



# **DAILY NEWS PAPER ANALYSIS**

**DATE - 14/05/2026**

**SOURCE : THE HINDU & INDIAN  
EXPRESS**

**CIVILS WITH AKASH  
SECTOR 25 CHANDIGARH**

# Centre doubles the import duty on gold, silver; move is criticised as retrograde

T.G.A. Sharad Raghavan  
NEW DELHI

The Centre has doubled the effective tax paid on the import of gold and silver to a total of 18.4% from the previous 9.2%.

The changes, which came into effect on Wednesday, were made through two separate notifications issued late on Tuesday night.

According to sources in the government, the decision was taken against the backdrop of the impact of the West Asia crisis on India's current account deficit (CAD). The CAD is the margin by which a country's total imports of goods, services, and transfers exceeds its exports.

However, industry players and experts said this "retrograde" and "blunt" decision will not only encourage a shift to smuggling but also have other negative effects on employment.

The Finance Ministry has not yet released an official statement on the duty hikes or its justifications.

**Customs duty up to 10%**  
Previously, the basic customs duty on gold and silver stood at 5%, with a 1% Agriculture Infrastructure and Development Cess (AIDC), and a 3% Integrated Goods and Services Tax (IGST) rate on the total assessable value of the imports, which includes the cost, insurance, and freight price, and the applicable basic customs duties, taking the effective import tax to about 9.2%.

Now, the customs duty has been hiked to 10%, and the AIDC has become 5%, taking the effective tax rate, including the IGST, to about 18.4%. The decision comes soon after Prime Minister Narendra Modi's exhortations to the public to reduce gold purchases for at least a year, among other actions, to help protect India's foreign exchange reserves and the rupee exchange rate.

"The current geopolitical situation has created significant volatility in glo-

## Bullion burden

The decision comes soon after Prime Minister Modi's austerity appeal to the public to reduce gold purchases

| Tax   | Earlier      | Now           |
|---|--------------|---------------|
| Basic customs duty                              | 5%           | 10%           |
| Agriculture Infrastructure and Development Cess | 1%           | 5%            |
| Integrated Goods and Services Tax*              | 3%           | 3%            |
| <b>Total</b>                                    | <b>-9.2%</b> | <b>-18.4%</b> |



Note: IGST is applicable on the assessable value of the gold, which includes the Cost, Insurance and Freight (CIF) value and the basic customs duty.

bal crude oil markets and international shipping routes," a government source explained. "As a large importer of crude oil, India remains vulnerable to elevated energy prices and supply-side disruptions, which can increase the import bill, exert pressure on inflation, and the CAD."

They further said that the government was prioritising India's foreign exchange resources towards essential imports such as crude oil, fertilizers, industrial raw materials, defence requirements, critical technologies, and capital goods.

"In contrast, precious metals, while culturally and financially significant, are predominantly consumption and investment driven in nature," they said. "Such imports involve substantial outflow of foreign exchange."

Industry players, economists, and investment advisors have said that the decision is not likely to impact Indians' demand for gold, and would instead increase smuggling.

"Our consistent position is that hiking import duties rarely curbs gold imports – it merely inflates prices," the Gem & Jewellery Export Promotion Council said in a statement. "Despite gold prices doubling recently, imports have not declined proportionally. Such measures often fuel smuggling and escalate export costs."

This sentiment was echoed by Sachin Sawrikar, founder and managing partner at Artha Bharat Investment Managers, who

termed the import duty hike as a "blunt instrument that history tells us rarely achieves its intended purpose".

The GJEPC also said that the most severe impact of this policy will be felt by MSME manufacturers, who are the "backbone" of the industry, accounting for 80% of GJEPC's membership and who are currently facing a critical liquidity crunch.

According to industry insiders, the decision to hike the import duties on precious metals will see imports fall by about 15-20%.

According to data with the Ministry of Commerce and Industry, India imported \$71.9 billion of just gold in 2025-26, up 24% from the previous year.

### Lack of transparency

In a note, the think-tank Global Trade Research Initiative (GTRI) pointed out that the notifications issued by the government continue to be very difficult to understand, which defeats the objective of transparent taxation the government is trying to achieve.

Determining the actual applicable duty now requires going through multiple layers of amendments, corrections and tariff changes issued over several decades, the note added.

"Such drafting defeats the objective of transparent taxation and runs contrary to India's stated goal of improving ease of doing business and simplifying customs procedures," GTRI said.

- Higher burden on MSME jewellers,
- Impact on gems & jewellery exports,
- Limited impact on actual gold demand.

## Static Linkages

- CAD occurs when imports exceed exports of goods and services.
- High gold imports widen CAD and increase external vulnerability.
- Customs Duty is imposed under the Customs Act, 1962.
- Gold acts as:
  - Store of value,
  - Hedge against inflation,
  - Safe-haven asset.
- AIDC introduced in Union Budget 2021.
- High import duties historically linked with rise in smuggling.

## Critical Analysis

### Positives

- Helps conserve forex reserves.
- May reduce import bill.
- Supports rupee stability.
- Useful during external economic shocks.

### Negatives

- May increase gold smuggling.
- Gold demand in India is relatively price inelastic.
- MSME jewellery sector may face liquidity stress.
- Higher compliance burden due to complex tariff structure.

## Way Forward

- Promote:
  - Sovereign Gold Bonds (SGBs),
  - Gold ETFs,
  - Gold Monetisation Scheme.
- Strengthen anti-smuggling enforcement.
- Adopt stable and predictable tariff policy.
- Simplify customs duty structure for ease of doing business.

## KEY HIGHLIGHTS:

### Context

- Centre increased effective import duty on gold and silver from 9.2% to 18.4%.
- Done through increase in:
  - Basic Customs Duty (BCD): 5% → 10%
  - Agriculture Infrastructure and Development Cess (AIDC): 1% → 5%
- Decision linked to:
  - Rising crude oil prices,
  - West Asia geopolitical tensions,
  - Pressure on Current Account Deficit (CAD),
  - Need to conserve foreign exchange reserves.

### Key Points

- India imported nearly \$71.9 billion worth of gold in 2025-26.
- Gold is among India's largest import items after crude oil and electronics.
- Government objective:
  - Reduce non-essential imports,
  - Protect rupee stability,
  - Manage Balance of Payments (BoP).
- Industry concerns:
  - Increase in smuggling,

# Protection to religion not just for 'essential practices', says Centre

The Hindu Bureau  
NEW DELHI

The Constitution presumes that every religious practice is protected unless it violates public order, morality, and health, the Centre told the Supreme Court on Wednesday.

Appearing before a nine-judge Bench headed by Chief Justice of India Surya Kant in the Sabarimala review hearing, Solicitor General Tushar Mehta said the protection afforded to religion was not restricted to "essential religious practices" alone, but had a wider ambit.

Mr. Mehta, who opened the rejoinder in the constitutional reference hearing, said the burden was on the challenger to show that a religious practice breached public order, morality, and health.

He further submitted that fundamental rights in the Constitution have been interpreted expansively by the court in the past. Only Article 25 (right to religion and freedom of conscience) and Article 26 (freedom of denominations or any section thereof to manage their own religious affairs) were given restrictive meanings by the court. "Articles 25 and 26 were the only fundamental rights the court gave restricted meanings, saying the rights would be protected to the extent of 'essential religious practices' only," Mr. Mehta submitted.

He pointed out that the phrase 'essential religious practices' is absent in the



text of the Constitution, arguing that it was sheer judicial creativity at work.

## Interconnected rights

Mr. Mehta added that Articles 25 and 26 are interconnected, not isolated silos, submitting that an individual's freedom of conscience and the right of a denomination to manage its own affairs are interconnected. Article 26 is only a manifestation of the individual right in a collective form, he said.

"Fundamental rights are not islands," he said.

The full day hearing also saw the Supreme Court observe that people need not go to a temple to be religious. A small lamp lit in a hut was an equally poignant expression of faith, Chief Justice Kant said.

Justice B.V. Nagarathna added Hinduism was a way of life, and did not depend on ritualistic practices or frequent visits to temples.

Legal scholar and former director of the National Judicial Academy, Mohan Gopal, submitted that what Justice Nagarathna referred to was called 'autotheism' or the individual freedom of conscience to explore one's own inner conscience.

- Article 26:
  - Rights of religious denominations to manage religious affairs.
- Centre's arguments:
  - ERP doctrine is judicially evolved.
  - Burden lies on challenger to prove violation of constitutional limits.
  - Articles 25 and 26 are interconnected rights.
- Court observations:
  - Religion is not limited to rituals or temple visits.
  - Faith can be expressed individually.

## Static Linkages

- Shirur Mutt Case (1954):
  - Origin of ERP doctrine.
- Kesavananda Bharati Case (1973):
  - Basic Structure Doctrine.
- S.R. Bommai Case (1994):
  - Secularism as Basic Structure.
- Indian secularism:
  - Equal respect for all religions.
- Constitutional restrictions on religious freedom:
  - Public order
  - Morality
  - Health
  - Other Fundamental Rights.
- Constitutional morality vs social morality debate.

## Critical Analysis

### Positives

- Expands scope of religious freedom.
- Reduces excessive judicial interference in theology.
- Strengthens freedom of conscience.
- Protects denominational autonomy.

### Concerns

- May protect discriminatory practices.
- Conflict between:
  - Religious freedom
  - Gender equality
  - Constitutional morality.
- Ambiguity in defining morality.
- Difficulty in balancing individual and collective rights.

## Way Forward

- Develop clear constitutional standards for religious disputes.
- Balance:
  - Religious freedom
  - Equality
  - Dignity.
- Ensure judicial restraint in theological matters.
- Promote reform through dialogue and constitutional values.
- Focus on rights-based interpretation instead of strict ERP test.

## KEY HIGHLIGHTS:

### Context

- In the Sabarimala review hearing, the Union Government told the Supreme Court that all religious practices are constitutionally protected unless they violate:
  - Public order
  - Morality
  - Health
- Centre argued that the Constitution does not mention the "Essential Religious Practices (ERP)" doctrine explicitly.
- Solicitor General Tushar Mehta stated that Articles 25 and 26 should be interpreted broadly.
- Supreme Court discussed:
  - Freedom of conscience
  - Religious autonomy
  - Constitutional morality
  - Individual faith beyond rituals.

### Key Points

- Article 25:
  - Freedom of conscience.
  - Right to profess, practice, and propagate religion.

# Just war, power balance and modern conflict

Alexander Pope's famous line, "Now Europe balance'd, neither side prevails: For nothing's left in either of the scales", reminds us that peace without war is perhaps best achieved when there is a balance of power. Hugo Grotius's concept of a just war was swallowed by the ambiguities of international law and the realpolitik of national self-interest. Special treaties of 1815 and 1839 guaranteed Switzerland and Belgium protection from attack but provided less protection for the latter. The Hague Convention III of 1907 established procedures requiring a formal declaration of war or an armistice before hostilities could begin. The Covenant of the League of Nations (Article 12(1)) believed that antecedent arbitration or judicial settlement and a three month cooling period would obviate war. The Kellogg-Briand Pact (1928) condemned recourse to war and to settle controversies which were prescribed to be achieved by pacific means.



Rajeev Dhavan  
Senior Advocate of the Supreme Court of India

inspection. But the U.S. and Israel want Iran to become defenceless and surrender all its missiles and weaponry as well. If any country should do this, it should be Israel.

The realities of just wars have been diluted out of any respect for meaning with the fall of the Soviet Union. The balance-of-power protections outlined in Pope's poem have disappeared. The nub of all this is the concept of anticipatory self defence which the U.S. unreservedly has used in its attack on Vietnam, Libya, Afghanistan, Iraq, Venezuela, and now Iran. Under the doctrine of state responsibility, the U.S. used any excuse to retaliate against the Latin American states in the 19th century if its citizens were threatened claiming that international law sanctioned these because it had the 'responsibility' to protect its citizens.

In the famous Caroline incident of 1837, where an American ship was smashed over the Niagara Falls, the British claimed self-defence. America's Daniel Webster (lawyer and diplomat) contemporarily warned against its unchecked disproportionate uses. For Mr. Trump, no law has any meaning. America can no longer claim its role as the peacekeeper of the world.

**The West Asia war**  
But let us turn to the West Asia war. Israel's pretence of self-defence against the state of Iran thin. Its responses in Gaza, Iran, Lebanon and Syria involve territorial aggression and are illegal and genocidal. Mr. Trump's imperialism is guided by Israel. One recalls seeing a T-shirt in Jerusalem with the legend: "Don't worry America, Israel is behind you". It is difficult to understand how survivors of the Holocaust can inflict such inhumane violence.

At the root of the conflict are three important aspects. The first, the Gulf countries have never had the military prowess to defend their oil interests, property and the excessive lifestyle of governing elites. West Asia was broken into a number of nations whose military defence came from imperial nations – earlier from England, and now America. In this helpless situation, they are unlikely to give up their defence arrangements with the U.S. even though its leaders or even populace do not want adverse relations with neighbouring Iran. They are cautious. Eventually, they will side with the U.S. after Iran's counterattack on their military and energy installations and on the opening of the Strait of Hormuz.

Second, the U.S. wants to control, with the Strait firmly under its control. This is the third phase objective of the "undeclared" war after the first and second phases of the war targeted military and then energy resources. Mr. Trump

wants a negotiated unilateral surrender though his objectives change by the day. If the Strait is to be released from Iran's control, a limited aerial and a ground attack on Kharg Island and southern Iran will alter the war irretrievably.

The third question concerns who will be responsible for the reconstruction of Iran after the conflict ends, and whether reparations will be provided by the U.S., or by China and Russia, to restore the country and the balance of power.

The talks in Islamabad/Pakistan were bound to fail. The conditionalities of both parties were incompatible. The only issue that should have been discussed was the limited logistics of ceasefire. Other issues did not have a 'yes' or 'no' answer. Each issue needed to be discussed, step by step in later meetings. Nuclear energy is resolvable by oversight. Iran was open to inspection but this was defeated in Mr. Trump's first term. Giving up missiles altogether is unreasonable for either side.

Reducing America's military presence in the Gulf and West Asia will take time and require a multi-lateral meeting of the Gulf states. The answer to the Strait of Hormuz is neither Mr. Trump's impending war, nor a negotiation between America and Iran. It requires a multilateral discussion initiated by the United Nations or a consortium of nations, including all affected countries, including China, not just Pakistan as a proxy. They have to join the peace initiative anew. Otherwise it is Munich of 1938 all over again. Pakistan has played its part. A wider initiative is needed to look for a solution not thwarted by conditionalities, proxies, or Mr. Trump's mood and seal for war.

**People and a moral voice**  
The UN has become meaningless as a peace keeper. Perhaps Mr. Trump wants to lead a U.S.-aligned international council that includes participation from some Gulf countries. We are also witnessing the WTO, which was created to defend America's imperial economic interest, descending into chaos along with climate change treaties.

The post-World War II which envisaged a human rights-based democratic order has been exposed as a moral façade for global predation and has failed to protect people humanely, while providing moral excuses for imperial actors. Too many sins are created in the name of democracy and human rights.

But to return to the concept of a just war, unsupported by a balance of power to preserve world peace: the concept of a just war has become meaningless except as a much-needed moral voice. This moral voice rests with the people of the world – all of us, not our rulers.

## Static Linkages

- Sovereign equality of states.
- Collective security under UN Charter.
- Balance of Power theory.
- Nuclear Non-Proliferation framework.
- Strategic importance of chokepoints:
  - Strait of Hormuz,
  - Suez Canal,
  - Malacca Strait.
- India's energy dependence on West Asia.
- Principle of peaceful settlement of disputes.

## Critical Analysis

### Positives

- Highlights importance of:
  - diplomacy,
  - multilateralism,
  - rule-based international order.
- Emphasises need for peaceful conflict resolution.

### Concerns

- Ambiguity in "self-defence" can justify unilateral wars.
- Weakening credibility of:
  - UN,
  - WTO,
  - global governance institutions.
- Risk of:
  - oil supply disruptions,
  - regional instability,
  - humanitarian crisis,
  - nuclear escalation.

### India's Concerns

- Energy security.
- Safety of Indian diaspora in Gulf.
- Stability of maritime trade routes.
- Maintaining strategic autonomy.

## Way Forward

- Strengthen UN-led multilateral diplomacy.
- Clarify legal standards on anticipatory self-defence.
- Ensure IAEA-based nuclear oversight.
- Promote regional dialogue involving Gulf countries and Iran.
- Reduce militarisation of strategic maritime zones.
- Reform global governance institutions for greater credibility.

## KEY HIGHLIGHTS:

### Context

- Escalation of tensions between the U.S., Israel and Iran has revived debate on:
  - legality of use of force,
  - anticipatory self-defence,
  - weakening of UN-led global order.
- The conflict has major implications for:
  - global energy security,
  - Strait of Hormuz,
  - international law,
  - and regional stability in West Asia.

### Key Points

- Article 2(4) of UN Charter:
  - prohibits threat or use of force against territorial integrity of states.
- Article 51:
  - recognises inherent right of individual or collective self-defence against armed attack.
- Debate exists on:
  - "anticipatory self-defence" before an actual attack occurs.
- NATO collective defence:
  - Article 5 allows collective response if a member is attacked.
- Strait of Hormuz:
  - critical global oil transit chokepoint.
- Growing concerns over:
  - unilateral military interventions,
  - decline of multilateralism,
  - weakening role of UN institutions.

Modern geopolitics challenges traditional notions of lawful and just wars

# The Xi-Trump summit – shadow boxing on Iran

An American President stuck in an unwinnable and unpopular war, undertakes a risky trip to Beijing to seek Chinese intervention for a desperately needed off-ramp. The hosts feign sympathy and help, albeit in a layered, unbarbed manner. They are subtle and discreet in proposing a hefty quid pro quo. Over the next few months, things are sorted out: the White House disengages from a sticky mess, quietly letting the “sanquished” opponent prevail. Long sceptical and often hostile, Washington becomes a reluctant believer in China’s “peaceful rise”.

The 1972 summit is this a likely pre-script for Donald Trump’s visit to Beijing that begins today? It may turn out to be, but it does sum up the first United States-China bilateral summit in February 1972, when a Vietnam-mauled President Richard Nixon met Chairman Mao. As the post-visit Shanghai Communiqué panned out, the U.S. recognised the long-reviled Communist People’s Republic as the sole China, gave it a F5 status, and threw Taiwan under the bus. Subsequent western capital and technology surge propelled China’s phenomenal economic and geostrategic take-off. In return, China abandoned Hanoi, enabling the U.S. to extricate itself from a haemorrhaging war. Vietnam, too, emerged as a victorious and unified nation. So, while other stakeholders benefited, China hit a jackpot. Half a century later, history may be tantalisingly close to repeating itself in Beijing on the first such visit by an American President since 2017 for a summit. It would have a comprehensive agenda, from bilateral (trade/tariff, economic, tech transfer, and Taiwan) to various global issues. The U.S.-Iran war is likely to figure prominently in Beijing because an early face-saving exit from the West Asian imbroglio is currently Mr. Trump’s top priority. The Iran war



**Mahesh Sachdev**  
Retired Indian Ambassador with an interest in West Asia and oil matters

has had huge economic and geostrategic costs, including to his legacy. Waging a clever asymmetric strategy, Iran has converted a military debacle into a strategic win with a chokehold on the Strait of Hormuz, staunching crude supplies and causing economic pain globally. Its refusal to capitulate to Mr. Trump’s conditions has denied him an off-ramp, denting his approval at home as he faces an uphill battle in the upcoming Congressional midterm election.

China as Iran’s anchor  
China is Iran’s largest economic partner, buying over 80% of its oil exports, estimated at up to \$45 billion in 2025. The additional non-oil bilateral trade is estimated to be over \$9 billion and is suspected to include many of the crucially needed Chinese war materials. Pakistan, an “ironclad” friend, keeps China informed about the U.S.-Iran negotiations. The Iranian Foreign Minister, Abbas Araghchi, visited Beijing on May 6 for bilateral discussions, without the traditional joint communiqué. These factors make China the most prominent foreign determinant for Iran, with Beijing the go-to destination with a key to the Iranian imbroglio. Thus, despite Mr. Trump’s assertion to the contrary, he may need Chinese President Xi Jinping’s help to cobble a modus vivendi with Iran.

Against this backdrop, observers discern several competing tendencies during the last week: the Trump team was keen to finalise the negotiation road map with Iran before the Beijing Summit to keep China out.

However, Iran delivered an uncompromising response after 10 days, which was rejected by Mr. Trump. The U.S. “Operation Freedom” to jump-start the Strait of Hormuz navigation was a non-starter. The Trump administration has officially “terminated” the Iran war to avoid running afoul of the War Powers Act. Suspended negotiations, problematic military option,

escalating oil prices, and the incoming Hajj have created a perfect maelstrom for Mr. Trump’s Beijing foray. Two tendencies afford an insight into the ever-inscrutable and minimalistic Chinese mindset on this issue.

Following Mr. Araghchi’s visit to China, Tehran’s position has hardened perceptibly on contentious issues such as Hormuz, nuclear enrichment, missiles and the proxies. Apart from highlighting the demands on reparations, security guarantees, defreezing assets, closing the American military bases in the region and a ceasefire in Lebanon and Yemen. Simultaneously, China and Russia have raised the ante by threatening to veto even the toned-down U.S.-backed draft UN Security Council (UNSC) resolution on the Hormuz blockade.

**A possible strategy**  
While the Summit scenario is still evolving, Beijing’s nod-and-wink to Iranian defiance indicates a hardball strategy for the Trump-Xi summit. China seems to perceive that prolonged or deepened Gulf tensions would enable it to extract more American concessions on bilateral issues in return for sorting out Iranian obduracy. It may ask Mr. Trump to yield on tariffs and sanctions, technology denial and Taiwan. Citing the Iranian trust deficit, Beijing may cynically carve a role for itself either as a mediator guarantor or through a UNSC Resolution. The proposed unwinding could be phased over the next few months. It remains to be seen if Mr. Trump, a self-styled consummate transactional dealmaker, has a counterstrategy of his own for a potential grand bargain: Chinese help for an Iranian off-ramp in return for minimal concessions. Otherwise, he may set out like Henry Kissinger, who sheepishly admitted later, “I think if we drink enough mao tai [a potent Chinese liquor], we can solve anything.”

## Static Linkages

- Strait of Hormuz connects Persian Gulf and Gulf of Oman.
- Sea Lines of Communication (SLOCs) are vital for global trade.
- India imports over 80% of its crude oil needs.
- Higher crude prices worsen Current Account Deficit (CAD).
- UNSC P5 members possess veto power.
- Realist theory in IR focuses on power and national interest.
- Balance of Power is central to global geopolitics.
- Strategic autonomy is a core principle of India’s foreign policy.
- Chokepoints are vulnerable maritime passages affecting global trade.
- UNCLOS provides principles regarding freedom of navigation.

## Critical Analysis

### Significance

- Reflects transition towards multipolar world order.
- Demonstrates growing Chinese influence in West Asia.
- Shows weakening unilateral dominance of the U.S.

### Concerns

- Rising oil prices may hurt developing economies.
- Prolonged tensions can disrupt global supply chains.
- Militarisation of strategic waterways threatens global trade.
- Great-power rivalry weakens effectiveness of global institutions.

### Impact on India

#### Positive

- Opportunity for India to strengthen strategic autonomy.
- Scope for balancing relations with U.S., Iran, and Gulf countries.

#### Negative

- Higher import bill and inflation risks.
- Pressure on rupee and CAD.
- Threat to Indian diaspora and maritime trade routes.

## Way Forward

- Diversify crude oil import sources.
- Expand Strategic Petroleum Reserves (SPR).
- Accelerate renewable energy transition.
- Strengthen maritime security cooperation.
- Promote diplomacy and peaceful conflict resolution.
- Continue balanced multi-alignment policy.

## KEY HIGHLIGHTS:

### Context of the News

- The proposed summit between the U.S. and China is taking place amid tensions related to Iran and the Strait of Hormuz.
- The article compares the present situation with the 1972 Nixon visit to China during the Vietnam War.
- China has emerged as Iran’s largest economic partner and a major buyer of Iranian oil.
- China and Russia are opposing U.S.-backed moves in the UNSC regarding the Hormuz issue.
- The developments highlight growing strategic competition between major powers and concerns over global energy security.

### Key Points

- Strait of Hormuz is a critical global oil chokepoint.
- Any disruption in Hormuz impacts:
  - Global crude oil prices
  - Inflation
  - Energy-importing countries like India
- China imports large quantities of Iranian crude oil despite sanctions.
- Iran is using asymmetric pressure tactics instead of direct warfare.
- U.S.-China rivalry now extends to:
  - Trade
  - Technology
  - Taiwan
  - West Asia
- China and Russia increasingly coordinate in multilateral institutions like UNSC.
- India’s interests:
  - Energy security
  - Stable oil prices
  - Safety of Indian diaspora in West Asia
  - Freedom of navigation

## Testing troubles

### Leaks and breaches have destroyed the National Testing Agency's credibility

Once bitten, twice shy: this saying surely does not apply to the National Testing Agency (NTA). Given the number of times that the Agency has run into trouble in the conduct of common entrance exams, it would have been logical to expect those at the helm to have learnt their lessons. However, this week's cancellation of the National Eligibility-cum-Entrance Test (NEET)-UG affecting over 22 lakh students is a serious blow to the agency's reputation. The NTA, on May 12, 2026, announced the cancellation of the exam held on May 3, amid allegations of paper leak, as the government tasked the CBI with carrying out a comprehensive inquiry. The decision followed investigations revealing that a 'guess paper' – a collection of predicted, high-importance questions created to help students prepare – matched numerous questions in chemistry and biology. Media reports said that this material had reached coaching hubs in Rajasthan nearly a month ahead, and had been sold to aspirants for huge sums. This led to investigations by the Rajasthan Police Special Operations Group and 15 people were arrested. In the face of such obvious fraud, the NTA maintained the line that the decision to cancel the exam was taken "in the interest of students and in recognition of the trust on which the national examination system rests". The question though, is: does the NTA still enjoy that trust? NEET has been dogged by controversy right from the start, with several States opposing the format. But even after it was rolled out across the country, the NTA, as the agency conducting the exam, has suffered several dents to its credibility, with various charges and controversies coming up with depressing regularity. This includes the 2019 impersonation scam in Tamil Nadu where students used proxies to write the exam; the 2022 controversy of frisking girl examinees in Kerala, and the 2024 paper leak and grace marks controversy.

The K. Radhakrishnan committee, which was constituted to recommend reforms in the examination process, recommended a restructuring of the NTA, and creating strong institutional linkages with State and district authorities in order to produce a secure test administration apparatus. Among others, it also made recommendations for multi-stage testing, hybrid use of papers and computers, and a series of measures to prevent breaches and malpractices. It would be a crime to allow the NTA to continue with its inept conduct of common entrance exams, impacting the future of several lakhs of students. NEET was introduced as a measure to bring into play a single, standardised, and transparent entrance exam for medical admissions. But the transparency that it has so far shown is of an entirely different kind: leaks and breaches of confidentiality.

## KEY HIGHLIGHTS:

### Context of the News

- NTA cancelled NEET-UG 2026 conducted on May 3, 2026, affecting over 22 lakh students.
- Cancellation followed allegations of paper leak and circulation of a "guess paper" matching actual questions.
- Rajasthan Police Special Operations Group arrested multiple persons linked to the leak.
- Union Government handed over investigation to CBI.
- Incident revived concerns over transparency and credibility of centralized entrance examinations.
- Previous controversies:
  - 2019 impersonation scam (Tamil Nadu)
  - 2022 Kerala frisking controversy
  - 2024 NEET paper leak and grace marks issue

### Key Points

- National Testing Agency (NTA) established in 2017 under Ministry of Education.
- NEET introduced to:
  - Standardize medical admissions
  - Ensure merit-based selection
  - Reduce multiple entrance examinations

- K. Radhakrishnan Committee recommendations:
  - Restructuring of NTA
  - Multi-stage testing
  - Hybrid paper-computer examination system
  - Stronger Centre-State coordination
  - Enhanced anti-malpractice mechanisms
- Repeated leaks undermine:
  - Institutional credibility
  - Public trust
  - Meritocracy
  - Fair competition

### Static Linkages

- Education placed in Concurrent List through 42nd Constitutional Amendment Act, 1976.
- Equality before law and equal opportunity in public institutions.
- Transparency and accountability as principles of good governance.
- Role of autonomous institutions in public administration.
- Ethical governance and integrity in public examinations.
- Cybersecurity and data protection in digital governance.

### Critical Analysis

#### Significance of NEET

- Uniform national standard for medical admissions.
- Reduces multiplicity of exams.
- Promotes merit-based selection.

#### Major Concerns

##### Institutional Failure

- Repeated paper leaks expose weak examination security.
- Credibility crisis for NTA.

##### Governance Issues

- Lack of accountability and coordination.
- Weak monitoring of examination ecosystem.

##### Social Impact

- Stress and uncertainty among students.
- Financial burden due to repeated preparation.

##### Ethical Concerns

- Honest candidates disadvantaged.
- Undermines fairness and public trust.

##### Federal Concerns

- Several States oppose NEET citing:
  - Rural-urban disparity
  - Coaching culture
  - Language disadvantages

### Way Forward

- Comprehensive restructuring of NTA.
- Strong cybersecurity and encrypted paper delivery systems.
- AI-based monitoring and audit systems.
- Greater coordination with State governments.
- Strict anti-cheating legislation and fast-track trials.
- Regulation of coaching centres.
- Transparent grievance redressal mechanisms.
- Psychological support systems for students.

## Elusive peace

### Europe must push for a negotiated settlement to the Ukraine war

In May 9, speaking to reporters after the Moscow Victory Day parade, Russia's President Vladimir Putin said the war with Ukraine was "coming to a close", and, for the first time since the war began in February 2022, indicated that he would be willing to meet Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy if talks were aimed at finalising a long-term peace deal. His comments underscore the pressure that he faces, both domestically and on the battlefield, as the war, which he launched as a 'special military operation', drags into its fifth year. Mr. Putin had said in 2022, months after the invasion began, that Russia would do "our best to stop this as soon as possible". Yet, the war continued, with Russian troops making incremental advances in eastern and southern Ukraine. Those gains, however, have now largely stalled. While the frontline has barely shifted this year, both sides have carried out devastating drone and missile strikes. In the early years of the war, the Russian public was largely insulated from its consequences. That is no longer the case. Today, Ukraine is capable of striking deep inside Russian territory. Tax increases, rising prices and a deepening gloom in the business sector have fuelled public frustration, affecting Mr. Putin's approval rating. At the same time, hardline nationalist sections are demanding a more forceful response to Ukraine's attacks, adding to the pressure on the Kremlin.

Russia has so far ruled out a lasting ceasefire. Instead, it seeks a comprehensive peace agreement – Ukraine must remain neutral, withdraw from the Donbas region, sanctions on Russia must be removed and a new security arrangement between Moscow and NATO. While Russia has genuine security concerns, amplified by NATO's unchecked eastward expansion, clinging to maximalist demands while fighting a seemingly endless war will not make Russia stronger. Mr. Putin launched the war expecting a swift victory. His forces have captured over 20% of Ukrainian territory, but at a tremendous cost. It is time that he shifted focus from continuing a war with no clear endpoint to finding a path to peace. Ukraine has demonstrated that it can withstand an invasion by a great power. But Kyiv, too, lacks a realistic pathway to victory. Russia, despite mounting challenges, retains the military capacity to inflict greater damage, and if the war drags on, Kyiv risks losing more territory. Europe must also realise that the Ukraine war has weakened the continent economically and politically, leaving it more dependent on the U.S. even as Washington is drifting away. The four-plus years have shown that there is no military solution to this conflict. What is needed instead is a serious push by all sides toward a negotiated settlement.

## KEY HIGHLIGHTS:

### Context of the News

- Russian President Vladimir Putin stated after the Moscow Victory Day parade that the Ukraine war may be "coming to a close".
- He expressed willingness to hold direct talks with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy for a long-term peace agreement.
- The Russia-Ukraine conflict began in February 2022 and has now entered its fifth year.
- Russia currently occupies parts of eastern and southern Ukraine, including regions in Donbas.
- The war has led to global disruptions in food, energy and fertiliser supply chains.

### Key Points

- Russia demands:
  - Ukrainian neutrality
  - No NATO membership for Ukraine
  - Recognition of Russian-controlled territories
  - Removal of Western sanctions
- Ukraine seeks:
  - Territorial integrity
  - Security guarantees
  - Continued Western support

- NATO expansion towards Eastern Europe remains a major geopolitical issue.
- The conflict has highlighted:
  - Drone warfare
  - Cyber warfare
  - Economic sanctions as strategic tools
- Europe has faced:
  - Energy crisis
  - Inflation
  - Economic slowdown
- The war strengthened debates on:
  - Multipolar world order
  - Strategic autonomy
  - Limits of military solutions

### Static Linkages

- Sovereignty and territorial integrity are fundamental principles of international relations.
- Collective defence alliances can create security dilemmas.
- Economic sanctions are tools of coercive diplomacy.
- Wars disrupt global supply chains and increase inflationary pressures.
- Diplomacy and negotiated settlement are key mechanisms for conflict resolution.
- Energy security and food security are closely linked with geopolitical stability.
- Humanitarian law protects civilians during armed conflicts.

### Critical Analysis

#### Significance of Peace Talks

- May reduce global geopolitical instability.
- Could stabilise energy and food prices.
- Reduces risk of prolonged military escalation.
- Helps revive global economic growth.

#### Major Challenges

- Russia and Ukraine have conflicting territorial claims.
- NATO-Russia distrust remains deep.
- Western sanctions continue to affect negotiations.
- Risk of prolonged "frozen conflict".

#### Impact on India

##### Positive

- Lower crude oil price volatility.
- Reduced fertiliser and food inflation.
- Better global trade stability.

##### Concerns

- Pressure to balance relations with Russia and the West.
- Continued uncertainty in global supply chains.

### Way Forward

- Immediate ceasefire and humanitarian protection.
- Sustained diplomatic negotiations under international mediation.
- Balanced security arrangement in Europe.
- Respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity.
- Greater role for multilateral institutions like the UN.

# In age of uncertainty, patriotism is a poor substitute for statecraft

PRIME MINISTER Narendra Modi has called on Indians to lighten their belts, particularly on fuel and gold consumption. It is a belated public admission that the fallout from Donald Trump's morally appalling, "the world be damned", war in Iran is likely to add to the cumulative uncertainties already besetting the global economy. The sinking value of the rupee has made it inevitable that India will have to confront the shortages. Managing demand is not a reasonable tool to deploy under such circumstances. India is vulnerable as an economy, with imports surging, foreign investment and remittances slowing down, and energy self-reliance a chimera. How effective the exhortation will be remains to be seen.

Modi loves nothing better than appealing to the language of sacrifice, patriotism, and civilisational virtue as an asset to be deployed in solving problems. This is a piece with his approach to demonetisation or the changing of pots and pans during the early days of Covid as a show of national solidarity. But there is a larger danger that India will once more fail to attend to the three risks inherent in these forms of appeal. The first risk is to assume that what we are witnessing is a temporary shock. For starters, the duration of the war is still uncertain. It is exerting immense pressure on the US economy as well. But in most scenarios, there is no quick resolution to the war. There is no question that the United States and Trump have lost face in this war. Most of the terms Iran has to offer will be

seen as a defeat. In the long run, the United States will be better off offering a small dose of humble pie now for its own democracy and the world's sake. But if it had even this minimal sense of decency and self-interest, it would not have pushed the world down this path of catastrophe.

India's capacity to avert any ceasefire should not be underestimated. And while Gulf states need peace for the viability of their own models, they also cannot stomach a resurgent Iran. Iran itself is also playing for existential stakes. So, protracted instability is a high-probability outcome. The challenge with the language of sacrifice is that it works, if at all, on short-term time horizons. Otherwise, it is a recipe for inducing more cynicism.

But more importantly, India has repeatedly made the mistake of using moralised language to deflect attention from deep structural and governance problems. Like most shocks, this one has also exposed our preexisting vulnerabilities. Despite impressive gains in renewables, India's long-term energy strategy has not reduced our dependence on the world. It is all very well for analysts to propose, and for the government to adopt, diversification as a mantra. But our diversification options have been limited by growing fears of American pressure. The environment for foreign investment was never particularly benign in India. Astonishingly, we are still having the same debates over complex tax regimes, regulatory uncertainty,



PRATAP BHANU MEHTA

and an ad hoc legal system that we were having 40 years ago. We have passed measures such as labour-law reforms, but in the larger scheme of things, India is still not an attractive place for investment.

We also misread the world economy. We assumed that there would always be capital sloshing around the world, and were caught off guard by the massive reallocation of capital induced by AI. Private domestic investment is finally rising, but only after a decade of stagnation. There are individual success stories in manufacturing, but our aggregate share in global manufacturing has barely moved. We are almost totally irrelevant to the world's leading technology races. The world has also figured out that governance is a scarce resource, and how it is allocated matters enormously. Let us say that in India, it has been disproportionately allocated to the circus part of the bread and circuses. This familiar litany of woes can go on. But the basic point is that we have accumulated structural problems that have made us vulnerable in the first place. The world is now hypercompetitive.

In a world of cumulative uncertainty, where geopolitical, technological, financial, climate, and possibly pandemic shocks reinforce one another, there is no margin for error. What we need at this moment is not merely moralised discourse on the economy. This is not just a time to tighten demand for energy and gold. It is a time to double down on the fundamentals of the economy, in a frame-

work that is credible and concrete. This is the only way to avoid a possible confidence doom loop in the Indian economy. But, likely, the emphasis will quickly pivot to spin like "we are still the fastest-growing economy in the world". At this point, a statement like that is a bit like saying, "I have a big gun. Oh, by the way, I have no ammunition." It does not solve any problem you are trying to fix. Some honesty might make us more credible.

Moralised calls for demand management can disguise distributive conflicts. For one thing, moralised appeals are not about structural change; they are meant to reinforce the direct emotional appeal between the leader and the people. There is nothing intrinsically wrong with that aspiration, but it can also detract from serious economic thinking. Even the implementation of rationing is not simple; it requires serious economic trade-offs. Already, the brunt of the costs of the LPG gas shortage has been borne by the poorest consumers and the smallest restaurant businesses. One of the secondary effects of this war, and the inflation it creates, will be political and social churn across the world. Just like we were underestimating the vulnerability of our economy, we may also be underestimating the social churn about to follow. The age of cumulative uncertainty will require, not patriotic exhortation, but sophisticated statecraft. Right now, patriotism is a substitute for statecraft.

The writer is contributing editor, The Indian Express

## KEY HIGHLIGHTS:

### Context of the News

- Prime Minister Narendra Modi urged citizens to reduce fuel and gold consumption amid rising global uncertainty due to the Iran-West Asia conflict.
- Rising crude oil prices and rupee depreciation have increased concerns regarding:
  - Current Account Deficit (CAD)
  - Inflation
  - Import dependence
- The article highlights India's structural economic vulnerabilities such as:
  - High energy imports
  - Slow foreign investment
  - Weak manufacturing competitiveness
  - Regulatory uncertainty

### Key Points

- India imports around 85% of its crude oil requirement.
- West Asia is crucial for:
  - Energy imports
  - Remittances
  - Maritime trade
- Rising crude prices lead to:
  - Imported inflation
  - Higher fiscal burden
  - Rupee depreciation
  - Wider CAD
- Gold imports increase pressure on foreign exchange reserves.
- AI-driven global capital shifts are affecting investment flows toward advanced economies.
- Structural reforms remain essential for long-term economic resilience.

### Static Linkages

- Current Account Deficit = Excess of imports over exports in goods and services.

- Imported inflation occurs due to rise in global commodity prices.
- Energy security includes:
  - Availability
  - Affordability
  - Accessibility
  - Sustainability
- Strategic Petroleum Reserves help manage supply disruptions.
- Supply-side shocks can trigger inflation and slow growth simultaneously.
- Stable taxation and regulatory certainty attract investments.

## Critical Analysis

### Positives

- Renewable energy expansion improving long-term energy diversification.
- Domestic investment showing gradual recovery.
- Policy focus on manufacturing through PLI schemes.

### Challenges

- High dependence on imported crude oil.
- Inflation disproportionately affects poor households.
- Regulatory uncertainty impacts investor confidence.
- Weak global manufacturing share.
- Limited participation in frontier technologies like AI.

### Concerns

- Short-term patriotic appeals cannot substitute structural reforms.
- Prolonged geopolitical instability may impact:
  - Trade
  - Energy security
  - Remittances
  - Currency stability

## Way Forward

- Accelerate renewable energy transition.
- Expand Strategic Petroleum Reserves.
- Improve ease of doing business.
- Strengthen manufacturing competitiveness.
- Promote AI and high-technology sectors.
- Diversify energy import sources.
- Enhance macroeconomic stability and institutional governance.

# Chief Secretary and a chief challenge

**T**HE APPOINTMENT of West Bengal's Chief Electoral Officer Manoj Agarwal as the Chief Secretary by the Suwendu Adhikari government raises many a question. Agarwal, who is the state's senior-most bureaucrat, but is set to retire in July, supervised the rollout of the Special Intensive Revision exercise in the state, which led to about 91 lakh deletions. Of these, nearly 27 lakh are seen as controversial, for which the appellate process is incomplete. The West Bengal SIR is also under challenge in the Supreme Court. Against this backdrop, the government's decision to appoint Agarwal is questionable not because of his own competence, but because it risks undermining trust in a premise larger than him — that those overseeing election processes are not keeping an eye on a post-election office. It is also for this reason, arguably, that the poll panel had wanted a CEO who would retire after overseeing the election. The problem is also this. As CEO, Agarwal oversaw the SIR process, and as Chief Secretary, he will steer the state response in terms of addressing infirmities in the process. There is also an issue of institutional credibility here. Fifteen years of Trinamool government saw a disquieting politicisation of the bureaucracy that smudged institutional lines. The new BJP government that seeks to make a departure from this past can ill afford to be unmindful of this.

The Adhikari government in Bengal has also said that while those whose cases are still under consideration by the appellate tribunals will receive the benefits of government schemes, those deleted through the SIR exercise will no longer be able to do so. A minister has underlined the new framework of exclusion: Those who have applied under the CAA for citizenship can also avail all government schemes. This resurrects the spectre that the amendments to the citizenship law a few years ago had touched off, and draws the SIR into it. The CAA drew criticism because, for the first time in a diverse democracy, it made religion a criterion for citizenship, providing an accelerated path to Indian citizenship for persecuted religious minorities from neighbouring countries — except Muslims. The SIR process that shifted the burden of proof onto the vulnerable voter, set unrealistic timelines for voters and no deadlines for appellate tribunals, and in which there were many more deletions in Muslim-dominated constituencies, cannot — and should not — become a test for citizenship. The watchful eye of the Court is needed more than ever.

The term "ghuspathiya" or illegal immigrant — invoked to justify the new exclusionary framework and paper over its cracks — is part of the language of communal dog-whistle politics. In West Bengal, the BJP government has just won a formidable victory. It must deliver on a mandate to deliver change that includes all, not tarnish it by narrowing its vision at the very outset. As CEO, the process that Agarwal steered achieved a much-needed cleanup but has been tainted by exclusion. As Chief Secretary, can he hit reset and refresh? A lot rides on this question.

## KEY HIGHLIGHTS:

### Context of the News

- The West Bengal government appointed the former Chief Electoral Officer (CEO) as Chief Secretary soon after the completion of the Special Intensive Revision (SIR) of electoral rolls.
- The SIR exercise reportedly led to deletion of around 91 lakh names from voter lists.
- A significant number of deletions are under dispute and the matter is being examined by the Supreme Court.
- Concerns were raised regarding:
  - Institutional neutrality,
  - Electoral transparency,
  - Exclusion of vulnerable communities,
  - Linkages between citizenship and welfare access.
- The controversy has revived debates around:
  - Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA),
  - Electoral integrity,
  - Free and fair elections.

### Key Points

- Electoral roll revision is conducted under Article 324 of the Constitution.
- SIR aims to:
  - Remove duplicate voters,
  - Delete ineligible entries,
  - Improve accuracy of electoral rolls.
- Major concerns in the present case:
  - Burden of proof shifted to voters,
  - Lack of adequate appeal mechanisms,

- Higher deletions in minority-dominated areas,
- Possible politicisation of bureaucracy.
- Debate over linking:
  - Citizenship verification,
  - Welfare benefits,
  - Voting rights.
- Raises questions regarding:
  - Administrative neutrality,
  - Constitutional morality,
  - Democratic accountability.

### Static Linkages

- Article 324 – Powers of Election Commission.
- Article 326 – Universal Adult Franchise.
- Article 14 – Equality before law.
- Representation of the People Act, 1950 – Electoral rolls.
- Citizenship Act, 1955.
- Citizenship Amendment Act, 2019.
- Basic Structure Doctrine:
  - Democracy,
  - Secularism,
  - Free and fair elections.
- 2nd ARC recommendations on civil service neutrality.
- Supreme Court:
  - Free and fair elections are part of Basic Structure.

### Critical Analysis

#### Significance

- Accurate electoral rolls strengthen democratic legitimacy.
- Periodic revision prevents electoral fraud and duplication.
- Clean voter databases improve governance efficiency.

#### Concerns

##### Institutional Credibility

- Appointment of an election official to a key executive post immediately after elections may create perception of bias.

##### Constitutional Issues

- Large-scale deletions may affect voting rights of vulnerable citizens.
- Electoral verification should not become indirect citizenship testing.

##### Governance Concerns

- Weak grievance redressal mechanisms.
- Risk of exclusion due to documentation barriers.
- Possibility of communal polarisation.

## Ethical Dimensions

- Need for politically neutral bureaucracy.
- Importance of procedural fairness and transparency.

## Way Forward

- Ensure transparent and inclusive electoral revision processes.
- Strengthen appellate and grievance mechanisms.
- Maintain clear separation between electoral administration and political executive influence.
- Avoid linking welfare benefits directly with disputed electoral status.
- Introduce stronger safeguards against wrongful exclusion.
- Promote civil service neutrality through institutional reforms.
- Enhance judicial and parliamentary oversight in sensitive citizenship-related exercises.

# Close cervical cancer gap, focus on equity

**A** MODELLING study in *The Lancet* has estimated that India can prevent more than 10 million cervical cancer cases over the next century if it achieves the WHO's targets on HPV vaccination — 90 per cent of girls to be vaccinated by age 15; 70 per cent of women to be screened at ages 30 and above; and 90 per cent of patients to receive treatment. The scale of that possibility is extraordinary. But so is the scale of the challenge. India accounts for one of the world's heaviest cervical-cancer burdens, with more than 1.2 lakh new cases and roughly 80,000 deaths each year. Cervical cancer is among the most preventable forms of the disease, yet for many women — especially those in rural districts, poorer households and socially marginalised communities — access to early screening, reliable diagnosis, treatment that is not prohibitively expensive and preventive vaccination remain a distant reality.

The Human Papillomavirus (HPV) vaccine was first introduced in India in 2008, but its uptake remained limited due to safety concerns, patchy information dissemination, logistical gaps and sociocultural barriers. Nearly two decades later, in February this year, an HPV vaccination programme for adolescent girls was launched, but participation has been uneven. Screening rates, too, remain distressingly low: Only around 2 per cent of eligible women undergo regular testing. Disparities within India are stark. Tamil Nadu has achieved screening rates above 10 per cent, while Assam and West Bengal register figures as low as 0.2 per cent. The outcome is a disease that disproportionately punishes the vulnerable.

The ongoing vaccination drive places India among a handful of countries that include the HPV vaccine in their national immunisation programmes. Experts have also proposed integrating HPV nucleic acid testing into the National Essential Diagnostics List to expand the reach and accuracy of screening beyond urban centres. With targeted outreach, these can narrow the inequity, offering India a rare opportunity to reduce one of its most preventable cancer burdens.

## KEY HIGHLIGHTS:

### Context

- A study published in *The Lancet* estimated that India can significantly reduce cervical cancer cases if WHO targets on HPV vaccination, screening, and treatment are achieved.
- India records:
  - ~1.2 lakh new cervical cancer cases annually.
  - ~80,000 deaths annually.
- India recently expanded HPV vaccination for adolescent girls under the national immunisation framework.
- Screening coverage remains very low, especially in rural and vulnerable populations.

### Key Facts

- Cervical cancer is mainly caused by persistent infection with Human Papillomavirus (HPV).
- High-risk strains:
  - HPV-16
  - HPV-18
- WHO Elimination Targets:
  - 90% girls vaccinated by age 15.
  - 70% women screened.
  - 90% patients treated.
- Cervical cancer is one of the most preventable cancers.

- Screening methods:
  - Pap smear test
  - HPV DNA/Nucleic Acid Testing
- HPV DNA testing is more sensitive and accurate.
- Tamil Nadu has relatively higher screening rates.
- Assam and West Bengal have extremely low screening rates.
- India has included HPV vaccination in public immunisation efforts.

### Important Government Initiatives

- National Programme for Prevention and Control of Non-Communicable Diseases (NP-NCD)
- Ayushman Bharat Health and Wellness Centres
- Universal Immunisation Programme (UIP)
- National Health Mission (NHM)

### Constitutional & Governance Linkages

- Article 21 → Right to Health (Judicial Interpretation)
- Article 47 → Duty of State to improve public health
- Public Health → State List (7th Schedule)
- Cooperative Federalism needed for vaccination and screening drives

### Issues & Challenges

- Vaccine hesitancy and misinformation
- Poor awareness in rural areas
- Social stigma regarding reproductive health
- Low screening coverage
- Healthcare infrastructure gaps
- Interstate disparities in implementation
- Affordability and accessibility concerns

### Significance for UPSC

- Women's health and human capital development
- Preventive healthcare model
- Inclusive healthcare access
- Public health governance
- SDG-3 (Good Health and Well-being)
- Reducing catastrophic health expenditure

### Way Forward

- Expand awareness campaigns through ASHA and Anganwadi workers
- Increase school-based vaccination coverage
- Improve rural diagnostic infrastructure
- Include HPV DNA testing widely in public health system
- Promote indigenous vaccine manufacturing
- Strengthen primary healthcare delivery