



DAILY NEWS PAPER ANALYSIS

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SC blames NTA for leak of 2026 NEET paper

Bench issues notice to Ministry of Education, and NTA, on plea to 'replace or restructure' the body

NTA to file an affidavit on measures to implement recommendations of the monitoring committee

Plea said the NTA did not answer to Parliament, which shielded it from direct audits by the govt

Krishnasdas Rajagopal
NEW DELHI

The Supreme Court on Monday squarely blamed the National Testing Agency (NTA) for the National Eligibility-cum-Entrance Test-Undergraduate (NEET-UG), 2026, paper leak, saying the exam body sadly had not learnt its lesson even two years after the previous security breach in 2024.

The hard work of 23 lakh students came to nothing with the cancellation of the examination after it was learnt that the question paper had been leaked.

A Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) probe is under way into the issue and a retest is scheduled on June 21.

"It is so sad, really, that

the NTA has not learnt its lesson. We had with such difficulty heard the petitions in 2024 and passed orders... We had directed the constitution of a committee to give recommendations... Those recommendations, we believe, were accepted... a monitoring/high-powered committee was appointed," Justice P.S. Narasimha, heading a two-judge Bench, observed on Monday while hearing a petition filed by the Federation of All India Medical Association to "replace or fundamentally restructure" the NTA.

Affidavit sought

The Bench directed the NTA to file an affidavit in the next three days on measures taken by it to implement the recommendations of the monitoring/



JUSTICE P.S. NARASIMHA
Supreme Court Judge

high-powered committee and listed the case for hearing on an urgent basis later this week.

The top court also issued notices to the Union of India, the Union Ministry of Education, and other respondents arraigned by the petitioners.

A second petition by the United Doctors Front was also heard, which sought the transition of the NTA

from a registered society to a statutory body established by an Act of Parliament to ensure constitutional and parliamentary accountability.

For the Supreme Court, the NEET-UG 2026 paper leak was a repetition from 2024, when over 20 lakh students were affected by a paper leak.

The court had, at the time, taken cognisance of

Pradhan seeks report on CBSE marking glitches

NEW DELHI Union Minister for Education Dharmendra Pradhan has sought a detailed report on the glitches in the CBSE portal after multiple complaints about the new On Screen Marking system. » PAGE 6

Radhakrishnan to recommend changes in the way the NTA conducted the crucial annual exam for medical admissions across the country.

The recommendations of the monitoring/high-powered committee included the shift to a computer-based test (CBT) mechanism. Mr. Radhakrishnan has also been asked to file a separate affidavit within the same time period as the NTA on what steps were taken to ensure that the committee's recommendations had been followed.

The petitions have sought sweeping directions to the government to mandate "digital locking" of question papers, and transition to the CBT model to eliminate the physical chain-of-custody risks. The doctors' body

pointed out that, unlike the Union Public Service Commission or the Staff Selection Commission, the NTA was not directly answerable to Parliament. It operated under the Ministry of Education, shielding it from direct audits by the Comptroller and Auditor General, and mandatory probes by Parliamentary Committees.

"The recurrence proves that cosmetic administrative tweaks and expert committees like the K. Radhakrishnan Committee are inadequate without a fundamental legislative overhaul," the petition has contended.

The doctors' front sought the dissolution of the NTA in its current form and the enactment of a parliamentary Act to create a new testing authority.

KEY HIGHLIGHTS:

Context of the News

- The Supreme Court criticised the National Testing Agency (NTA) over the alleged NEET-UG 2026 paper leak.
- Around 23 lakh students were affected after cancellation of the examination.
- A CBI probe is underway; re-examination scheduled on June 21, 2026.
- The Court observed that despite reforms suggested after the 2024 NEET controversy, adequate safeguards were not implemented.
- Petitions before the Court sought:
 - Restructuring/replacement of NTA
 - Conversion of NTA into a statutory body through Parliamentary law
 - Shift to Computer-Based Testing (CBT)
 - Digital locking and encryption of question papers

Key Points

- NTA was established in 2017 under the Ministry of Education as a registered society.
- Conducts major examinations:
 - NEET
 - JEE Main
 - CUET
 - UGC-NET
- Supreme Court in 2024 constituted a committee headed by former ISRO Chairman K. Radhakrishnan.
- Key recommendations:
 - Transition to CBT model
 - Stronger cybersecurity systems
 - End-to-end encrypted paper transmission
 - Improved monitoring and accountability
- Petitioners argued that NTA lacks:
 - Parliamentary accountability
 - Statutory backing
 - Direct institutional oversight mechanisms

Static Linkages

- Article 14 → Equality before law and non-arbitrariness in state action.

- Article 21 → Fair procedure and protection of dignity.
- Judicial Review under Articles 32 and 226.
- Statutory bodies are created through Acts of Parliament/State Legislature.
- E-governance promotes transparency and efficiency in public administration.
- Cybersecurity is a key component of digital governance.
- Second ARC emphasised accountability and citizen-centric governance.
- Public examinations are linked with meritocracy and equal opportunity.

Critical Analysis

Significance of Reforms

- CBT reduces physical paper leak risks.
- Digital systems can improve transparency and efficiency.
- Statutory status may strengthen accountability mechanisms.
- Judicial scrutiny enhances institutional responsibility.

Challenges

- Digital divide may disadvantage rural candidates.
- Cyberattacks and data breaches remain risks in CBT.
- Weak institutional accountability reduces public trust.
- Repeated exam leaks create psychological stress among aspirants.

Constitutional & Governance Concerns

- Fair examinations are linked to equality of opportunity.
- Failure of exam integrity affects credibility of public institutions.
- Raises concerns regarding administrative accountability and governance capacity.

Way Forward

- Enact a comprehensive law for public examination integrity.
- Convert NTA into a statutory autonomous authority.
- Gradual nationwide shift towards secure CBT infrastructure.
- Mandatory cybersecurity audits and encryption systems.
- Independent oversight and regular parliamentary review.
- Time-bound grievance redressal mechanisms.
- Strong penal provisions for paper leak networks.

Kerala lynching case: HC acquits first accused, enhances punishment for 12 others to life term

The Hindu Bureau
KOCHI

The Kerala High Court on Monday acquitted Hassan of Palakkad, Palakkad – the first accused in the lynching of Madhu, a mentally challenged tribal youth, in 2018, finding evidence against him unreliable. The court, however, rejected the appeals filed by 12 other accused and awarded them life imprisonment, apart from ₹2 lakh fine each. They had earlier been awarded seven years of imprisonment.

The court was hearing appeals filed by the accused seeking acquittal, and also by the State government and Madhu's mother, Malli, who sought enhanced punishment for the accused.



A file photo of Madhu's mother Malli, left, and sister Sarasu on the premises of a special court in Palakkad in 2023. (X. VISWANATHAN)

Defending the verdict, prosecution counsel Jeewah said the acquittal was due to hostile witnesses and weak identification evidence against the prime accused. He added that electronic evidence played a decisive role.

Madhu, hailing from the tribal settlement in Attappady, was killed after an allegation that he had stolen

rice from a grocery shop, on February 22, 2018. A special court in Mannarkkad for trial of cases of atrocities against SC/ST communities had convicted 16 of the 16 accused in the case in April 2023.

"His death stands as a painful reminder of the continuing distance between constitutional ideals and the lived reality of many among the most marginalised. The near total collapse of eyewitness testimony is one of the most disturbing features of the entire trial, and we record our deep concern regarding the same," said a Division Bench of Justices Raja Vijayaraghavan V. and K.V. Jayakumar.

Approximately 75 persons were present when

Madhu sat tied against the temple treasury box on that afternoon (February 22, 2018). Forest officials, shop employees, roadside traders, and local residents appeared before the court, watched the CCTV footage in open court, and pleaded ignorance when their images and videos came up on the screen and claimed inability to identify the persons involved. The evidence on record established that several accused persons had contacted witnesses during the pendency of the trial, in clear violation of their bail conditions. It was only after the bail of most of the accused was cancelled that a witness found the courage to depose before the court, the High Court said. (Hindu PTI Input)

KEY HIGHLIGHTS:

Context

- Kerala High Court enhanced punishment to life imprisonment for 12 convicts in the 2018 Madhu lynching case.
- The first accused was acquitted due to weak identification evidence and hostile witnesses.
- Madhu, a tribal youth from Attappady, Kerala, was lynched after allegations of theft.
- The Court termed the incident a reminder of the gap between constitutional ideals and ground realities faced by marginalized communities.
- Electronic evidence and CCTV footage became crucial in securing conviction.

Key Constitutional & Legal Points

- Article 14 – Equality before law.
- Article 15 – Prohibition of discrimination.
- Article 21 – Right to life with dignity.
- Article 46 – Protection of educational and economic interests of Scheduled Tribes.
- SC/ST (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989.
- Witness Protection Scheme, 2018.
- Supreme Court judgment:
 - Tehseen S. Poonawalla vs Union of India (2018) on mob lynching.
- Importance of electronic evidence under Bharatiya Sakshya Adhiniyam / Evidence Law framework.

UPSC-Relevant Issues

- Mob vigilantism and breakdown of Rule of Law.
- Tribal marginalisation and social exclusion.
- Failure of witness protection mechanisms.
- Constitutional morality vs mob mentality.
- Criminal justice reforms and speedy trial.
- Role of judiciary in protecting vulnerable communities.
- Ethical concerns regarding bystander inaction.

Important Observations of the Court

- Mob justice cannot replace legal justice.
- Tribal persons continue to face structural discrimination.

- Witness intimidation weakened prosecution.
- Bail misuse and hostile witnesses affected trial quality.
- Human dignity is central to constitutional governance.

Governance & Social Justice Dimensions

- Need for stronger implementation of SC/ST safeguards.
- Better policing in tribal areas.
- Strengthening forensic and digital evidence systems.
- Community sensitisation regarding constitutional values.
- Fast-track courts for atrocities against vulnerable groups.

Ethical Dimensions

- Compassion and empathy towards marginalized groups.
- Constitutional morality.
- Accountability of society during mob violence.
- Human dignity as a core ethical value.
- Failure of collective social responsibility.

Way Forward

- Enact dedicated anti-lynching law.
- Strengthen Witness Protection Scheme.
- Improve tribal welfare delivery and legal awareness.
- Ensure strict monitoring of bail conditions.
- Increase conviction through forensic evidence.
- Promote constitutional values through education and governance.

Finance Commission transfers and equity issue

The Finance Commission (FC), constituted under the Constitution, determines the distribution of the Union's gross tax revenues between Centre and States and among the States themselves to address vertical and horizontal fiscal imbalances. Following earlier commissions, the 16th FC has retained the vertical devolution share of 41% for the States and continued to emphasise equity as the guiding principle in determining horizontal transfers.



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transfers to poorer States have not eliminated disparities in public expenditure even on basic services. In 2022-23, Bihar spent ₹937 per person on health, against Arunachal Pradesh's ₹9,148 (0.8 times lower), while Bihar's per student spending on elementary education in 2023-24 was ₹20,282 compared with Sikkim's ₹1,30,498. These gaps show that fiscal transfers alone have not ensured convergence in public service delivery.

Recommendations of Finance Commission
The 16th FC accepted the Centre's argument that cesses and surcharges cannot be shared because they often finance welfare and infrastructure programmes that indirectly benefit States and retained 41% vertical share. It also abolished revenue-deficit grants as well as sector-specific and State-specific grants and recommended that States discontinue off-budget borrowings, bring all liabilities onto their budgets and maintain fiscal deficits below 3%. These measures could increase short-term fiscal stress for States.

The FC made only modest adjustments to the criteria used by the 15th FC. Income distance received a weight of 42.5% (population 17.2%, area 10%, forest cover 10%, and the demographic criterion – modified by replacing the inverse fertility rate with population growth – 10%). It also introduced States' contribution to national GDP, replacing tax effort, with a 10% weight. However, instead of using actual GDP shares, the FC applied a square root transformation to State GDP shares, with a weight of just 10%, far below the expected 25%. This significantly reduced the advantage of economically stronger States and altered the rankings. Maharashtra's actual GDP share of 4.25% fell to 3.1% after the transformation, while Tamil Nadu's declined from 5.09% to 6.67% and Karnataka's from 8.56% to 6.59%. At the same time, the shares of many smaller States increased.

Consequently, overall devolution shares of 14 States rose marginally compared with the 15th FC. Karnataka gained the most (0.484 percentage point increase), followed by Kerala (0.457) and Gujarat (0.277). Tamil Nadu saw only a negligible rise, from 4.079% to 4.097%. Meanwhile, the shares of 14 States declined, with Madhya Pradesh experiencing the largest reduction (0.503 percentage points), followed by Arunachal Pradesh (0.463) and Uttar Pradesh (0.52).

From a longer-term perspective, however, disparities remain substantial. Under the 16th FC, the southern States' share has risen slightly to about 17%, while the share of the largest beneficiary States has fallen to just under 50% – a shift of only about 1.2% in favour of the southern States. The balance between equity and efficiency has changed only marginally. Under the 15th FC, efficiency-related criteria accounted for 25% of

the weight and equity criteria for 75%; under the 16th FC, this has shifted to 30% and 70% respectively – an adjustment too small to significantly alter outcomes. Poorer States such as Uttar Pradesh (17.2%), Bihar (9.9%), Madhya Pradesh (7.35%) and West Bengal (7.22%) continue to receive larger shares than fiscally stronger and better-performing States.

Deviations with alternative schemes
Alternative weighting schemes suggest that the outcomes could have been different. If the FC had assigned a 25% weight to the square root of GDP contribution while reducing the weight of income distance to 27.5%, Karnataka's share would have increased from 4.13% to 4.58%, Maharashtra's from 6.44% to 7.28%, and Tamil Nadu's from 4.097% to 4.867%. Under an equal-weight scheme across the six criteria, their shares would have risen further to 5.54%, 7.84%, and 5.24%, respectively.

Had the FC used actual GDP share (instead of square root formula) with 10% weight, the devolution shares of Maharashtra, Karnataka and Tamil Nadu would have increased to 7.03%, 4.36% and 4.34%, respectively. With 25% weight (and 27.5% weight to income distance), they would have increased to 8.68%, 5.51% and 5.47%. With equal weighting scheme, their respective shares might have increased to 8.83%, 5.93% and 5.65%. That is, their respective shares increased by 2.39%, 1.86% and 1.55%.

Given that the 16th FC estimates total vertical transfers of ₹94 lakh crore over the award period, these differences are significant. A 2.39% increase in Maharashtra's share would translate into an additional ₹2.49 lakh crore, or about ₹1.62 lakh crore annually. Karnataka's additional 1.86% share would yield about ₹1.88 lakh crore, or roughly ₹17,265 crore annually. Tamil Nadu's 1.55% increase would amount to approximately ₹1.62 lakh crore, or ₹32,365 crore annually.

In India, unlike other large federations such as Australia and China, States with greater political influence in terms of parliamentary representation are not necessarily the economically stronger ones. Consequently, these States tend to receive higher fiscal transfers. The issue is likely to intensify after delimitation, as governments may have stronger incentives to favour politically influential States. Since the FC's primary objective is to address both vertical and horizontal fiscal imbalances, future FCs should place greater emphasis on fiscal capacity and fiscal outcome indicators rather than relying predominantly on non-fiscal indicators. Additionally, they should adopt more data-driven approaches for assigning weights, using the principal component analysis method.

The views expressed are personal

Criterion	Weight
Demographic Performance	10%
GDP Contribution	10%

Major Issues Raised

- Cesses & surcharges exceed 15% of gross tax revenue and are not shareable.
- GST reduced States' fiscal flexibility.
- Centrally Sponsored Schemes reduce fiscal autonomy.
- Southern States argued that:
 - Better governance,
 - Population control,
 - Higher tax contribution
 - are not adequately rewarded.

Regional Imbalance

- Share of southern States declined from:
 - 24.8% (6th FC) → 15.8% (15th FC).
- Major beneficiary States:
 - Uttar Pradesh,
 - Bihar,
 - Madhya Pradesh,
 - West Bengal.

Static Linkages

- Article 270 → Distribution of taxes between Centre and States.
- Article 271 → Cesses and surcharges excluded from divisible pool.
- FRBM framework promotes fiscal discipline.
- GST Council institutionalised cooperative federalism.
- Equalisation transfers reduce inter-State disparities.
- Fiscal federalism is part of cooperative federalism.

Critical Analysis

Positives

- Supports poorer States through income-distance criterion.
- Promotes balanced regional development.
- Encourages fiscal discipline.
- Ecological criteria incentivise forest conservation.

Concerns

- Rising cesses weaken States' fiscal capacity.
- Efficient States feel penalised.
- Reduced grants may increase stress on poorer States.
- GST reduced taxation autonomy of States.
- Equity criteria dominate over efficiency indicators.

Way Forward

- Cap cesses and surcharges.
- Increase weight for fiscal performance and tax effort.
- Strengthen fiscal autonomy of States.
- Ensure transparent and predictable devolution criteria.
- Balance equity with efficiency.
- Strengthen cooperative federal institutions.

States and pressures
States also face mounting fiscal pressures. The COVID-19 pandemic, structural changes introduced by the Goods and Services Tax (and recent rate rationalisation from four rates to two principal rates), and mounting public debt further constrained their fiscal space. Moreover, the growing dominance of Centrally Sponsored Schemes has narrowed their fiscal autonomy (the restructuring of the National Rural Employment Guarantee programme requires States to bear 40% of programme costs), while buoyancy of central taxes has shrunk. These factors could reduce the actual transfers to States, leading several States to demand a 50% vertical share. Another concern is frequent changes in devolution criteria and their assigned weights across successive FCs in order to transfer more resources to fiscally weaker States, making it difficult for States to predict their future shares. Many States called for a reduced weight for the income-distance criterion and suggested adjusting it for purchasing power differences to better reflect variations in the cost of living. Over time, the shares of better-performing States have steadily declined compared with those of major beneficiary States. The combined shares of four major beneficiary States – Bihar (including Jharkhand), Madhya Pradesh (including Chhattisgarh), Uttar Pradesh (including Uttarakhand) and West Bengal – increased from 42.5% during the Sixth FC period to 51% under the 15th FC. In contrast, the combined share of the four southern States – Andhra Pradesh (including Telangana), Karnataka, Kerala and Tamil Nadu – declined from 24.8% to 15.8%, widening the gap to 35.2%. Continued reliance on unconditional equalisation transfers may weaken incentives for revenue mobilisation and fiscal discipline in weaker States. Moreover, rising

Under the 16th Finance Commission, arbitrary weights affect better-performing States

KEY HIGHLIGHTS:

Context

- The 16th Finance Commission retained the States' share in the divisible tax pool at 41%.
- States demanded:
 - Inclusion/capping of cesses & surcharges,
 - Higher fiscal autonomy,
 - Greater share in central taxes.
- Debate intensified over:
 - Equity vs efficiency,
 - Fiscal federalism,
 - Regional imbalance between richer and poorer States.

Key Points

Constitutional Provisions

- Finance Commission → Article 280.
- Recommends:
 - Vertical devolution (Centre–State),
 - Horizontal devolution (among States).

Major Recommendations

- States' share retained at 41%.
- Revenue deficit grants abolished.
- States advised to:
 - Keep fiscal deficit below 3%,
 - Stop off-budget borrowings.

Criteria for Horizontal Devolution

Criterion	Weight
Income Distance	42.50%
Population	17.50%
Area	10%
Forest & Ecology	10%

India and Australia – bridging the trade and trust barrier

As a comprehensive India-Australia Free Trade Agreement (FTA) in the offing? With the Australian Foreign Minister Penny Wong in India for the Quad Foreign Ministers' meeting, there is anticipation that a Comprehensive Economic Cooperation Agreement (CECA) may be inked. This would expand the 2022 Economic Cooperation and Trade Agreement (ECTA) that had opened 100% of the Australian market to India while India reciprocated with roughly 70% market access covering nearly 95% of trade value. Canberra has since been pushing for FTAs, both privately and publicly. Meanwhile the West Asia crisis has forced upon India – in the words of the Chief Economic Adviser – a "balance of payments crisis stress test", making trade expansion and courtship investments an urgent necessity for the country.



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Former delegate of the Australia-India Youth Dialogue

The problems with Australia
But with Australia, the trade situation is complicated. Since ECTA, bilateral merchandise trade doubled from \$2.2 billion in FY 2020-21 to \$24.1 billion in FY 2024-25. These gains, however, have not been evenly shared. Australian exports to India account for nearly two-thirds of the bilateral trade.
Even in services, where bilateral trade has crossed \$10 billion, Australia's higher education sector alone accounts for close to 60%. In contrast, investment tells the opposite story: as of 2024, Indian investment in Australia had touched nearly \$32 billion against Australia's cumulative FDI into India of about \$18 billion.
The bilateral relationship is thus beset by interconnected problems. Australia wants parity in market access. But the question for India is not whether India should simply concede more market access; it is whether India can trade some market access for a more balanced overall

relationship. Australia's 2025 Economic Engagement Roadmap for India identified four bilateral 'superhighways': clean energy, education, tourism, and agribusiness. On the first three, there appears to be broad alignment but not on the fourth. Agriculture is where this bargain becomes most difficult. India has restricted access to its agricultural market in nearly all its major trade agreements. Despite being compelled to keep India's most vulnerable sectors (dairy, wheat, rice, sugar and chickpeas) outside ECTA, Australian farm exports to India have risen by nearly 90%, while Indian agricultural exports to Australia have grown more modestly by 25%.

This asymmetry reflects two very different agricultural realities. The average Indian farm is about 0.73 hectares; the average Australian farm exceeds 1,400 hectares. Agriculture contributes around 16% to India's GDP and 2.5% to Australia's. For Australia, agriculture is an export industry. For India, it is a livelihood that supports more than half of its population and remains the bedrock of its food security.

The notion of a "level playing field" between these two systems is hence a misframing of the problem. Indian farmers, even with subsidised inputs, remain structurally exposed to monsoon variability, fragmented landholdings and thin margins. Protecting the Indian market from cheap Australian imports, particularly wheat, is not a negotiating position; it is a political necessity. Yet, given the industrial scale of Australia's farming, Canberra will understandably push India to open up its market fully.

Using agriculture as an opportunity
Nonetheless, agricultural trade talks between the two countries need not become a zero-sum game. Agriculture can become the sector through which India converts Australia's demand for market access into a broader opportunity for institutional cooperation and investment. Two low-hanging fruits stand out.

First, the future of India-Australia agricultural trade most depend less on tariff concessions and

more on mutual recognition of biosecurity and phytosanitary standards. Building on the 2025 organic products arrangement, both countries can expand cooperation in digital certification, quarantine protocols and regulatory alignment. This would give Indian farmers a fairer shot at the Australian market even as India considers reciprocal access for Australian farmers.

Second, Australia's strategic opportunity in India may lie beyond agricultural commodities and in exporting the systems that make modern agriculture possible: precision farming technologies, cold-chain infrastructure, water management expertise and climate adaptation practices. India loses anywhere from 15% to 35% of its agricultural output to pests, disease and post-harvest inefficiencies every year. Australia's extensive experience in dealing with drought cycles, heat extremes and water scarcity is knowledge that would interest India.

However, this experience sharing must go hand-in-hand with real investments. Australian capital, technology and know-how must register a deeper presence inside India's agricultural sector – in storage facilities, logistics networks, farm-level tools and agri-technology partnerships between firms, universities and local governments. The recently launched India-Australia Smart Farm Network initiative points in the right direction.

Need for complementarity
Agriculture is too politically important in India to be treated as just another line item in a trade schedule; equally, it is too economically important to be left outside the bilateral partnership altogether. Rather than making the new FTA one of absolute symmetry in market access alone, India and Australia should make it an agreement based on complementarity across trade and investment.

Should the diplomats succeed, the day when Chivusaprah and Yoganite sit on the same breakfast table in the two countries is not far.

The views expressed are personal

Static Linkages

- WTO Agreement on Agriculture:
 - Market access
 - Domestic support
 - Export subsidies.
- SPS (Sanitary and Phytosanitary) Measures regulate food safety and plant/animal health standards.
- MSP and food procurement are linked with food security objectives.
- Small and fragmented landholdings reduce agricultural competitiveness.
- FTAs aim to reduce tariffs and improve trade integration.
- Trade deficit impacts Balance of Payments stability.
- Agricultural infrastructure gaps lead to high post-harvest losses.
- Climate-resilient agriculture is crucial for sustainable farming.

Critical Analysis

Advantages

- CECA can strengthen India's export diversification strategy.
- Australian investment can improve:
 - Agri-logistics
 - Storage
 - Cold-chain infrastructure.
- Technology transfer can improve productivity and climate resilience.
- Better SPS cooperation can improve Indian agricultural exports.

Concerns

- Cheap agricultural imports may hurt Indian farmers.
- Structural asymmetry between Indian and Australian agriculture creates unequal competition.
- Trade liberalisation may increase dependence on imports.
- Sensitive sectors linked to livelihood and food security remain vulnerable.

Stakeholder Perspective

- Farmers demand protection from low-cost imports.
- Agri-businesses favour greater market integration.
- Consumers may benefit from lower prices.
- Government seeks balance between trade expansion and livelihood protection.

Way Forward

- Follow calibrated agricultural liberalisation.
- Protect sensitive sectors through safeguard duties.
- Expand agri-tech and climate-resilient farming partnerships.
- Strengthen SPS certification and export quality standards.
- Promote investment in:
 - Warehousing
 - Cold chains
 - Food processing.
- Focus on value-added agricultural exports

KEY HIGHLIGHTS:

Context of the News

- India and Australia are likely to upgrade the 2022 Economic Cooperation and Trade Agreement (ECTA) into a Comprehensive Economic Cooperation Agreement (CECA).
- The issue gained importance during the Quad Foreign Ministers' meeting attended by Australian Foreign Minister Penny Wong.
- India is rapidly pursuing FTAs due to global geopolitical instability, tariff uncertainties, and external sector pressures.
- Agriculture has emerged as the key contentious sector in CECA negotiations.

Key Points

- Bilateral merchandise trade rose from \$12.2 billion (FY21) to \$24.1 billion (FY25) after ECTA.
- Australian exports constitute nearly two-thirds of bilateral trade.
- India excluded sensitive sectors such as:
 - Dairy
 - Wheat
 - Rice
 - Sugar
 - Chickpeas from tariff liberalisation under ECTA.
- Average farm size:
 - India: ~0.73 hectares
 - Australia: >1,400 hectares.
- Agriculture contributes:
 - ~16% to India's GDP
 - ~2.5% to Australia's GDP.
- Australia seeks greater agricultural market access in India.
- India loses 15–35% of agricultural output due to post-harvest inefficiencies.
- India-Australia cooperation is expanding in:
 - Precision farming
 - Cold-chain infrastructure
 - Climate-resilient agriculture
 - Water management.

From black to grey

India needs to prepare for a future with an ageing population

If India wanted proof of its shifting demographic status, then the latest SRS bulletin, 2024 has provided just that. The figures from the Sample Registration System - Statistical Report, 2024, offer incontrovertible proof – falling fertility rate, low crude birth rate – to show that India's pace of population growth is considerably slowing down. While the pundits predict at least three decades of population growth for the country, the plunging fertility rate certainly commands pause for contemplation and forward planning, for India to crest a crisis that several nations are struggling to manage. India's Total Fertility Rate has dropped to 1.9, lower than the replacement level of 2.1, aided, in large, by a falling birth rate. As per the latest SRS data, India's birth rate fell from 21 in 2014 to 18.3 in 2024; while death rate marginally went down from 6.7 to 6.4. The country is well on its way from population 'explosion' to one of ageing population and shrinking workforce expansion. India might still reap its demographic dividend – the median age in India is 29.2 years, in stark contrast to China (median age of 40.2), and several other European nations. In 2026, India has approximately 370 to 380 million youth, aged 15-29 years, representing roughly 27 % of the country's population. Estimates also put India's below 35 years population at over 65% of the total, making it one of the world's youngest cohorts.

In demographic terms, falling birth rate reflects a decline in fertility, linked to factors such as urbanisation, better education, access to contraception, and the desire for smaller families. India's high life expectancy at birth (72 years) and dipping death rate offer the other side of the transition paradigm, implying better access to health care. India needs to reassess the path ahead and pivot to prepare for the needs of a future greying nation, when the demographic dividend disappears. The SRS data, however, flags a more immediate concern too – one of vast regional and rural/urban disparities. Overall, performance in rural areas is not on a par with the urban centres, and the southern States continue to stay ahead of the northern States. Overall, child survival improvements are real (the Infant Mortality Rate has fallen to 24) but high-burden States in the north are still at a much higher IMR. States and areas that lag will need targeted interventions, whether it is access to health care, awareness or education facilities to effect a national convergence.

KEY HIGHLIGHTS:

Context of the News

- The Sample Registration System (SRS) Statistical Report 2024 indicates a major demographic transition in India.
- India's Total Fertility Rate (TFR) has declined to 1.9, below the replacement level of 2.1.
- Crude Birth Rate (CBR) declined from 21 (2014) to 18.3 (2024).
- Infant Mortality Rate (IMR) reduced to 24.
- India is moving from a phase of high population growth towards:
 - ageing population,
 - slower workforce expansion,
 - regional demographic imbalance.
- Despite fertility decline, India continues to possess a demographic dividend due to a large youth population.

Key Points

Important Demographic Indicators

- TFR: 1.9
- Replacement Level Fertility: 2.1
- Life Expectancy: ~72 years
- Median Age of India: 29.2 years
- Over 65% population below 35 years
- Around 370–380 million youth (15–29 years) in 2026

Causes of Fertility Decline

- Urbanisation

- Female education
- Access to contraception
- Delayed marriages
- Rising cost of living
- Preference for smaller families

Regional Trends

- Southern States:
 - low fertility,
 - better health indicators.
- Northern States:
 - higher fertility,
 - higher IMR,
 - weaker healthcare access.
- Rural areas lag behind urban areas in:
 - maternal healthcare,
 - awareness,
 - education outcomes.

Static Linkages

- Demographic Transition Theory
- Replacement Level Fertility
- Population Momentum
- Demographic Dividend
- Dependency Ratio
- Ageing Population
- National Population Policy, 2000
- SDG 3, SDG 5, SDG 10

Critical Analysis

Opportunities

- Reduced pressure on resources and public infrastructure.
- Better maternal and child health outcomes.
- Opportunity to utilise demographic dividend through skilling and employment generation.

Challenges

- Risk of ageing population in future.
- Shrinking workforce growth rate.
- Regional demographic imbalance.
- Weak social security for elderly population.
- Persistent rural-urban disparities.

Key Concern

- India may face the challenge of “getting old before getting rich” if demographic dividend is not effectively utilised.

Way Forward

- Strengthen skill development and employment generation.
- Improve female labour force participation.
- Expand healthcare and elderly care infrastructure.
- Focus on lagging northern and rural regions.
- Strengthen social security and pension systems.
- Invest in human capital formation.

Baby bait

Incentives for having more children will keep poorer women out of workforce

Departing from decades of family-planning policies in India, the Andhra Pradesh government has proposed new incentives for families in the State to have three or more children. The State's total fertility rate has dropped from around 3 in the 1990s to 1.5 today, well below the replacement rate of 2.1 as well as the national average. According to some projections, nearly a quarter of the State population will be elderly by the mid-century, resulting in a smaller workforce relative to the old-age dependency burden. But while South India is ageing faster than the North, the evidence for cash incentives leading to larger families and doing so without significant socio-economic trade-offs is weak. At present, Andhra Pradesh has proposed ₹30,000 for a third child and ₹40,000 for a fourth; ₹1,000 monthly for five years; free education until the age of 18; provisions for mothers to work from home; enhanced funding for the 'Thalliki Vandanam' scheme, which currently pays ₹15,000 per child for school attendance; longer maternity leave; and other Anganwadi and childcare support. While one-time payments may encourage some families to have children earlier than planned, evidence from India and around the world indicates that they rarely produce large or sustained increases in fertility.

People in the State are having fewer children likely because housing and private education have become more expensive, stable employment is accessible later rather than sooner, and aspirations around children's quality of life have expanded. The proposed incentives are unlikely to offset the 18-year cost of raising one additional child even under optimistic assumptions about public provisions. The State government has also said that it wants to double women's labour force participation, which is antithetical to having more children with the existing social infrastructure. Indeed, France and the Nordic states were able to maintain this two-pronged success only by investing heavily in universal childcare, flexible working arrangements, paid parental leave, high-quality public schooling, and legal protections against career penalties that mothers are at risk of. Otherwise, as is already prevalent in India, mothers end up absorbing more unpaid care work and cannot enter the workforce. Crucially, the economics of the proposed incentives are more likely to influence poorer households seeking immediate cash, leading to an uncomfortable possibility: the State modestly increasing the size of economically vulnerable families without guaranteeing adequate long-term support for child development. Finally, ecological concerns such as water scarcity, urban congestion, waste management, and recycling will also be tested in the long term. While the southern States are anxious about population-based delimitation, asking families to alter personal decisions about having children to address a problem of constitutional design would be a profound mismatch between instrument and objective.

KEY HIGHLIGHTS:

Context of the News

- Andhra Pradesh government proposed incentives for families having three or more children.
- The move comes due to concerns over:
 - Declining fertility rate,
 - Rapid ageing population,
 - Future labour force shortage.
- Andhra Pradesh's Total Fertility Rate (TFR) has fallen to nearly 1.5, below the replacement level of 2.1.
- Proposed measures include:
 - ₹30,000 incentive for third child,
 - ₹40,000 for fourth child,
 - Monthly support for five years,
 - Free education till 18 years,
 - Childcare and maternity support.

Key Points

- India is witnessing demographic transition with falling birth and death rates.
- Southern States have lower fertility and higher ageing compared to northern States.
- Declining fertility may lead to:
 - Higher old-age dependency ratio,
 - Increased healthcare and pension burden,
 - Shrinking workforce.
- Reasons for low fertility:
 - Rising cost of education and housing,

- Urbanisation,
- Delayed marriages and employment,
- Preference for smaller families.
- International experience shows:
 - Cash incentives alone do not significantly increase fertility.
 - Countries like France and Nordic nations succeeded through:
 - Universal childcare,
 - Paid parental leave,
 - Flexible work systems,
 - Women-friendly labour policies.
- Andhra Pradesh also aims to increase women's labour force participation, which may conflict with higher fertility goals if social support systems remain weak.

Static Linkages

- Replacement fertility rate – around 2.1 children per woman.
- Demographic Transition Theory.
- Population ageing and dependency ratio.
- Demographic dividend.
- Human capital formation.
- Population momentum.
- Delimitation based on population.
- Sustainable development and carrying capacity.

Critical Analysis

Positives

- Recognises emerging issue of ageing population.
- May help maintain future working-age population.
- Expands maternal and childcare support.
- Encourages debate on long-term demographic planning.

Concerns

- Cash incentives may have limited long-term impact on fertility.
- Poorer families may be influenced disproportionately for short-term benefits.
- Women may face increased unpaid care burden.
- Contradiction between:
 - Higher fertility targets and
 - Higher female workforce participation.
- Increased population may intensify:
 - Water scarcity,
 - Urban congestion,
 - Waste management issues.
- Delimitation concerns cannot be solved through population expansion policies.

Way Forward

- Focus on quality of population rather than quantity.
- Improve public education and healthcare systems.
- Expand affordable childcare infrastructure.
- Promote gender-sensitive labour policies.
- Strengthen elderly-care and social security systems.
- Enhance skill development and productivity to offset workforce decline.
- Address federal concerns on delimitation through institutional reforms.

Dead ends on the road from Bengal, both sides need new directions

THREE WEEKS since the results, the dust of assembly elections has all but settled, and though the outcome in West Bengal was a rupture, a political sameness is again descending. The stillness is broken erratically — now, by the victor extending his strong arm to swat down the impudent cockroach Janta Party, and then, by rumblings within the vanquished party. But in general, both seem headed back to square one, BJP as well as TMC.

The BJP dare not pause too long on the CJP phenomenon because that might mean wondering if, like the irremissible cockroach, dissent finds a way — even in the guise of a reclaimed star, even in the aftermath of a famous victory. It might mean acknowledging that the people speak, and need to be heard, not when they cast their vote every five years, but also in between. On the other side, if the TMC stops to listen to the voices within that are raising questions about its own complexities in its defeat, it might have to recognize that the onset of political correction, and action, is on its way.

This avoidance of the political imperative is also framed by the readings of the West Bengal verdict. Especially in the non-BJP camp, whose future depends on finding the way forward from Bengal, they sound like an abdication of responsibility. The election was won, and lost, it is being said, because of "SIR" or "Hindu consolidation" or "anti-incumbency". All three have truth in them. All three are framed as political dead ends.

First, the SIR. The Special Intensive Revision of electoral rolls cast a long shadow over the Bengal election, with about 27 lakh voters in the "under adjudication" category deleted controversially, and not given time to appeal. Going by the

scoreboard, the deletions did not impact the result significantly — the deletions are larger than the margin of victory in 49 seats, of which only 26 figure the BJP's list of 206. But numbers alone do not tell the full SIR story.

The SIR residue lingers on in disturbing questions about the un-level playing field, the questionable role of the umpire, the Election Commission, and of the Supreme Court. It is there in the dispiriting message to vulnerable voters, especially of the Muslim minority. Going forward, therefore, whether or not the SIR helped the BJP swing the Bengal election is not the main SIR question.

As the exercise unfolds in other states, apprehensions touched off by the Bengal SIR must be addressed diligently. The Opposition's apocalyptic pitch on the "stolen election", however, which frames its own search for a villain and fall guy, comes in the way of a patient politics of vigilance and monitoring.

The second explanation for the verdict — anti-incumbency — has long been sanctified of people's real concerns, and emptied of political meaning. It is invoked by outgoing incumbents as an unattainable force, as if it could not have been countered by good governance or politics. It suits an incoming government, too, to treat anti-incumbency as a black box, not as a set of discontents that now need to be addressed by it.

The refusal to look anti-incumbency in the eye is even more evident in West Bengal, where by questioning the verdict's legitimacy, the TMC avoids a confrontation with ground-level reasons for the crisis of political bipolarity. Like the opposition's shadow network it inherited from the party-society under Left rule, for in-



VANDITA MISHRA

stance, and made its own. TMC cadres and political entrepreneurs became the state, insinuating themselves into all spaces, extracting and extorting. They dissolved the boundaries between party and government, blurred lines of accountability.

After Bengal, the TMC and national Opposition have resorted to another increasingly visible strategy of avoiding the political responsibility that flows from the electoral verdict. They point, helplessly, to a Hindu consolidation that is now cast as an iron law of political nature, much like anti-incumbency.

On this third explanation, there is an active convergence of BJP and non-BJP — it suits the BJP that its opponents see Hindu consolidation as the trumping electoral argument and logic. The Narendra Modi government's first flurry of decisions — from banning namaz on streets to imposing 'Vande Mataram' in madrasas — underlines this. The new government is triumphantly owning the space the BJP has worked to expand and that its opponents have ceded to it. This also helps it to defer for now, or indefinitely, its pressing governance challenges.

The Opposition needs to ask if it undermines itself by treating Hindu consolidation like anti-incumbency — as something without a political counter, as almost the end of politics. In fact, a big question after Bengal could be this: in the era of BJP dominance, what does the politics of secularism mean? At a time when the distortions of secularism-in-practice have made it easy for the BJP to fling the label of "oppression politics" at its opponents, and when the label sticks, how can secularism-as-principle be recast or retrieved?

If the pessimistic logic of a permanent majority and minority in a diverse democracy is not to win, the search for answers must pick up speed. The communal question has a long and troubled past, there are no ready answers in it.

Before Independence, it was hoped that solidarities forged in the anti-colonial movement would blunt and eventually dissolve religious antagonisms in the new country, and the people would be addressed by their leaders irrespective of caste and creed. Or that the economic issue would without the communal problem. Or that careful constitutional provisions for protections for minorities would take care of it. Or that communalism would be defeated, top-down, by the secular intelligentsia and liberal elites.

After Independence, in a country spooked by Partition and its terrible violence and uprooting, the communal problem was allowed to fester, largely unintended. The sly tokenism and opportunism that has masqueraded as secular politics failed to assuage minority insecurities while stoking resentments in the majority. Now, the BJP has stepped into the absence and weaponised it.

The BJP's successes call for a new imagination of secular politics. In the 1990s, the Mandal moment gave caste politics the democratic frame of "social justice". Today, laid low by the BJP's conquests, the Opposition could work out a framework of pluralism in which to set the new secular politics — which acknowledges religious difference with respect and reciprocity, instead of avoiding eye-contact with it.

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KEY HIGHLIGHTS:

Context of the News

- West Bengal Assembly election results triggered debates on:
 - Special Intensive Revision (SIR) of electoral rolls.
 - Hindu consolidation in elections.
 - Future of secular politics in India.
- Allegations emerged regarding deletion of nearly 27 lakh voters during electoral roll revision.
- Questions were raised on:
 - Neutrality of Election Commission.
 - Electoral inclusiveness.
 - Minority representation in democracy.

Key Points

- Electoral roll revision became politically controversial.
- Concerns over exclusion of vulnerable and minority voters.
- Anti-incumbency linked with:
 - Corruption,
 - Cadre dominance,
 - Governance fatigue.
- "Hindu consolidation" seen as a major electoral factor.
- Debate intensified on:
 - Constitutional secularism,
 - Majoritarian politics,
 - Democratic accountability.

Static Linkages

- Article 324 – Powers of Election Commission.
- Article 326 – Universal Adult Franchise.
- Articles 14, 15 – Equality and non-discrimination.
- Articles 25–28 – Freedom of religion.

- Secularism added by 42nd Constitutional Amendment (1976).
- S.R. Bommai Case – Secularism part of Basic Structure.
- Representation of People Act, 1950 & 1951.
- Constitutional morality and pluralism.
- Free and fair elections as core democratic principle.

Critical Analysis

Positives

- Democratic debate on electoral transparency.
- Greater focus on institutional accountability.
- Public discussion on constitutional secularism.

Concerns

- Alleged voter exclusion may weaken electoral fairness.
- Communal polarization may overshadow governance issues.
- Perceived institutional bias can reduce public trust.
- Identity politics may deepen social divisions.

Way Forward

- Ensure transparent electoral roll revision.
- Strengthen autonomy of Election Commission.
- Improve grievance redressal for voters.
- Promote issue-based politics over identity polarization.
- Reinforce constitutional values of pluralism and secularism.

From Ghazipur, UP, to J&K: Healing drug addiction wound



AJAY SINGH

I KNEW his name before I knew what heroin could do to a person. He was from Ghazipur, one of the brightest students in our hostel at Banaras Hindu University. Sharp, funny, full of ambition. Then, gradually, he wasn't. The transformation crept in quietly, until one day it was complete. He was one of thousands around BHU who had been consumed by a trade that operated brazenly, with political protection and impunity.

Ghazipur is not incidental to this story. Amitav Ghosh chose it as the opening of his Opium War trilogy for good reason — this district in eastern Uttar Pradesh sat at the heart of a narcotics trade that reached from Myanmar to Indian cities. The Ghazipur syndicate, operating through the 1980s and 1990s, was linked to Kun Sa, then among the world's most powerful drug traffickers, based in Myanmar. The Narcotics Control Bureau and the Central Bureau of Narcotics launched sustained campaigns. The trade grew anyway. And then, as happens when a crisis grows too large to police, it became invisible, filed away as someone else's problem.

This is why, when Lieutenant Governor Manoj Sinha announced a campaign to eradicate drugs from the lives of young people in Jammu and Kashmir, I did not dismiss it as rhetoric. Sinha is from Ghazipur. He was a student leader at BHU during the years when the trade was at its most devastating. He has seen what a generation looks like when it is lost to addiction.

The drug problem in J&K is, in some ways, even more entrenched. The region borders the Golden Crescent — Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Iran — one of the world's largest opium-producing zones. Heroin and brown sugar are readily available. Pakistani supply networks have extended the reach of this trade into Punjab and Rajasthan as well.

The damage shows most clearly in Punjab. Visit the areas around educational institutions and you encounter stories that never make the news: Families who speak in whispers, parents who grieve privately, children who disappeared not to vi-

olence but to a slower, quieter ruin. The state has shown remarkable resilience — religious institutions in particular have stepped into the vacuum — but community resistance cannot substitute institutional commitment.

In J&K, the drug menace has been a festering wound for decades. Its connection to the financing of separatism has long been suspected; the reluctance of mainstream political parties to engage with the issue seriously has been, at best, a failure of courage and, at worst, something more troubling.

Sinha's campaign has drawn enthusiastic participation from local communities. This is significant. Public health crises of this nature require communities to believe change is possible, and to invest energy in it. But the deeper question is whether this energy can be institutionalised, and whether the example travels. In Ghazipur, in Varanasi, in the metros and tier-two cities where addiction statistics have climbed steadily, there is no comparable movement. Professional politicians have little appetite for this. It demands something more difficult than a rally — the patient work of rebuilding individual lives. That requires sustained funding, trained counsellors, family support systems, and a political class willing to treat addiction as a public health emergency rather than a moral failing. It requires, as someone once said of a different long struggle, not weeks or months but years of commitment without the guarantee of visible results.

Sinha has the background, the credibility, and apparently the resolve to see this through in J&K. The test will be whether what begins in the Valley can become a model for how political will, community participation, and institutional support can be brought together to fight a crisis hiding in plain sight. The students of Ghazipur, of BHU, of Punjab, of every city where this catastrophe is unfolding, deserve nothing less.

The writer is former press secretary to the President of India

- Ministry of Social Justice report on substance abuse:

- Opioid use in India is higher than global average.
- Youth are increasingly vulnerable.

Static Linkages

- Article 47 directs the State to improve public health and prohibit harmful intoxicants.
- Drug trafficking is linked with organized crime and terrorism financing.
- Border management is crucial for internal security.
- Rehabilitation and de-addiction are essential components of welfare governance.
- Cooperative federalism is necessary for interstate anti-drug operations.
- Social stigma affects treatment and reintegration of addicts.

Critical Analysis

Significance

- Addresses youth vulnerability and demographic concerns.
- Helps tackle narco-terrorism and illegal financing.
- Encourages community participation in governance.
- Recognizes addiction as a public health issue.

Challenges

- Porous borders and difficult terrain.
- Weak rehabilitation infrastructure.
- Social stigma and lack of awareness.
- Rising synthetic drug trade.
- Coordination gaps among agencies.

Concerns

- Excessive criminalization may ignore rehabilitation needs.
- Political and administrative complacency can weaken implementation.
- Long-term behavioural change requires sustained funding and counselling support.

Way Forward

- Strengthen border surveillance and intelligence sharing.
- Expand de-addiction and rehabilitation centres.
- Integrate counselling in schools and colleges.
- Increase community policing and awareness campaigns.
- Improve coordination among NCB, BSF, police, and health departments.
- Focus on skill development and employment generation for youth.
- Treat addiction through a balanced approach of enforcement + rehabilitation.

Its connection to the financing of separatism has long been suspected; the reluctance of mainstream political parties to engage with the issue seriously has been, at best, a failure of courage

KEY HIGHLIGHTS:

Context of the News

- J&K Lieutenant Governor Manoj Sinha launched a campaign against increasing drug addiction among youth in Jammu & Kashmir.
- The issue has gained attention due to rising heroin and synthetic drug trafficking in border states like Punjab and J&K.
- J&K's proximity to the "Golden Crescent" makes it vulnerable to cross-border narcotics smuggling.
- Concerns also exist regarding narco-terrorism and financing of separatist activities through drug networks.

Key Points

- Golden Crescent: Afghanistan–Pakistan–Iran region; major global opium-producing zone.
- Golden Triangle: Myanmar–Laos–Thailand region; another major narcotics-producing region.
- India faces challenges from both trafficking routes.
- Main trafficking methods:
 - Drones,
 - Border infiltration,
 - Hawala financing,
 - Courier/synthetic drug networks.
- NDPS Act, 1985 is the primary anti-drug legislation in India.
- Narcotics Control Bureau (NCB) coordinates anti-narcotics operations.

Dust is easiest to clean, time to do it is now

IT IS now well known that the particulate matter (PM) burden on Delhi's air — responsible for the city's chronic pollution crisis — is a toxic mix of multiple pollutants. Addressing it requires a multi-pronged approach that combines systemic overhauls with relatively simple interventions at the local government level. Controlling emissions from the transport, industrial and agricultural sectors involves complex solutions with significant implications for economic activity in the city and its surrounding regions. Dust pollution, in contrast, can be reduced through relatively less economically disruptive measures such as regular road sweeping, water sprinkling, covering construction sites, and maintaining roads and pavements. However, as an investigation by this newspaper shows, the city's limited dust-control infrastructure, especially its Mechanical Road Sweeping Machines (MRSMs), remains severely underutilised. The persistent failure to implement such operationally straightforward measures raises serious questions about administrative intent.

In Delhi, dust pollution primarily originates from construction sites, demolition activities, roadside soil and the movement of heavy vehicles. It accounts for nearly 41 per cent of PM10 pollutants and 38 per cent of the finer PM2.5 particles during summer, when dry conditions increase dust levels in the city's air. Yet, as the investigation reveals, Delhi's MRSM fleet operates below capacity for much of the year, including during peak-pollution months, and its deployment remains confined to only a few parts of the capital. Coverage across municipal zones is uneven, with better-funded zones receiving more service than others. This skewed usage defeats the purpose of the machines. Dust does not respect administrative boundaries — when one zone is cleaned while another is neglected, particles circulate across the city because of traffic movement and shifting wind patterns.

For far too long, Delhi's authorities have treated the city's poor air quality as a seasonal problem, despite a wealth of studies highlighting heavy pollution year-round. Their failure to acknowledge the scale of the crisis prevents the city from deriving the maximum benefit from MRSMs. The fact that the deployment of these machines is concentrated in winter, when smog attracts public attention, shows that the authorities continue to adopt a reactive approach. Delhi needs a coordinated dust-management strategy involving civic bodies, the Public Works Department and pollution-control agencies. Real-time monitoring of MRSM deployment and performance audits could introduce much-needed transparency into the system. Indore's experience with these machines demonstrates that solutions to dust pollution are neither technologically complex nor financially prohibitive. Unlike geography or crop-residue burning, this is an aspect of pollution over which the Delhi government cannot claim helplessness. Like in its interventions on clean fuel, emission standards and protection of green belts, the Court should nudge Delhi's authorities.

KEY HIGHLIGHTS:

Context of the News

- Recent reports highlighted the underutilisation of Mechanical Road Sweeping Machines (MRSMs) in Delhi despite severe air pollution levels.
- Dust pollution remains a major contributor to particulate matter pollution in Delhi, especially during summer.
- Civic bodies have failed to ensure uniform deployment of dust-control infrastructure across municipal zones.
- The issue reflects governance gaps in implementation of pollution-control measures under the National Clean Air Programme (NCAP) and GRAP framework.

Key Points

- Dust pollution contributes nearly:
 - 41% of PM10
 - 38% of PM2.5 during summer in Delhi.
- Major sources:
 - Construction and demolition activities
 - Road dust
 - Open soil
 - Heavy vehicular movement
- MRSMs help through:
 - Mechanised vacuum sweeping
 - Water sprinkling
 - Prevention of dust re-suspension
- Problems identified:
 - Limited operational use

- Seasonal deployment during winter only
- Uneven municipal coverage
- Weak monitoring and accountability
- Delhi continues to follow a reactive rather than preventive pollution-control strategy.

Static Linkages

- PM10: particulate matter less than 10 micrometres.
- PM2.5: finer particles causing severe respiratory and cardiovascular diseases.
- National Ambient Air Quality Standards (NAAQS) notified under Air Act, 1981.
- Article 21:
 - Right to life includes right to clean environment.
- Article 48A:
 - State shall protect and improve environment.
- Article 51A(g):
 - Fundamental duty to protect natural environment.
- National Clean Air Programme (NCAP):
 - Targeted reduction in particulate pollution.
- Graded Response Action Plan (GRAP):
 - Emergency pollution-control mechanism for Delhi-NCR.
- Construction and Demolition Waste Management Rules, 2016 regulate dust emissions.
- 74th Constitutional Amendment:
 - Urban local bodies responsible for sanitation and public health.

Critical Analysis

Significance

- Dust-control measures are relatively low-cost and administratively feasible.
- Effective mechanised cleaning can substantially reduce particulate pollution.
- Improves public health and urban sanitation.

Challenges

- Poor coordination among agencies:
 - Municipal corporations
 - PWD
 - Pollution-control authorities
- Weak enforcement of construction norms.
- Lack of year-round pollution strategy.
- Uneven resource allocation among municipal zones.
- Administrative apathy and weak monitoring.

Governance Concerns

- Raises issues of:
 - Accountability
 - Transparency
 - Administrative efficiency
- Reflects implementation deficit rather than policy absence.

Way Forward

- Ensure year-round operation of MRSMs.
- Create integrated dust-management strategy for Delhi-NCR.
- Real-time monitoring of machine deployment.
- Strict enforcement of construction dust norms.
- Increase roadside greening and paved shoulders.
- Strengthen coordination between CAQM, civic bodies, and Delhi government.
- Conduct periodic third-party environmental audits.
- Promote preventive rather than seasonal pollution management.

Health indicators point to gains, and disparities

THE JUST-released Sample Registration System report for 2024 highlights a demographic transformation that is cause for both celebration and concern. The country's birth rate — the total number of live births per 1,000 people in a population — declined to 18.3 per 1,000 population in 2024, down from 21 in 2014. The Infant Mortality Rate (IMR) has also fallen steadily from 39 per 1,000 live births in 2014-2019 to 24 in 2024. These gains reflect decades of sustained public-health investment. Yet, the national averages conceal a deeper gulf between rural and urban areas, and between states: Chhattisgarh records the country's highest IMR at 36, with MP and UP at 35 each. Kerala, at the other end, stands at eight; Tamil Nadu, Delhi and Himachal Pradesh at 11. This gap between the best- and worst-performing states underlines persistent local failures.

The broader gains reflected in the data owe much to the cumulative impact of targeted interventions under the National Health Mission. These have expanded immunisation coverage, lowering preventable child deaths, and improved institutional deliveries. But the persistence of rural disadvantage suggests that public-health infrastructure has advanced unevenly, with poorer states and districts still struggling to catch up. The 2024 data places rural IMR at 27 deaths per 1,000 live births, compared with 17 in urban areas — a disparity that reflects enduring inequalities in health-care access, awareness and maternal nutrition.

The fertility data, too, compounds this picture of two Indias. India's Total Fertility Rate (TFR) has remained flat at 1.9 for the fifth consecutive year, below the replacement level of 2.1. Delhi records the country's lowest TFR at 1.2, followed by Kerala, Tamil Nadu, and West Bengal at 1.3. But Bihar's TFR remains the highest at 2.9. The consequences of ignoring this are considerable. Nearly 10 per cent of India's population is now aged 60 and above, signalling that many of the economically advanced states are ageing rapidly. Read together, the data does not present a single India on the cusp of its demographic dividend, but two demographic realities moving at different speeds. Policymakers must resist the comfort of national averages to confront that divergent reality.

KEY HIGHLIGHTS:

Context

- The Sample Registration System (SRS) Report 2024 shows major demographic changes in India.
- Birth Rate declined from 21 (2014) to 18.3 per 1,000 population (2024).
- Infant Mortality Rate (IMR) declined from 39 to 24 per 1,000 live births.
- Total Fertility Rate (TFR) remained at 1.9, below replacement level (2.1).
- Large inter-state disparities continue:
 - Highest IMR: Chhattisgarh (36)
 - Lowest IMR: Kerala (8)
 - Highest TFR: Bihar (2.9)
 - Lowest TFR: Delhi (1.2)

Key Points

Important Data

- Birth Rate: 18.3
- TFR: 1.9
- IMR: 24
- Rural IMR: 27
- Urban IMR: 17
- Around 10% population is above 60 years.

Major Observations

- India is moving toward population stabilisation.
- Southern and urbanised states are ageing faster.
- BIMARU states continue to show high fertility and poor health indicators.
- Rural-urban healthcare inequality persists.

Reasons for Improvement

- National Health Mission (NHM)
- Universal Immunisation Programme
- Institutional deliveries
- Better maternal and child healthcare

Static Linkages

- Replacement level fertility = 2.1
- Demographic Transition Theory
- Population momentum
- Dependency ratio
- Demographic dividend
- Public Health → State Subject
- SDG 3: Good Health and Well-being

Critical Analysis

Positives

- Declining IMR reflects healthcare improvement.
- Lower fertility indicates better literacy and awareness.
- Improved institutional deliveries reduced infant deaths.

Challenges

- Wide regional disparities remain.
- Rural healthcare infrastructure is weak.
- Ageing population may increase pension and healthcare burden.
- High fertility states may face unemployment and poverty pressure.

Way Forward

- Strengthen rural healthcare infrastructure.
- Improve maternal nutrition.
- Focus on women's education and awareness.
- Expand geriatric healthcare facilities.
- Target district-level health interventions.
- Improve Centre-State coordination under NHM.