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THE HINDU
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Daily News Analysis

The Hindu Important News Articles & Editorial For UPSC CSE

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Page 01 : GS 3 : Internal Security

India is in the process of finalising its **first National Counter Terrorism Policy and Strategy**, a landmark step aimed at providing a **uniform, institutionalised framework** for preventing, responding to, and prosecuting terrorism across all States. The initiative, led by the Union Ministry of Home Affairs with inputs from agencies such as the **National Investigation Agency**, reflects India's evolving internal security challenges, particularly in the digital and transnational domains.

India finalising first anti-terror policy

Vijaita Singh
NEW DELHI

The Union government is finalising India's first anti-terror policy to provide a template for all States to combat and respond to terror attacks and related incidents, a senior government official has told *The Hindu*.

Digital radicalisation, the misuse of open borders, and conversion networks funded by foreign players are among the key issues being discussed in the run-up to the policy's release.

The National Investigation Agency (NIA) is also

Key issues include digital radicalisation, the misuse of open borders, and conversion networks

organising an anti-terror conference on December 26 and 27 at Delhi where the contours of the policy are likely to be shared.

'NIA has given inputs'
"The Home Ministry is finalising the document and the NIA has also given its inputs," an NIA official told *The Hindu*.

Union Home Minister Amit Shah had announced

last November that a National Counter Terrorism Policy and Strategy would be introduced soon.

After the April 22 Pahalgam terror attack, the NIA had conducted meetings with anti-terror units of all States and apprised them of the measures to be put in place to prevent and pre-empt such attacks.

The use of the National Intelligence Grid (NATGRID), a secure platform for law enforcement agencies to access government and other databases, has also been discussed.

Over the past few months, NIA Director General Sadanand Date and

National Security Guard chief Brighu Srinivasan have briefed a few State police chiefs on issues such as foreign-funded conversion rackets, online radicalisation, and Aadhaar spoofing, among others.

Police against LWE
A National Policy and Action Plan for Left Wing Extremism (LWE) had earlier been introduced in 2015.

An Uttar Pradesh police official said that online radicalisation and the misuse of the open border with Nepal have been flagged as priority issues likely to find mention in the new anti-terror policy.

Key Features of the Proposed Policy

Shift from Incident-Based to Preventive Approach

Emphasis on **pre-emption, early detection, and disruption** rather than post-attack response.

Builds on lessons from recent attacks such as the Pahalgam incident.

Focus on New-Age Terrorism Drivers

Digital radicalisation via social media and encrypted platforms.

Aadhaar spoofing and identity fraud enabling sleeper cells.

Foreign-funded conversion networks used as tools for radicalisation.

Misuse of open borders, particularly the India-Nepal border, highlighting porous border vulnerabilities.

Strengthening Federal Coordination

The policy seeks to act as a **template for States**, ensuring standard operating procedures (SOPs) while respecting the federal structure.

Regular coordination between State Anti-Terror Squads (ATS), central agencies, and intelligence bodies.

Institutional Role of NIA and NSG

Inputs from NIA and operational perspectives from the National Security Guard strengthen tactical and legal dimensions.

The proposed anti-terror conference institutionalises **knowledge-sharing and capacity building**.

Leveraging Technology and Data Integration

Enhanced use of **National Intelligence Grid** for real-time access to multi-sectoral databases.

Signals a move towards **intelligence-led policing**.

Continuity with Existing Security Frameworks

Builds upon the **National Policy and Action Plan on Left Wing Extremism (2015)**, which combined security operations with development and governance reforms.

Indicates a broader national security doctrine beyond region-specific threats.

Challenges and Concerns

Civil Liberties: Expanded surveillance and data access must be balanced with privacy safeguards.

Implementation Gap: Uniform adoption by States with varied capacities remains a concern.

Cross-Border Cooperation: Addressing open borders requires sustained diplomatic and operational coordination with neighbours.

Conclusion

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The proposed National Counter Terrorism Policy marks a **strategic evolution in India's internal security architecture**, moving from fragmented responses to a **coherent, forward-looking national framework**. By addressing digital radicalisation, cross-border vulnerabilities, and institutional coordination, the policy aligns India's counter-terror strategy with contemporary threat realities. Its effectiveness, however, will ultimately depend on **robust implementation, inter-agency trust, and the careful balancing of security with constitutional values**, making it a critical development for India's democratic security paradigm.

UPSC Prelims Practice Question

Ques : With reference to India's proposed National Counter Terrorism Policy, consider the following statements:

1. It aims to provide a uniform framework for all States to prevent and respond to terrorist incidents.

2. It proposes the creation of a new central counter-terror agency replacing the National Investigation Agency.

3. It emphasises the use of technology platforms such as NATGRID for intelligence-led policing.

Which of the statements given above is/are correct?

(a) 1 and 3 only

(b) 1 only

(c) 2 and 3 only

(d) 1, 2 and 3

Ans : a)

UPSC Mains Practice Question

Ques : India is in the process of finalising its first National Counter Terrorism Policy. Discuss the key features of the proposed policy and examine how it addresses emerging internal security challenges in the digital era. **(150 words)**

Daily News Analysis

Page 06 : GS : 3 : Internal Security & Economy

In a significant articulation of India's strategic priorities, Air Marshal Ashutosh Dixit, Chief of Integrated Defence Staff to the Chairman, Chiefs of Staff Committee, underscored that critical minerals are central to national security, defence preparedness, and technological sovereignty. His remarks reflect a growing recognition that modern warfare, advanced manufacturing, and future technologies are deeply dependent on assured access to a narrow set of strategically vital minerals.

'Critical minerals important for national security and technological sovereignty'

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

Critical minerals are crucial for national security, defence capability development, and technological sovereignty, Air Marshal Ashutosh Dixit, Chief of Integrated Defence Staff to the Chairman Chiefs of Staff Committee, said on Tuesday.

Speaking at a discussion titled "Minerals that Matter: Geopolitics, Sovereignty and Value Chains", Air Marshal Dixit underscored the role of critical minerals in modern defence systems. "Modern defence systems, including jet engines, missiles, precision munitions, radars, satellites, batteries and semiconductors, are intrinsically dependent on assured access to these minerals,"

Air Marshal Ashutosh Dixit

he said. Highlighting the geopolitical dimensions of mineral supply chains, he said that global supply networks for critical minerals are highly concentrated and increasingly subject to export controls and geopolitical pressures.

He emphasised that self-reliant defence manufacturing and sustained operational readiness are inseparable from secure and resilient mineral supply chains.

Referring to recent initiatives, Air Marshal Dixit highlighted the identification of critical minerals, the launch of the National Critical Mineral Mission, and government efforts to strengthen the value chain – from extraction and processing to manufacturing and recycling.

These measures, he said, are vital for translating policy intent into tangible outcomes.

The Air Marshal, who was speaking at the event organised by the Centre for Joint Warfare Studies and IP Bazzaar, inaugurated a compilation of 30 technical reports on critical minerals, featuring detailed intellectual property landscape studies and market analyses.

Why Critical Minerals Matter

Defence and National Security Dimension

Modern defence platforms such as **jet engines, missiles, radars, satellites, batteries, and semiconductors** rely heavily on critical minerals like lithium, cobalt, rare earth elements, gallium, and nickel.

Any disruption in supply chains can directly impair **operational readiness and indigenous defence manufacturing**.

Geopolitics of Mineral Supply Chains

Global supply chains for critical minerals are **highly concentrated in a few countries**, making them vulnerable to export controls, geopolitical rivalries, and strategic coercion.

This mirrors the evolving trend of **"weaponisation of supply chains"**, similar to energy or semiconductor geopolitics.

Technological Sovereignty

Emerging sectors—electric vehicles, renewable energy, space technologies, AI hardware, and defence electronics—require secure mineral access.

Dependence on external suppliers undermines **Atmanirbhar Bharat** and India's ambition to be a technology-driven power.

Policy and Institutional Responses

Identification of Critical Minerals

India has formally identified a list of critical minerals essential for economic and strategic needs, aligning policy with global best practices.

National Critical Mineral Mission (NCMM)

The Mission aims to strengthen the entire **value chain—from exploration and mining to processing, manufacturing, and recycling**.

This approach recognises that mining alone is insufficient; downstream capabilities determine real strategic control.

Knowledge and Capacity Building

The compilation of technical reports on critical minerals, inaugurated at the event, reflects an emphasis on **intellectual property mapping, market intelligence, and indigenous R&D**.

The role of institutions such as **Centre for Joint Warfare Studies** highlights the growing civil–military–academic interface in strategic planning.

Challenges Ahead

Limited Domestic Reserves: India has modest reserves of several critical minerals, necessitating overseas asset acquisition and mineral diplomacy.

Environmental and Social Concerns: Mining expansion must balance sustainability, tribal rights, and ecological protection.

Technological Gaps: Processing and refining capabilities remain a weak link compared to global leaders.

Conclusion

The emphasis on critical minerals by India's defence leadership signals a **paradigm shift in national security thinking**, where resource security is treated as inseparable from military strength and technological leadership. Initiatives like the National Critical Mineral Mission mark a move from policy intent to structural transformation. For India, securing resilient and diversified mineral supply chains will be essential not only for defence readiness but also for sustaining long-term economic growth and safeguarding strategic autonomy in an increasingly competitive global order.

UPSC Mains Practice Question

Ques : Critical minerals have emerged as a new pillar of national security and technological sovereignty. In this context, examine the strategic importance of critical minerals for India. Discuss the challenges India faces in securing their supply chains and evaluate the measures taken by the government to ensure long-term resilience.

Page 07
Syllabus : GS 3 : Environment / Prelims

A recent study published in Science provides robust empirical evidence that rhino dehorning has led to a dramatic reduction in poaching in African wildlife reserves. At a time when global rhino numbers have fallen to fewer than 28,000 individuals, the findings offer important insights into cost-effective, incentive-based wildlife conservation, with direct relevance for biodiversity governance and environmental policy debates in India and globally.

Rhino dehorning nearly eliminated poaching in African reserves: study

Reserves that removed the horns of rhinos reported a 75% decrease in poaching compared to the pre-dehorning levels. In the seven reserves that implemented abrupt dehorning (within one to two months), poaching fell by 78%. Dehorned rhinos also faced a 95% lower risk of being poached compared to animals with intact horns

Sanjukta Mondal

Once upon a time, the thunder of the hooves of lakhs of mighty rhinoceroses echoed across the savannahs, grasslands, and tropical forests of Africa and Asia – but things have been pretty quiet lately. As of 2024, fewer than 28,000 rhinos remain on the planet, all five species combined.

Relentless poaching has been a major threat to the survival of rhinos around the world. Greater Kruger, the southern African reserves protecting the world's largest rhino population, alone lost 1,985 black and white rhinos between 2017 and 2023. That's nearly 6.5% of the rhino population disappearing each year, despite an investment of $74 million in anti-poaching strategies, including ranger patrols, trained tracking dogs, AI-powered detection cameras, and aerial surveillance.

One approach that has shown promise is dehorning. An international team of researchers recently collected data over seven years from 11 reserves in the South African portion of the Greater Kruger region and found that dehorning significantly reduced poaching incidents by removing the primary incentive for poachers.

Nelson Mandela University senior lecturer and study member Tim Kuiper said the idea for their project arose from an urgent need on the ground: "The managers, rangers and scientists [at Kruger National Park] came together and asked a bold question: why are we still losing so many rhinos? What can we do differently?"

The team found that dehorning 2,284 rhinos across eight reserves resulted in a sudden 78% drop in poaching, achieved with just 1.2% of the total anti-poaching budget. The findings were published in *Science*.

Illegal rhino horns

Rhinoceroses' horns are made of keratin, the same fibrous protein found in hair and nails. The animals use them to dig to access edible plants and roots, and as a symbol of virility during mating.

Some people also perceive rhino horns as status symbols. Many practitioners of traditional medicine in certain Asian countries, but especially China and Vietnam, also include rhino horns in their preparations because they believe the horn treats everything from fever and gout to more mystical issues like possession. There is no scientific evidence to back any of these claims, but that has not stopped a global black market worth hundreds of millions of dollars still persists.

One 2022 report by the Wildlife Justice Commission found that the wholesale trade in raw rhino horns between 2012 and 2022 generated between $874 million and $1.13 billion in gross illicit income.

Why poachers kill

The researchers behind the new study said the demand for rhino horns plus poverty in many local communities creates financial pressures that drive people to risk everything, sometimes their lives, to poach or support poachers.

To remove a rhino's horn without causing harm, conservationists and veterinarians sedate, blindfold, and fit the animal with earplugs to reduce stress. Then they carefully cut 90-93% of the horn with a saw, above the germinal layer, which is the living tissue at the horn's base that's essential for it to regrow. After trimming, the remaining stump is smoothed and coated with a tarry substance to prevent infections.

Poachers often operate under intense pressure, so killing the rhino allows them to remove the entire horn without resistance.

Dehorning against poaching

To assess the effectiveness of dehorning in reducing poaching, the researchers analysed quarterly data from 2017 to 2023 across 11 wildlife reserves. Using a powerful statistical method called hierarchical Bayesian regression modelling, they compared reserves that dehorned rhinos with those that didn't, tracking changes in poaching before and after the intervention.

Reserves that removed the horns reported a 75% drop in poaching versus

While arresting poachers remains a part of the anti-poaching toolkit, they weren't found to be as effective at deterring poachers. Researchers said this could be because systemic issues and corruption create loopholes that traffickers can exploit to avoid detection

pre-dehorning levels. In the seven reserves that implemented abrupt dehorning (within one to two months), poaching fell off by 78%. Dehorned rhinos also faced a 95% lower risk of being poached compared to those with intact horns.

In another striking finding, while efforts to detect and arrest poachers remain a crucial part of the anti-poaching toolkit, they weren't found to be as effective at actually deterring poachers. The researchers said this could be because systemic issues and corruption create loopholes that traffickers can exploit to avoid detection. Weak criminal justice systems also make it worse, often allowing poachers to escape with little or no meaningful punishment.

Conservation with locals

Kaziranga National Park in Assam, home to one of the world's largest populations of greater one-horned rhinos, has also suffered poaching.

Bibhab Kumar Talukdar, an International Union for Conservation of Nature awardee and rhino conservationist, said that while poaching still claims over 400 rhinos a year, India

and Nepal have lost only one or two over the last three years. Kaziranga's success has been attributed to smart patrolling and active community engagement. Partnerships of local communities and park authorities have helped mitigate human-wildlife conflict.

"So why should India or Nepal need dehorning?" Mr. Talukdar asked.

The efforts required extensive groundwork, involving more than 1,000 hours in workshops and discussions with reserve staff and rangers on how to collect and interpret data. The labour-intensive nature of such research highlights the need to involve those on the ground in conservation efforts. Rangers in particular are often locals and possess regional ecological knowledge, but this resource remains underutilised.

Dr. Kuiper said rangers are the frontline defenders of conservation. Their welfare, including fair pay, training, and safety, must be prioritised alongside interventions, as lasting success depends on supporting the people who implement these strategies.

The researchers also noted that while dehorning might not be a silver bullet, as poachers may still target rhinos for the small horn remnants, it shows strong potential as a long-term strategy. They believe the study's findings can help governments and wildlife protection agencies make more informed decisions about allocating resources and assessing the effectiveness of interventions.

(Sanjukta Mondal is a chemist-turned-science-writer with experience in writing popular science articles and scripts for STEM YouTube channels. sanjuktamondal.sm@gmail.com)

THE GIST

▾ Greater Kruger lost 1,985 rhinos between 2017 and 2023. That was despite millions invested in anti-poaching strategies, including patrols, dogs, AI-powered cameras, and aerial surveillance. Now, one approach is showing promise – dehorning

▾ Some perceive rhino horns as status symbols. They are also used in traditional medicine because it is believed that it treats everything from fever and gout to more mystical issues like possession. One report found that horns generated between $874 million and $1.13 billion in illicit income

▾ India and Nepal, however, have chosen not to dehorn, because their local programmes have been successful. They have lost only one or two rhinos over the last three years. Kaziranga's success has been attributed to smart patrolling and community engagement

Key Findings of the Study

Significant Reduction in Poaching

Reserves that implemented dehorning witnessed a **75% decline in poaching** compared to pre-dehorning levels.

In reserves where dehorning was conducted rapidly (within 1–2 months), poaching fell by **78%**.

Dehorned rhinos faced a **95% lower risk of being poached** compared to those with intact horns.

High Cost-Effectiveness

Dehorning accounted for only **1.2% of total anti-poaching expenditure**, yet delivered disproportionately high outcomes.

In contrast, expensive enforcement-heavy measures (AI surveillance, aerial patrols, detection dogs) showed limited deterrence.

Rationale Behind Effectiveness

Poaching is primarily **incentive-driven**; removing the horn eliminates the main economic reward.

Weak criminal justice systems, corruption, and porous enforcement allow traffickers to evade punishment, reducing the deterrent effect of arrests alone.

Broader Context: Wildlife Crime and Illegal Markets

Rhino horns, made of **keratin**, have **no proven medicinal value**, yet command high prices in illegal markets due to cultural beliefs and status symbolism.

According to the Wildlife Justice Commission, the illegal rhino horn trade generated **$874 million–$1.13 billion** between 2012 and 2022.

Poverty and lack of alternative livelihoods in local communities act as **push factors** for poaching networks.

Limits and Ethical Considerations

Not a silver bullet: Poachers may still kill rhinos for residual horn stumps.

Animal welfare concerns: Though scientifically managed and non-lethal, dehorning raises ethical debates.

Long-term sustainability: Dehorning must be repeated periodically as horns regrow.

Lessons for India

India's success in protecting rhinos in Kaziranga National Park and Nepal is attributed to smart patrolling, strong legal enforcement, and community participation, not dehorning.

This highlights that context matters: strategies must be adapted to local ecological, social, and governance conditions rather than mechanically replicated.

Conclusion

The study on rhino dehorning underscores the importance of evidence-based and incentive-sensitive conservation strategies. While dehorning has proven to be a highly effective and economical tool in African contexts, it also reinforces a broader lesson: wildlife conservation cannot rely solely on militarised enforcement. Sustainable outcomes require a balanced mix of scientific interventions, strong institutions, community engagement, and attention to ranger welfare. For policymakers, the key takeaway lies not in adopting dehorning per se, but in designing context-specific, data-driven conservation policies that address both ecological and socio-economic drivers of wildlife crime.

UPSC Prelims Practice Question

Ques: With reference to rhino dehorning as a conservation strategy, consider the following statements:

1. Rhino horns are composed of keratin, the same protein found in human hair and nails.

2. Dehorning removes the horn completely, permanently preventing its regrowth.

3. Dehorning has been found to reduce incentives for poaching in certain African reserves.

Which of the statements given above is/are correct?

(a) 1 and 3 only

(b) 2 and 3 only

(c) 1 only

(d) 1, 2 and 3

Ans : a)

UPSC Mains Practice Question

Ques: "Wildlife conservation strategies must address economic incentives, not merely enforcement." Discuss this statement in the context of the recent study on rhino dehorning in African reserves.

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Daily News Analysis

Page 08 : GS 2 : Governance / Prelims

Child trafficking represents one of the **gravest violations of human rights and constitutional morality**, amounting to a modern form of slavery. In a recent judgment dated December 19, the **Supreme Court of India** described child trafficking in India as a "**deeply disturbing reality**", underlining the failure of society and institutions to fully protect children despite an elaborate legal framework. The case, relating to the sexual exploitation of a minor by organised trafficking networks in Bengaluru, has brought renewed focus on the structural, legal, and social dimensions of child trafficking.

Key Observations of the Supreme Court

Nature of the Crime

The Court held that child trafficking and sexual exploitation strike at the **core of dignity, bodily integrity, and the constitutional promise of protection to children**.

It recognised trafficking as an **organised crime**, involving layered networks of recruitment, transportation, harbouring, and exploitation.

Victim-Centric Judicial Approach

The Bench emphasised the need for **"sensitivity and latitude"** while recording a child victim's testimony.

Minor inconsistencies in testimony should not be grounds for disbelief, given the trauma involved.

A trafficked child, the Court clarified, **is not an accomplice** but an **injured witness**, whose testimony deserves high evidentiary value.

Legal Affirmation

The Court upheld convictions under the **Immoral Traffic (Prevention) Act**, reinforcing the legal basis for prosecuting trafficking-related offences.

Governance and Implementation Gaps

Low Conviction Rates

End the exploitation
Child trafficking needs concerted action from government and civil society

One of the worst forms of modern slavery is child trafficking, and the Supreme Court of India has issued a stern wake-up call about the prevailing situation in India. In a December 19 judgment, it observed that child trafficking is a "deeply disturbing reality" in the country where sexual exploitation of children by organised cartels continues to flourish despite protective laws. It was hearing a case regarding a minor who was forcibly exploited sexually by a gang of traffickers in Bengaluru. The Court upheld the conviction of the gang members under the Immoral Traffic (Prevention) Act. The offence, it said, struck at the very foundations of dignity, bodily integrity and the state's constitutional promise of protection to every child against exploitation. A Bench of Justices Manoj Misra and Joymalya Bagchi drew attention to the complex and layered structure of organised crime networks which operate at various levels of recruiting, transporting, harbouring and exploiting minor victims. The Bench laid down guidelines to follow in child trafficking cases, particularly the need for "sensitivity and latitude" while hearing the child's testimony. It may not be possible for the child to narrate with precision and clarity the nature of the crime, it said, pointing out that courts must not disbelieve her testimony because of minor inconsistencies in her evidence.

A victim of sex trafficking, particularly a minor, is not an accomplice, it noted, and "her deposition is to be given due regard and credence as that of an injured witness". The Court's observations must not go in vain and the onus is on the government and civil society to do what is necessary to protect children. The net must be spread wide to end other forms of exploitation as well such as forced child labour. Stringent laws may be in place, but on the ground, much more needs to be done like giving teeth to anti-trafficking units or passing an anti-trafficking Bill. Last year, the Ministry of Home Affairs told Parliament that India had recorded as many as 10,659 cases of human trafficking between 2018 and 2022, but of the persons arrested for the crime in the same period, the conviction rate was just 4.8%. The issue of rehabilitation after rescue also has to be thought through; mere compensation is not enough. The focus must be on prevention and protection, and one way to ensure this is to keep children in school till they are 14 as the Right to Education Act promised. With the advent of the digital space, trafficking is a shape-shifting evil, and government and social entities must be prepared to tackle all its forms.

Data shared by the **Ministry of Home Affairs** shows 10,659 human trafficking cases between 2018 and 2022, but a conviction rate of only **4.8%**, indicating weak investigation, prosecution, and witness protection.

Weak Institutional Capacity

Anti-human trafficking units often lack adequate manpower, training, and coordination.

Absence of a comprehensive, standalone **anti-trafficking law** limits an integrated response.

Rehabilitation Deficit

Post-rescue rehabilitation remains underdeveloped.

Compensation alone is insufficient; long-term psychological care, education, and livelihood support are essential.

Prevention as the Cornerstone

Education as Protection: Ensuring children remain in school till at least 14 years, as envisaged under the **Right to Education Act**, reduces vulnerability to trafficking and forced labour.

Community and Civil Society Role: Awareness, early identification, and social vigilance are critical, especially in source regions.

Digital Dimension: With trafficking increasingly leveraging online platforms, law enforcement must develop cyber-monitoring and digital forensics capabilities.

Conclusion

The Supreme Court's judgment is a **constitutional wake-up call** that child trafficking cannot be addressed through laws alone. Ending this exploitation requires **concerted action by the State, judiciary, and civil society**, combining strong enforcement with compassionate victim-centric processes. Prevention through education, effective prosecution, institutional strengthening, and holistic rehabilitation must form the pillars of India's response. In an era where trafficking is becoming increasingly adaptive and digital, safeguarding children is not merely a welfare obligation but a **test of India's commitment to human dignity and constitutional values**.

UPSC Prelims Practice Question

Ques : With reference to child trafficking in India, consider the following statements:

A trafficked child is treated as an accomplice to the offence under Indian criminal law.

The Supreme Court has held that minor inconsistencies in a child victim's testimony should not be grounds for rejecting evidence.

The Immoral Traffic (Prevention) Act provides the legal framework for prosecuting organised sexual exploitation.

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Which of the statements given above is/are correct?

(a) 2 and 3 only

(b) 1 and 2 only

(c) 3 only

(d) 1, 2 and 3

Ans : a)

UPSC Prelims Practice Question

Ques : Despite stringent laws, conviction rates in human trafficking cases remain abysmally low in India. Analyse the reasons for this gap between law and outcomes. How can a victim-centric judicial approach improve justice delivery? **(250 words)**

Page 09 : GS 1 : Indian Society

As artificial intelligence (AI) reshapes labour markets, concerns around automation, productivity, and skills have become central to India's development discourse. However, a critical gender dimension risks being overlooked. Drawing on India's **Time Use Survey (2024)**, the article highlights that **working women face a severe time constraint due to the double burden of paid and unpaid work**, leaving them significantly disadvantaged in an AI-driven economy where continuous upskilling is essential. This is not merely a social issue, but a structural economic and governance challenge.
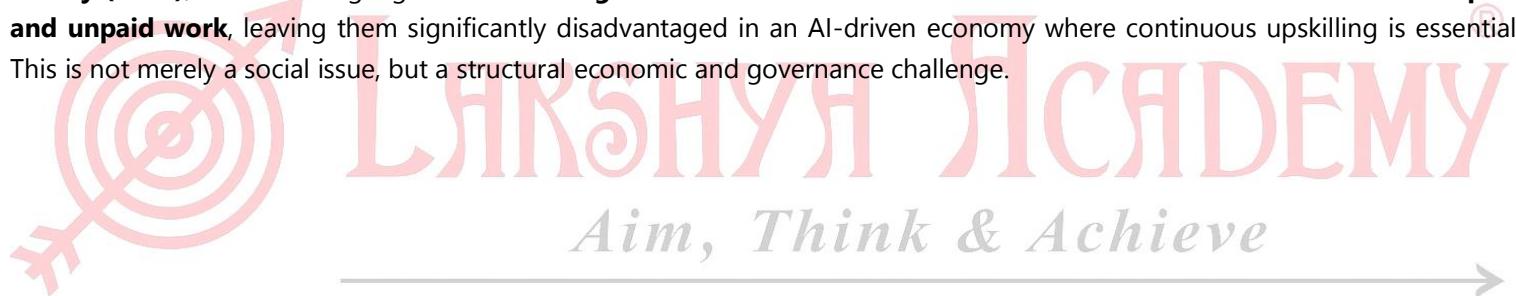
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The upskilling gap: why women risk being left behind

With 10 hours less per week for self-development than men, India's working women need flexible learning and "time-saving" policie

DATA POINT

Shravani Prakash
Tanu M. Goyal
Chellsea Lauhka

As 2025 ends, Indians are consumed by two anxieties – whether artificial intelligence (AI) will take over their jobs, and whether the future belongs to 80-hour work weeks or the right to disconnect after office hours. But for millions of working women, a near 80-hour work week is already a lived reality, as their workday continues long after office hours, filled with unrecognised and unpaid labour. Unfortunately, no AI or algorithm has yet threatened to take over women's "unpaid work" or rescue them from the long hours spent on cooking, cleaning, caregiving, planning, and emotional management.

India's latest Time Use Survey (2024) makes this reality unmistakable: 40% of women now participate in the labour force. They are not simply leaning into paid work; instead, they are working a relentless second shift. As women take on more paid work, their unpaid responsibilities hardly decline – instead of substitution, there is stacking. This results in working women being left with limited time for personal development, leisure, or adequate rest.

Chart 1 highlights a stark imbalance in how Indian men and women divide their working hours. On average, working women spend around 9.6 hours a day on combined paid and unpaid work. A substantial share of this time is, however, spent on unpaid work that largely comprises elderly and childcare activities; domestic chores such as cooking and cleaning; and other voluntary work and subsistence production. This burden peaks when women are in their prime ages (25-39 years), leading to their total working hours exceeding 70 hours a week.

In contrast, men record lower total hours of work. On average, they spend about 8.6 hours a day on combined paid and unpaid work, with more than 80% of this time devoted to paid activities (wage/salaried work, remunerative self-employment, and production of goods and services for sale). Across the working life cycle, men's total work hours typically fall within the range of 54-60 hours per week, largely because their unpaid workload is minimal and stable across life stages.

Women's working hours exceed men's across nearly every age group. The gap is widest in the 25-39 age range, when women spend double the time on unpaid caregiving than men, with childcare forming the largest component. Even later in life, while men's unpaid contributions rise marginally (often to care for ageing parents), the broader unequal contract at home remains intact, regardless of age, occupation, or income level.

Women don't have more hours in a day, but they simply offset the burden of double shifts by cutting back on time for self-care. On average, women in India sleep fewer hours in a week than men, with the gap widening to around 2-2.5 hours a week during their prime working years **(Chart 2).**

Women, on average, also spend 10 hours less than men every week on self-development activities, including learning, skill enhancement, building self-awareness and practices that support mental, emotional, and physical well-being. Once again, this gap is widest (around 11-12 hours per week) during the prime age group. These figures matter immensely in an AI-disrupted economy, since time for upskilling and self-development is essential to transition from low-skilled to higher-value work.

Women contribute a mere 17% of India's GDP, not because they do too little but because much of their essential labour is unpaid and invisible, which does not get added to national income calculations. The Periodic Labour Force Survey shows that nearly 40% of women outside the labour market cite household responsibilities as the reason. Even the recent rise in women's workforce participation is driven largely by unpaid family work and low-paid self-employment. The AI era could make this worse, as women's jobs are more automation-prone, and AI-driven performance metrics risk penalising caregivers whose time constraints remain invisible to algorithms.

True empowerment cannot mean merely adding jobs, unless paid employment replaces women's drudgery instead of compounding it. Policy, technology, and workplaces must be redesigned around women's time – an undervalued resource that underpins both care and productivity. These must shift towards an outcome-based approach that explicitly uses time-use data to free women's time from unpaid work and redirect it toward higher-value, remunerative activities.

The gender budget can be a key tool to enable this by integrating time-use metrics. Budgets must prioritise and sustain outlays to time-saving infrastructure such as affordable childcare and elderly care, piped water, clean energy, and safe public transport. Simultaneously, to adapt and thrive in a rapidly changing world of work, women must have access to lifelong and flexible upskilling opportunities designed around their time, mobility, and digital constraints. This calls for sustained gender budget allocations to expand programmes that build locally relevant vocational capabilities, strengthen technology and digital skills, and scale targeted initiatives such as the India AI Mission and AI Careers for Women programmes.

Until women's time is valued, freed, and mainstreamed into policy and growth strategy, India's 2047 Viksit Bharat vision will remain constrained by women's invisible labour, time poverty and underutilised potential.

Double shift for women

Chart 1A: Working hours for men in a day across age groups
Chart 1B: Working hours for women in a day across age groups
On average = 8.6 hour workday comb
On average = 9.6 hour workday comb

Chart 2: Trade-off between work and sleep in number of hours across age groups
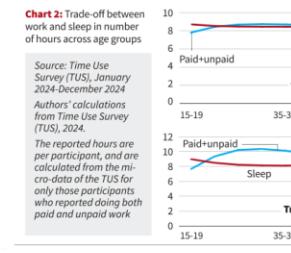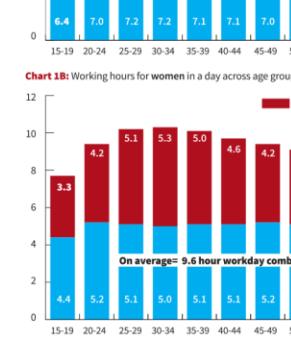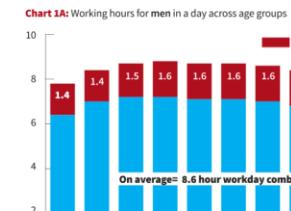
Source: Time Use Survey (TUS), January 2024-December 2024. Authors' calculations from Time Use Survey (TUS), 2024. The reported hours are per participant, and are calculated from the micro-data of the TUS for only those participants who reported doing both paid and unpaid work

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Key Arguments and Evidence

Double Burden of Work and Time Poverty

Working women in India spend **around 9.6 hours per day** on combined paid and unpaid work, compared to **8.6 hours for men**.

Women's unpaid work—caregiving, domestic chores, and emotional labour—does not decline as they enter paid employment; instead, responsibilities **"stack" rather than substitute**.

The burden peaks during **25–39 years**, when women work over **70 hours per week**, significantly higher than men.

Upskilling and Self-Development Gap

Women spend **about 10 hours less per week** than men on self-development, learning, and skill enhancement.

This gap widens to **11–12 hours per week** during prime working years, precisely when career progression and upskilling are most critical.

In an AI-disrupted economy, limited access to time for reskilling increases the risk of women being trapped in **low-skilled, low-paid, and automation-prone jobs**.

Economic Implications

Women contribute only **17% to India's GDP**, not due to lower effort, but because a large share of their labour is **unpaid and excluded from national income accounting**.

The **Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS)** shows nearly **40% of women outside the labour force cite household responsibilities** as the main reason.

Rising female labour force participation is often driven by **unpaid family work or vulnerable self-employment**, offering limited income security.

AI and Gendered Risks

Women's jobs are more susceptible to automation, while **AI-driven performance metrics** may penalise caregivers whose time constraints are invisible to algorithms.

Without corrective policies, AI could **reinforce existing gender inequalities** rather than reduce them.

Policy and Governance Dimensions

Rethinking Growth and Employment

True empowerment cannot come from merely adding paid jobs if unpaid drudgery remains unchanged.

An **outcome-based policy approach**, grounded in time-use data, is needed to free women's time for higher-value activities.

Role of Gender Budgeting

Gender budgeting can integrate **time-use metrics** to prioritise investments in:

Affordable childcare and elderly care

Piped water and clean energy

Safe and reliable public transport

These "time-saving infrastructures" directly enhance women's capacity to participate in skilled work.

Flexible and Lifelong Upskilling

Women require **flexible, modular, and locally accessible learning models** aligned with their time and mobility constraints.

Targeted initiatives such as the **India AI Mission** and AI careers programmes for women are steps in the right direction but require sustained funding and scale.

Conclusion

The article underscores that **women's time poverty is a binding constraint on India's AI readiness and long-term growth**. Without recognising, reducing, and redistributing unpaid care work, policies aimed at skilling and technological leadership will remain incomplete. Valuing women's time through gender-responsive budgeting, time-saving infrastructure, and flexible upskilling ecosystems is essential. If India's vision of **Viksit Bharat @2047** is to be realised, women must not be passive spectators of the AI revolution but empowered participants—enabled by policies that see time not as a private burden, but as a public policy priority.

UPSC Mains Practice Question

Ques : "In the age of Artificial Intelligence, women face a disproportionate upskilling disadvantage due to the burden of unpaid care work and time poverty." Discuss this statement in the context of India using time-use data. Examine the implications for labour force participation, technological sovereignty, and inclusive growth. Suggest policy measures to ensure gender-equitable participation in the AI-driven economy. **(250 Words)**

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Daily News Analysis

The VB-G RAM G Act 2025 fixes structural gaps

The President of India has assented to the Viksit Bharat – Guarantee for Rozgar and Ajeevika Mission (Gramin) Act, 2025, enhancing the statutory wage employment guarantee to 125 days and strengthening rural livelihoods through empowerment, convergence, and saturation-based delivery for a resilient, self-reliant rural Bharat.

A misreading by some

Yet, even as the VB-G RAM G Act comes into force, there are some who have advanced a set of assumptions that do not withstand careful scrutiny. It is being claimed that the employment guarantee has been weakened, that decentralisation and demand-based rights have been undermined without consultation, and that the reform represents fiscal withdrawal that is disguised as restructuring. Each of these assertions rests on a misreading of the Act's substance and intent.

What has led to this misreading is a deeper conceptual error – the assumption that welfare and development are opposing choices. The new framework is built on the opposite understanding: that welfare, anchored in an enhanced statutory livelihood guarantee, and development, anchored in durable infrastructure creation and productivity enhancement, are mutually reinforcing. Income support, asset creation, agricultural stability and long-term rural productivity are treated as a continuum rather than a trade-off. This is not aspirational rhetoric but an approach embedded in statutory design.

The suggestion that the legal right to employment has been diluted is incorrect. The Act retains the statutory and justiciable character of the employment guarantee while strengthening its enforceability. Far from being curtailed, the entitlement has been expanded from 100 to 125 days. Procedural dis-entitlement clauses that previously nullified unemployment allowance in practice have been removed, and time-bound grievance redress mechanisms have been reinforced. The reform directly addresses the long-recognised gap between statutory promise and lived reality.

It is also argued that demand-based employment has been abandoned in favour of top-down planning. This rests on a false binary. Demand for work continues to originate from workers. What changes is that demand is no longer addressed only after distress has set in. By anchoring execution in advance, participatory village-level planning, the reform ensures that when workers seek employment, work is actually available rather than denied due to administrative unpreparedness. Planning, in this sense, does not suppress demand; it operationalises it.

The charge of centralisation overlooks the architecture of the law. Gram panchayats remain the primary planning and implementing authorities, and gram sabhas retain approval powers over local plans. What has changed is that decentralised planning is no longer ad hoc or episodic but institutionalised as a structured and participatory process. Viksit Gram Panchayat Plans are aggregated at the block, district, State and national levels to enable coordination, convergence and visibility across sectors, not to override local priorities. What is centralised is coherence; the decision-making authority remains local. This corrects fragmentation without undermining decentralisation.

Claims that the reform was pushed through without consultation are equally inconsistent with the record. The Bill was preceded by extensive consultations with State governments, technical workshops and multi-stakeholder discussions. Core design features – village planning structures, convergence mechanisms and digital governance systems – were shaped by feedback from States and by lessons drawn from years of implementation.

An increase in allocations, equity

The broader premise that the employment guarantee was systematically weakened over the past decade does not align with facts. Budgetary allocations increased from ₹33,000 crore in 2013-14 to ₹86,000 crore in 2024-25. Person days generated rose from 1,660 crore in the period up to 2013-14 to 3,210 crore thereafter. Central funds released increased from ₹2.13 lakh crore to ₹8.53 lakh crore, and completed works expanded from 153 lakh to 862 lakh. Women's participation rose from 48% to 56.73%. Over 99% of fund transfer orders are now generated on time, and nearly 99% of active workers are linked to the Aadhaar Payment Bridge. These trends point to sustained commitment and improved delivery, not neglect.

What became evident over time, however, was that implementation experience had also revealed structural weaknesses in the earlier framework itself – episodic employment, weak enforceability of unemployment allowance, fragmented asset creation and persistent scope for duplication and ghost entries. These weaknesses were visible on the ground during drought years, migration spikes and periods of disruption such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

Fiscal restructuring under the new Act is also mischaracterised as abdication. The central government's contribution is increasing – the provision for the Centre's share rises from ₹86,000 crore to nearly ₹95,000 crore, underscoring continued and enhanced support for rural employment. The 60:40 funding model follows the long-established structure of centrally sponsored schemes, while the northeastern and Himalayan States and Jammu and Kashmir are accorded a differential 90:10 ratio. Far from signalling fiscal withdrawal, this framework reinforces shared responsibility and accountability.

Equity is ensured through rule-based normative allocation, with State-wise allocations determined on objective parameters prescribed in the Rules. States are treated not as mere implementing agencies but as partners in development, empowered to notify and operationalise their own schemes within the statutory framework. Flexibility is explicitly preserved: during natural disasters, or other extraordinary situations, States may recommend special relaxations, which includes expansion of permissible works and temporary enhancement of employment. Rule-based allocation and contextual flexibility are thus balanced in a manner consistent with cooperative federalism.

The Act empowers States to notify, in advance, periods aggregating to 60 days in a [year?] covering peak sowing and harvesting [seasons] during which works shall not be un[dertaken]. Differentiated notifications may be [issued at the] level of districts, blocks, or gram pa[nchayats] based on agro-climatic conditions, [ensuring] the enhanced employment guarantee [complements agricultural operations.

The UPA's record

From its very first tenure, the Cong[ress-led] United Progressive Alliance (UPA) g[overnment] failed to match rhetoric with delive[ry on] MGNREGA. While the Congress ma[nifesto] promised "at least 100 days of work [at a wage] of ₹100 per day", the government c[apped wages] at ₹100 as early as 2009 and kept th[em for] years, ignoring inflation and rising [prices]. The Centre openly admitted that St[ates were] acting arbitrarily under the scheme [but blamed] the wage freeze by blaming State go[vernments for] 'indiscriminate increases'. This adm[ission] exposed a serious governance failu[re – the] Congress-led Centre was unable to [control] its own State governments, allowing [the scheme to] become vulnerable to misuse, fake [entries and] financial leakages.

The UPA's second term saw a ste[ep decline in] commitment to the scheme. Budge[tary] allocations were cut from ₹40,100 c[rore in 2010-11] to ₹33,000 crore by 2012-13, despite [rising] demand from States. In a parliamen[tary reply in] 2013, Minister of State Rajeev Shukl[a] acknowledged that employment un[der] MGNREGA had fallen sharply – fro[m 2.84 crore] workers in 2010-11 to just 6.93 crore [in] 2013. Delayed fund releases, lack of [transparency] in payments, and administrative ap[athy] discouraged workers from seeking [work,] directly undermining the legal guar[antee] promised under the Act.

The Comptroller and Auditor Ge[neral's] report laid bare the true state of MG[NREGA] during the UPA years. It highlighted [widespread] corruption and mismanagement: o[ver 1 crore] fake or defective job cards, thousan[ds of crore] lost to unaccounted withdrawals and [ghost] work, delayed or denied wages in 2[5 States,] poor record-keeping in more than l[akhs of] gram panchayats. States with the hi[ghest] concentration of rural poor – Bihar, [Uttar] Pradesh and Maharashtra – used on[ly a fraction] of allocated funds, proving that the [scheme failed] precisely where it was needed mos[t.

To frame the debate as a choice [between] welfare and development is to pose [a false] dichotomy. Welfare, when anchore[d in a] guaranteed livelihood, and develop[ment] anchored in durable rural infrastru[cture and] productivity, are not competing obj[ectives but] interdependent ones. The real deci[sion is] whether to freeze a framework that [was] under-delivered, or to reform it into [an] enforceable, and integrated employ[ment] guarantee that advances welfare th[rough] development. The new Act preserv[es the] right to work, expands entitlement[s, strengthens] worker protections, and corrects st[ructural] weaknesses revealed through years [of] implementation. This is not demoli[tion, it is a] process of renewal grounded in exp[erience.]

Shivraj Singh Chouhan
is Union Minister for Agriculture and Farmers' Welfare, and Rural Development, Government of India

The Viksit Bharat-Guarantee for Rozgar and Ajeevika Mission (Gramin) (VB-G RAM G) Act, 2025 is no demolition; the opposition to the Act is based on a set of assumptions

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Contex[t]

The assent to the Viksit Bharat — Guarantee for Rozgar and Ajeevika Mission (Gramin) Act, 2025 (VB-G RAM G Act) marks a major structural reform in India's rural employment and livelihood framework. Articulated by Shivraj Singh Chouhan, the Act seeks to move beyond a narrow conception of welfare by integrating statutory wage employment, durable asset creation, agricultural productivity, and livelihood diversification into a single, rights-based framework. By enhancing the employment guarantee from 100 to 125 days and embedding convergence-led planning, the Act attempts to address long-standing implementation gaps observed under earlier arrangements.

Core Provisions and Intent

Expansion and Strengthening of the Legal Right to Work

Statutory employment guarantee enhanced to 125 days, retaining its justiciable character.

Removal of procedural barriers that earlier diluted access to unemployment allowance.

Reinforced time-bound grievance redressal, addressing the gap between legal promise and ground reality.

From Distress-Driven to Anticipatory Employment

Demand for work continues to originate from workers, but advance, participatory village-level planning ensures availability of work when demanded.

This shifts the framework from reactive relief to preventive livelihood security, particularly relevant during droughts, migration spikes, and shocks such as pandemics.

Decentralisation with Structured Coordination

Gram panchayats and gram sabhas remain the primary planning and approval authorities.

Introduction of Viksit Gram Panchayat Plans, aggregated upward to district, State and national levels.

Centralisation is limited to coherence and convergence, not decision-making, aligning with cooperative federalism.

Fiscal Architecture and Equity

Central allocation increased to nearly ₹95,000 crore, countering claims of fiscal withdrawal.

Retention of the 60:40 Centre–State funding pattern, with 90:10 for northeastern and Himalayan States and Jammu & Kashmir.

Rule-based normative allocation ensures inter-State equity, while flexibility is retained for disaster situations and extraordinary circumstances.

Convergence with Agriculture and Livelihoods

States empowered to notify up to 60 days during peak sowing/harvesting seasons when works will not be undertaken, ensuring complementarity with agriculture.

Emphasis on durable assets, productivity enhancement, and livelihood diversification, rather than episodic employment.

Addressing Criticisms

Dilution of demand-driven nature: The Act does not abandon demand-based employment; it operationalises demand through preparedness and planning.

Centralisation: Decision-making authority remains local; what is centralised is coordination across sectors to reduce fragmentation.

Lack of consultation: The reform followed extensive consultations with States, technical workshops, and stakeholder discussions, drawing on years of implementation experience.

Comparative Perspective: Learning from Past Limitations

Implementation experience under the earlier MGNREGA framework revealed structural weaknesses—episodic employment, weak enforceability of unemployment allowance, fragmented asset creation, and scope for leakages. Audit findings and utilisation patterns highlighted that mere statutory intent without institutional redesign could not guarantee outcomes, especially in poorer States. The VB-G RAM G Act represents an attempt to institutionalise lessons learned, rather than freeze an underperforming structure.

Conclusion

The VB-G RAM G Act, 2025 reframes rural employment from a short-term safety net into a **comprehensive, enforceable livelihood guarantee embedded within rural development**. By expanding entitlements, strengthening decentralised planning, ensuring fiscal commitment, and promoting convergence with agriculture and infrastructure, the Act seeks to correct structural gaps exposed over years of implementation. The reform challenges the binary of welfare versus development, asserting instead that **durable development is the strongest form of welfare**. Its ultimate success, however, will depend on effective State capacity, transparency in implementation, and sustained political commitment to rights-based rural transformation.