plot of land where the midnight tragedy took place on January 16 is part of the planned development of Noida's Sector 150 — it is not a semi-rural geography. The road on which the car was travelling is a part of the Noida project.

Google Earth's satellite picture reveals certain facts, which invite questions related to urban development. The incident did not occur at a traffic junction. It happened at a fairly wide four-lane main road, which suddenly turns a full 90 degrees and becomes a two-lane single road. The width of the road, as well as its geometry, is not as per the norms of the Central Road Research Institute. It also does not fit the criteria set by the Indian Road Congress. In layman's terms, all four-lane roads that have a verge in the centre need to be turned in a slow curve. Such curves depend on the speed of traffic movement that needs to be monitored. Speed limits need to be enforced strictly.

Two, there is no visible crash barrier on the side of the road — ensuring this should have been the mandate of both the planning agency and the execution department. Therefore, in the dense fog, the unfortunate car driver drove into what Google Earth calls the "Sector lake".

Three, why was there a water body/lake at the place of the accident?

It was apparently a plot of land allotted/sold by the Noida Authority, in which a building with a double basement, or more, was to be constructed. The project never took off. If newspaper reports are to be believed, the project developer sold it to another developer, who too could not complete it. Thus, water collected in a deep hole in the ground — it wasn't cordoned off, at least on the side where the road runs along the plot.

Fourth, how was the pit for the basement car park so full of water? The answer to this, too, is simple. The plot is at a site that is very close to, or perhaps in, the floodplains — the Hindon river's *pushta*. It is well known that groundwater levels near the boundaries of a river are always high (as underground channels of water seep into the river basin and then flow downstream).

Thus, even if there is no source of water to fill the neglected basement pit, the surrounding groundwater would have filled it up over time. The Noida Authorities need to answer whether such a *pushta* land (in the river's floodplain) should ever have been sold?

Given that the double basement buildings are about 30-40 feet deep before the foundations are cast, the water level in the pit would easily have been about 20 feet deep, enough to drown the car and its hapless driver.

Will there be any accountability or responsibility for the incident? Although there have been some movement — builders have been served notice and the Noida Authority CEO put on "wait list" — the probability is terrifyingly low.

After all, the tragedy can be ascribed to a number of reasons and agencies. The Noida Authority's planning department, as well as its road department. The developer/builder and the so-called owners of the plot, too, must be held responsible. The authorities in charge of rescue operations, who arrived too late to save the victim, must bear responsibility. It is also an abdication on part of the local police who were probably too overwhelmed by other matters of law enforcement to give adequate attention to the site of the tragedy.

And, finally, the citizenry, too, that seems to have got used to irregularities. For them, the omissions at the site may have appeared trivial before things took a tragic turn.

The writer is an architect and urbanist

Google Earth's satellite picture reveals certain facts, which invite questions related to urban development

KEY HIGHLIGHTS

Context of the News
- A fatal accident occurred in Noida (Sector 150) where a vehicle fell into a deep, water-filled construction pit along a main road.
- The incident highlighted systemic failures in urban planning, road safety norms, land-use regulation, and governance accountability.
- The area is part of planned urban development, not an unauthorized settlement.
- The pit belonged to an abandoned real estate project with multiple basement excavation.
- The site lies close to the Hindon river floodplain.

Key Points
- Sudden road geometry change from four-lane to two-lane with sharp turn.
- Absence of crash barriers and warning signage.
- Non-adherence to IRC road design standards.
- Sale/allotment of land in floodplain-adjacent area.
- High groundwater table led to water accumulation in basement pit.
- Lack of site fencing and hazard mitigation.
- Delay in emergency rescue response.
- Diffused responsibility among planning authority, road department, developer, police, and disaster response agencies.

Static Linkages
- Master Planning and Zonal Planning – NCERT Geography (Urbanisation)
- Road safety standards – Indian Road Congress (IRC)
- Floodplains as ecological buffers – NCERT Physical Geography
- Groundwater–river interaction – NCERT Geography
- Disaster preparedness – NDMA Guidelines
- Doctrine of Public Trust – Indian Polity
- Accountability in public administration – ARC Reports

Critical Analysis
- Gap between urban planning and on-ground execution.
- Weak enforcement of technical standards.
- Environmental concerns ignored in real estate-driven urban growth.
- Fragmented institutional responsibility.
- Ethical failure in ensuring citizen safety.
- Reactive governance instead of preventive regulation.

Way Forward
- Mandatory compliance with IRC and CRRI norms.
- Prohibition of deep basements in floodplain and high water table zones.
- Periodic safety audits of urban infrastructure.
- Clear fixation of accountability among agencies.
- Mandatory fencing and monitoring of abandoned construction sites.
- Integration of hydrological mapping in urban planning.
- Strengthening urban disaster response mechanisms.

Report card for the officer is a good idea

SINCE INDEPENDENCE, India has faced a challenge with respect to the bureaucracy. The civil services, designed for the needs of an extractive and imperious colonial power, needed to be transformed to a "steel frame" that serves the needs of a young democracy. Civil service reforms began with the Constitution, continued with the first Administrative Reforms Commission (1966), focused on reforming training and promotions with the second ARC (2009) and the Right to Information Act. The "administrative scorecards" sent by the Cabinet Secretariat to secretaries in the central government must be viewed through this prism of making the civil services more efficient and responsive. As this newspaper reported, the scorecards assess officers and their departments out of 100, with a special emphasis on "file disposal", "Output/Activities" and "expenditure on schemes/ capital expenditure".

Over the last decade, the Centre has also made several attempts to bring the bureaucracy up to speed through digitisation, Mission Karmayogi, lateral entry and PRAGATI, to fast-track infrastructure projects. Some of these schemes have drawn criticism on two broad parameters. First, they were too dependent on the executive's political will. Second, they left in place far too much subjectivity. The "report card" is a step towards addressing both.

Bureaucracies are notoriously impervious to change. Part of the reason for this is the ability of "governmentality" to rationalise and absorb within its framework the very measures that are meant to change it. Administrative scorecards can easily become just another task to tick off, rather than being seen as an impetus for improved efficiency. The other danger with assessments is that they become more important than what they are meant to assess, as when a test score matters more than learning. However, if these pitfalls are kept in mind and avoided, the administrative scorecard has the potential to move the bureaucracy forward in ways that are measurable — and much-needed.

KEY HIGHLIGHTS

Context of the News
- Post-Independence, India inherited a colonial administrative system designed for control, not democratic service delivery.
- Successive reforms aimed to convert the bureaucracy into a development-oriented and accountable "steel frame".
- Major reform milestones include:
  - Constitutional provisions ensuring neutrality and continuity of services.
  - First Administrative Reforms Commission (1966) focusing on structure and efficiency.
  - Second Administrative Reforms Commission (2009) emphasising performance, ethics, and citizen-centric governance.
  - RTI Act, 2005 enhancing transparency and accountability.
- Recently, the Cabinet Secretariat introduced administrative scorecards for Secretaries and central departments.
- Scorecards assess performance out of 100, focusing on:
  - File disposal
  - Outputs/activities
  - Expenditure on schemes and capital expenditure

Key Points
- Scorecards introduce quantifiable and standardised performance assessment.
- Aim to reduce subjectivity in evaluating senior civil servants.
- Part of broader governance reforms such as:
  - Mission Karmayogi
  - Digitisation and e-Office systems
  - PRAGATI
  - Lateral entry at senior levels
- Focus on outcomes aligns with results-based governance.
- Attempts to institutionalise accountability beyond political discretion.

Static Linkages
- Indian Constitution: Articles 309–311 (civil services safeguards).
- ARC Reports: Performance appraisal, accountability, and citizen-centric administration.
- Economic Survey: Importance of capital expenditure for long-term growth.
- Indian Polity (NCERT/Laxmikanth): Bureaucracy as a permanent executive.
- Ethics in governance: Performance with integrity and public interest.

Critical Analysis
Positive Aspects
- Enhances measurability of administrative performance.
- Encourages timely decision-making and faster implementation.
- Supports fiscal discipline through focus on expenditure efficiency.
- Reduces arbitrariness in evaluations.

Concerns
- Risk of mechanical compliance (tick-box approach).
- Over-emphasis on quantitative indicators may ignore policy quality.
- Departments may prioritise scores over substantive outcomes.
- Cultural resistance within entrenched bureaucratic systems.

Way Forward
- Combine scorecards with qualitative assessments and peer review.
- Link evaluation outcomes with training and capacity building, not only incentives.
- Periodic revision of indicators to reflect policy complexity.
- Incorporate citizen-centric outcomes and service delivery indicators.
- Maintain balance between accountability and bureaucratic autonomy.