

**The Hindu Important News Articles & Editorial For UPSC CSE**  
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In the post-pandemic era, digital devices have transitioned from luxury tools to "digital pacifiers." While technology offers connectivity, experts warn that excessive early exposure creates an "opportunity cost," where virtual engagement replaces the sensory-rich, real-world interactions necessary for a child's foundational growth.

## Early screen use stunts vital social growth of children, experts warn

Paediatricians and psychologists are increasingly concerned about how children may miss out on real-world interactions with people and objects if they're exposed to screens from an early age; this could affect their ability to develop healthy relationships with people around them as they grow older

**Shubhi Sahrabhargava**

**B** if our phones, tablets or our laptops – everyday, we interact with various digital devices designed to make our lives easier. Especially since the pandemic, even children have been exposed to this electronic world at a very young age. Earlier, parents would desperately handhold toys to distract crying children, now they simply show them videos using YouTube videos.

"It is so very, very powerful for the human experience," said Melissa Greenberg, a clinical psychologist at Princeton Psychodynamic Centre in New Jersey. "So kids get really drawn into the visual stimulation. And then, throughout childhood, they just miss opportunities to interact with the world through their other senses."

Paediatricians and psychologists are increasingly concerned about how children may miss out on real world interactions with people and objects if they are exposed to screens from an early age. This could affect their ability to develop healthy relationships with people around them as they grow older. And not just very young children, even older children or adolescents' lives can bear the brunt of increased screen and social media usage in the form of poorer emotional regulation, detachment from reality, loss of focus, and a host of other mental health problems.

Dr. Greenberg also draws her insights from her personal life, with two children aged six and eight. Having raised them through the pandemic, she understands the perils of isolation and the importance of interacting with others, she explains, including herself, were in a difficult situation because of the constant social distancing, so they may have handed tablets to children without thinking too deeply about it, she said.

"We are not in the pandemic anymore, but I think parents feel themselves in these positions where they're exhausted or they are also dependent on their screens," she explained. "And they need their kid to be entertained for a few minutes, and they just hand them something."

But unknowingly, they may end up missing how children's eyes to a whole other online world – without a clear cut-off or anything they might get access to and how it will shape them.

**Grow up to feel uncomfortable** To build some safeguards after the pandemic, the American Academy of Pediatrics recommended that children below the age of two should have very limited screen time, unless it is for video calls. This is primarily because those early years are when children are still developing their senses. Overwhelming them with visual stimuli – even if unintentionally – can slow their sense of the world and affect their interactions with others. Handing over phones can also affect children's posture.

"If you're looking at a screen, you are not doing all of the other things that babies should be doing, like crawling, touching, exploring the world around them," Dr. Greenberg said. "So I don't know that the screen itself is the problem; it is the opportunity cost of babies exploring their environments – that is how they learn about the world around them."

Some children experience the consequences of being absorbed in a digital screen later as well, as they get a bit older, enter adolescence or become teenagers. With more time online, some children grow up to feel uncomfortable with in-person interactions as well. The recent study in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* on U.S. youth reported that teenagers spend an average of about 8.5 hours a day on screen-based entertainment.

"You go into a cafeteria in a school, 15 years ago it would have been chaotic and loud and everyone's playing and moving around. Now you walk in and everyone's like this," she said, mimicking being handheld over a phone. "They're all quiet."

Just like with toddlers, this could also lead to missed opportunities of meaningful social interactions with peers at a young age, being unable to develop proper social skills could strain relationships with friends and family, with faking repercussions for mental health.

**Devastating consequences** At times, the mental health issues can take a darker turn. Some children have suffered access to phones even before they are eight years old, which, according to recent research, could lead to issues



**Unhealthy exposure:** Children, even adolescents, are likely to lose the brunt of increased screen usage in the form of poorer emotional regulation, detachment from reality, and a host of other mental health problems, experts warn.

such as hallucinations, feelings of aggression towards other people, diminished self-worth, and even suicidal thoughts as they grow older. The data, based on self-reported assessments from several thousands of people worldwide, suggest that for each year younger than 13 that children get their phones, the more their mental health issues increase as they enter adulthood.

An extreme case of phone addiction transpired recently in Ghazabad in Uttar Pradesh. Three minor sisters aged 12 to 16 years had dropped out of school in 2020 and were addicted to social media, cartoons, and TV shows on their parents' phones. When their parents restricted their phone use and threatened to get them married, the sisters killed themselves by jumping off their balcony in the early hours of February 4. In the note they left behind, the girls described how banning them from the online shows made them feel lonely. This is not an isolated incident; multiple instances of teens killing themselves when told to stay away from phones suggest an alarming rise in digital addiction.

One reason for such drastic consequences could be that children are being brought up by technology instead of human beings. Tara Thiagarajan, who led the research correlating age of phone access with mental health issues at the founder of Supple Labs, a non-profit organisation studying how the human mind is changing over time across the world, said.

Take the case of a child at a table with their family in a restaurant. This situation has opportunities for simple social interactions. In a previous era, the child might have been reaching for things, trying things, and saying things to the others. Some people might reprimand; others might cover the actions.

Such interactions teach children how to read other people's body language from a young age and how to conduct themselves in a group setting, including getting themselves heard, holding conversations, and managing conflicts.

**Aspects like the tone of voice, facial expressions, body language, and other non-verbal cues may either be warped or absent altogether in digital exchanges, which can affect children's abilities to form lasting interpersonal relationships**

Dr. Thiagarajan said growing up in a world dominated by online interactions prevents children from learning these social skills and interferes with their ability to develop a good notion of other people's personalities. Although engaging in video calls with other people is better than watching videos, one can end up missing larger environmental cues, per Dr. Greenberg. Some subtle cues can slide through unnoticed on a video call, like noticing someone's nervousness by how they are tapping their feet.

Aspects like the tone of voice, facial expressions, body language, and other non-verbal cues may either be warped or absent altogether in digital exchanges, which can affect children's abilities to form lasting interpersonal relationships. "You're becoming adept at technology, but you can no longer manage in a human world," said Dr. Thiagarajan, of children growing up in a society undergoing rapid "technologicalisation".

"When most of what goes on in your mind is from the screen, you've lost, to a large degree, your awareness of the physical environment around you. That's what creates these feelings of detachment from reality, and also the hallucinations."

**It's not just about your children's** In another meta-analysis of 17 previously published studies, Michael Hoeft at the University of Queensland and his colleagues reported similar findings: that increased screen time leads to more socio-emotional problems in children. Tracking nearly three lakh children over time, they found "screens and emotional

problems feed into each other like a vicious cycle," according to Dr. Hoeft. "Kids who spend more time on screens are more likely to develop anxiety, depression, aggression, and attention problems. But it works the other way too: children who are already struggling emotionally turn to screens to cope."

Because anxious children tend to use their phone more, Dr. Greenberg said that it is risky to issue quiet separation from causation vis-a-vis screen use. But she noted that increased cell phone usage and social media exposure could exacerbate existing conditions. "Anxiously seeking everyone's likes with looks better when they spend less time on their devices," she said.

To prevent children from getting addicted, parents should ensure that their children use phones for a limited time, based on what is recommended for their age group, according to Dr. Hoeft.

"Children who stayed within guidelines showed almost no increased risk, guideline recommended under an hour for preschoolers, under two hours for older kids," he said. "Problems appeared when children regularly exceeded these limits."

Even if parents limit screen use, Dr. Greenberg said that the question of whether children should have access to phones at night, or when they are alone in their bedrooms, is still undecided. "When a child is doing something privately on a device unsupervised, no matter how many parent controls you might set, they may access things that are really inappropriate," she said. "Because of the way that the algorithms work, you really never know what might pop up next on your children's feed."

Dr. Thiagarajan explained how the internet should have more water-tight gatekeepers that prevent children from accessing dangerous content, which could include porn sites or violent videos.

Dr. Greenberg also emphasised how each child is different; some may be able to give up their screen time readily but some may be more drawn to the digital world, and thus could find it more difficult to live their online activities. Her own children are like that, she admitted, and they are most likely in the majority. "If you have a kid who has a harder time putting it away, that doesn't mean you should just let them continue to have it," she said. "It means you really need to work with them to figure out how to manage the impulses so that they develop good habits around putting it away."

Dr. Greenberg also pointed out that parents should be careful about their own screen use around their children. "They should be aware that their kids are always watching and learning from them and observing their habits, and that that's a real impediment to how you're managing screens with your kids," she said. "It's not just about your kids; it's also about you."

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# Daily News Analysis

## The Core Issue: Developmental Opportunity Cost

The primary concern is not just the content on the screen, but what the screen displaces.

**Sensory Stunting:** Early childhood is a critical window for developing the five senses. Over-reliance on visual stimuli (screens) leads to a neglect of tactile and auditory exploration.

**Social Intuition:** Real-world interactions teach children to read non-verbal cues (body language, tone, micro-expressions). Digital exchanges often warp or omit these, hindering the ability to form deep interpersonal relationships.

**Biological Impact:** Excessive screen use is linked to sedentary behavior, poor posture ("tech neck"), and even structural changes in the brain affecting emotional regulation.

### Impact Across Age Groups

The consequences of digital over-dependence evolve as a child grows:

Age Group	Key Impact	Consequences
Infants (<2 yrs)	Lack of "Joint Attention"	Delays in language acquisition and motor skills (crawling/touching).
Children (3-12 yrs)	Poor Emotional Regulation	Inability to manage boredom or tantrums without digital aid; aggression.
Adolescents (13+ yrs)	Social Anhedonia	Preference for online avatars over in-person interaction; detachment from reality.

### Drastic Consequences & Mental Health

Recent data suggests a direct correlation: for every year earlier than age 13 that a child receives a smartphone, the risk of adult mental health issues increases.

**The "Loneliness Paradox":** Despite being hyper-connected, children report feeling more isolated. The tragic Ghaziabad incident (where sisters committed suicide after phone restrictions) highlights the severity of **Digital Addiction**.

**Psychological Disorders:** Unfettered access can lead to diminished self-worth, hallucinations, and social withdrawal.

### Global & Indian Guidelines

To mitigate these risks, health organizations have established clear boundaries:

**WHO & Indian Academy of Pediatrics (IAP):** \* Under 2 years: Zero screen time (except video calls).

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## Daily News Analysis

**2–5 years:** Maximum 1 hour of high-quality, co-viewed

content.

**Above 5 years:** Maximum 2 hours of recreational screen time.

### Government Initiatives:

**Tele-MANAS (14416):** A 24/7 mental health helpline.

**SHUT Clinic (NIMHANS):** India's first specialized clinic for technology addiction.

**Pragyata Guidelines:** Education Ministry's framework for digital learning and screen limits.

### Way Forward: The "Digital Wellness" Approach

**Parental Role Modeling:** Children mirror adult habits. Parents must practice "digital detox" to encourage offline engagement.

**Educational Reform:** Schools should adopt a Digital Wellness Curriculum focusing on screen literacy and cyber safety.

**Structural Safeguards:** Tech platforms need stricter age-verification and "time-well-spent" algorithms to protect vulnerable users.

**Alternative Engagement:** Promoting "Boredom" as a catalyst for creativity and establishing offline youth hubs in communities.

### Conclusion

The "technologisation" of childhood is a double-edged sword. While digital literacy is essential for the future, it must not come at the cost of human connection. Protecting India's demographic dividend requires a balanced approach—treating digital health as a public health priority to ensure that the next generation is "adept at technology" without becoming "inadept at humanity."

### UPSC Mains Exam Practice Question

**Ques:** The shift from 'child cuddling' to 'mobile scrolling' is redefining socialisation in India. Discuss the socio-psychological implications of digital addiction on the Indian youth. **(150 Words)**

**Page 07 : GS III : Environment / Prelims Exam**

The current situation in the Gulf of Mexico represents a high-stakes collision between national energy security and the survival of one of Earth's most endangered species. On March 31, 2026, the Endangered Species Committee—often called the "God Squad"—granted a rare exemption to the Endangered Species Act (ESA) to allow expanded oil and gas drilling, despite the imminent risk to the Rice's whale.

**The Conflict: Energy Security vs. Extinction**

The Trump administration's push for expanded drilling is driven by the ongoing war in Iran, which has spiked global energy prices and disrupted shipping through the Strait of Hormuz.

**The "God Squad" Decision:** U.S. Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth invoked national security, arguing that domestic oil production is a strategic necessity.

**The Rare Exemption:** This is only the third time in history the committee has granted such a waiver. The "God Squad" has the legal power to allow a federal project even if it is certain to cause a species' extinction.

**Who is the Rice's Whale?**

Recognized as a distinct species only in 2021, the Rice's whale is the only baleen whale that lives year-round in the Gulf of Mexico.

**Critically Endangered:** Scientists estimate there are fewer than 51 individuals remaining.

**Unique Habitat:** They stay in a narrow corridor in the northeastern Gulf, typically in waters 100 to 400 meters deep.

**Vulnerable Lifestyle:** They perform strenuous dives to the sea floor for fatty fish (silver-rag drifffish) by day and rest just below the surface at night, making them highly susceptible to ship strikes.

**Key Threats from Expanded Drilling**

Experts from institutions like the New England Aquarium warn that drilling compounds existing stressors:

**Deepwater Horizon Legacy:** Much of the population was decimated by the 2010 spill; a new spill could be the final "extinction vortex."

**Acoustic Pollution:** Seismic airguns used for oil exploration can deafen whales or disrupt the communication they need for mating and nursing.

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**Opportunity Cost:** Beyond whales, the drilling threatens Kemp's

Ridley sea turtles, loggerheads, and manatees.

### Legal and Precedent History

The Endangered Species Committee was established in 1978 to resolve "irresolvable" conflicts.

**1979 (Whooping Crane):** Allowed a dam on the Platte River but forced a multi-million dollar trust fund for habitat protection.

**1992 (Northern Spotted Owl):** Allowed logging in Oregon, but the decision was later withdrawn under legal pressure.

**2026 (Rice's Whale):** Critics, including groups like Earthjustice, have already pledged to sue, calling the move a "political exploitation" of the energy crisis.

### Conclusion

The decision marks a pivotal moment for the Endangered Species Act. By prioritizing short-term energy production over the survival of a species with a population of just 50, the administration sets a precedent that "national security" can be used to bypass fundamental environmental protections. If the expansion proceeds and a major spill or significant strike occurs, the Rice's whale could become the first species knowingly driven to extinction by a U.S. government policy.

### UPSC Prelims Exam Practice Question

**Ques: Consider the following statements regarding the Endangered Species Committee (ESC):**

1. It is popularly known as the "God Squad."
2. It can allow a project even if it leads to the extinction of a species.
3. It was established under the Clean Air Act.

**Which of the statements given above is/are correct?**

- (a) 1 and 2 only
- (b) 2 and 3 only
- (c) 1 only
- (d) 1, 2 and 3

**Ans: (a)**

### UPSC Mains Exam Practice Question

**Ques:** Anthropogenic activities can push critically endangered species into an 'extinction vortex'. Explain with suitable examples. (150 Words)

**Page 08 : GS III : Internal Security / Prelims Exam**

On March 30, 2026, Home Minister Amit Shah declared the end of Left Wing Extremism (LWE) in India. This marks the culmination of an intensive, three-year paramilitary push that dismantled the "Red Corridor," which once spanned over 180 districts. However, the transition from a "conflict zone" to an "opportunity corridor" requires moving beyond military success toward political and social reconciliation.

**The Current Challenge: The Governance Gap**

With the insurgent threat neutralized, the state faces the challenge of filling the vacuum left by the Maoists.

**Basic Services:** The government has launched campaigns to establish schools in every village and provide Aadhaar and Ration Cards to integrate residents into the formal economy.

**Infrastructure vs. Human Rights:** While operational success is evident, the process has faced criticism for "steamrolling" human rights and distorting judicial processes to achieve security goals.

**Risks of the Post-Naxal Era**

The defeat of LWE is not an end in itself but a beginning of a potentially volatile phase:

**Crony Capitalism:** There is a risk that the "liberation" of mineral-rich tribal lands (in Chhattisgarh, Odisha, and Jharkhand) may lead to aggressive resource extraction that benefits corporations while displacing indigenous populations.

**Alienation:** If the state is seen only as a "policing and mining" entity, the underlying grievances that fueled Maoism—land rights and tribal dignity—may resurface.

**Judicial Distortion:** The use of anti-terror laws against civil society has created a "trust deficit" that must be repaired for healthy democratic participation.

**Way Forward: The Politics of Reconciliation**

To ensure that LWE does not reincarnate in another form, the focus must shift to Inclusive Development:

**Strengthening PESA & FRA:** Rigorous implementation of the Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act and the Forest Rights Act to ensure tribals have a say in their own development.

**Decentralized Democracy:** Moving beyond Aadhaar/Ration cards toward substantive participation in local self-government.

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**Opportunity corridor**

Inclusive development must be the focus in areas freed of Naxalism

India is now Naxal-free, Home Minister Amit Shah declared in the Lok Sabha on March 30, a day ahead of a deadline he had set for himself for ending Left Wing Extremism (LWE). His assertion follows three years of intensive paramilitary operations, during which 4,839 Maoists surrendered, 2,218 were arrested, and 706 were neutralised in encounters. Mr. Shah had made tackling LWE a central piece of his internal security policy, and of his political legacy. Not surprisingly, he made it a point to contrast the measures and milestones under his watch with those of the UPA regime on this front. Former Prime Minister Manmohan Singh had flagged LWE as the biggest internal security challenge before the country and his government launched Operation Green Hunt in 2009-10, an expansive paramilitary offensive that faced stiff criticism from his allies. The belt of Maoist influence, at its peak, touched over 180 districts covering tribal, forest, and mineral-rich areas in Bihar, Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, Odisha, Andhra Pradesh and Maharashtra. The approach to tackling LWE then was more hesitant and measured, mindful of the human and institutional costs.

Mr. Shah launched an uncompromising militarist strategy which he reiterated in his speech. He said the government had a dual approach – dialogue and rehabilitation for those who surrendered arms, and no mercy for those who refused. His sweeping strategy steamrolled human rights activists and academics who were branded 'urban Naxals'. Police measures went far beyond even the harsh provisions of India's anti-terrorism laws, strangling freedoms and distorting judicial processes. The paramilitary operations have, in all probability, decapitated the military capabilities of the insurgents, opening the possibility of state presence in some of the least governed regions of the country. Mr. Shah said that a campaign to establish a school in every village and provide Aadhaar and ration cards to residents in some of the worst-affected areas has already begun. He is right that Maoists are ideologically opposed to parliamentary democracy, which is a position delinked from development or its absence. Nevertheless, inclusive development is imperative for a stable, peaceful society. The defeat of LWE extremism should not accelerate crony capitalist extraction of natural resources and further alienate tribal rights. Instead, it must lead to the genuine expansion of the rights of tribals, their substantive participation in parliamentary democracy, and accountability in resource extraction. Mr. Shah deserves credit for leading the operational success in curtailing LWE. He must now lead a politics of reconciliation and heal the wounds of the battle.

**Accountability in Extraction:** Resource extraction must include social impact assessments and direct benefits to local communities (e.g., District Mineral Foundations).

**Healing Wounds:** A state-led "truth and reconciliation" approach to address the trauma of decades of conflict and ensure that former insurgents and affected families are genuinely rehabilitated.

### Conclusion

The declaration of a Naxal-free India is a monumental achievement for internal security. However, military victory is fragile without socio-economic justice. The true test for the government lies in whether the "Red Corridor" becomes a site of corporate exploitation or a model of inclusive growth. As the Home Minister leads the operational victory, the state must now lead a politics of healing to prevent the return of radical ideologies.

### UPSC Prelims Exam Practice Question

**Ques:** Which of the following best describes "Urban Naxals"?

- (a) Armed insurgents operating in urban areas
- (b) Individuals accused of providing ideological or logistical support to Maoist movements
- (c) Migrant laborers affected by Naxal violence
- (d) Police informants in cities

**Ans:** b)

### UPSC Mains Exam Practice Question

**Ques:** The elimination of the military threat of Left Wing Extremism is only half the battle won; the real victory lies in the integration of the tribal heartland into India's democratic and developmental fabric. Critically analyze. **(250 Words)**

**Page 09 : GS II : Social Justice / Prelims Exam**

India's higher education sector has undergone a massive structural transformation. Since 1950, the number of colleges and universities has grown from roughly 1,600 to over 69,000 by 2022, predominantly driven by private sector participation. However, as the State of Working India 2026 report highlights, this "quantity-led" growth hasn't been matched by "quality-led" outcomes. To harness the closing window of the demographic dividend, India must pivot from simply building institutions to ensuring they deliver equitable and high-quality learning.

### An increase in colleges, students but not enough teachers

India's higher educational system must shift its focus from institutional expansion to ensuring equity and quality education

**DATA POINT**

**Anand Kumar**  
**M. K. Shrivani**  
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**W**hile India's higher education sector has expanded rapidly in recent decades, with many new institutions and more students enrolled than ever before, has this expansion truly translated into equitable access alongside adequate capacity for delivering quality education? The State of Working India 2026 report tries to answer this.

India's higher education sector has seen massive expansion in the last few decades, at least in terms of the setting up of colleges and universities. From about 1,600 colleges and universities in 1950, most of which were publicly funded, the number had grown to over 69,000 by 2022. Most of this expansion has been recent, and driven largely by private providers. College density has also increased nationally, from 29 colleges per lakh youth in 2010 to 45 in 2021. But large regional disparities remain. For instance, many districts in northern and eastern States have fewer than 18 colleges per lakh youth population.

However, college expansion has not been matched by a commensurate expansion in teaching capacity. Regulatory norms recommend between 15 and 25 students per teacher. Even at its best, the average college had about 24 students per teacher in 2010. The situation worsened to 35.4 in 2016 and stood at 32 in 2021. Many northern districts consistently report particularly high student-teacher ratios, despite substantial institutional expansion in these regions (Map 1). Faculty numbers have not kept pace with either the growth in institutions or the rise in enrolment. This is especially concerning since these regions account for a large share of India's youth population.

#### Course of privilege

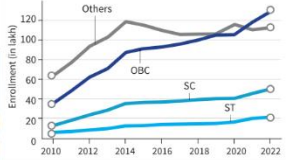
AISHE and the NSS Social Expenditure on Education Surveys show that higher-income students prefer engineering/professional courses, while lower-income students choose humanities and commerce



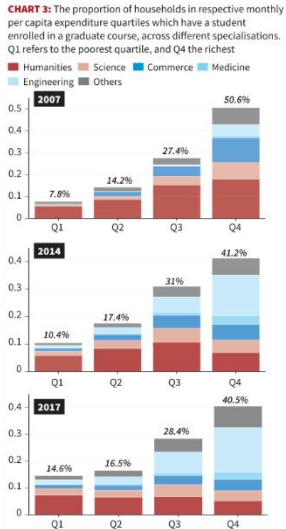
**MAP 1A:** Regional variation in college density. Darker shades represent higher colleges per youth population.

**MAP 1B:** Regional variations in student-teacher ratio. Darker shades represent higher student-teacher ratio i.e., fewer teachers per student.

**CHART 2:** Gross enrolments across different social groups. Others include the General category and other groups not classified elsewhere



**CHART 3:** The proportion of households in respective monthly per capita expenditure quartiles which have a student enrolled in a graduate course, across different specialisations. Q1 refers to the poorest quartile, and Q4 the richest



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**The Paradox of Expansion vs. Capacity**

**Institutional Growth:** College density increased from 29 per lakh youth in 2010 to 45 in 2021.

**The Teacher Shortage:** Regulatory norms (AICTE/UGC) recommend a Student-Teacher Ratio (STR) of 15:1 to 25:1. However:

The national average worsened to 32:1 in 2021.

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# Daily News Analysis

In some regions, particularly Northern and Eastern India, the ratio is even more skewed, directly impacting the "quality of transaction" in classrooms.

**Regional Disparities:** While some states are "over-colleged," many districts in Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, and Odisha have fewer than 18 colleges per lakh youth, creating "educational deserts."

## The Democratization of Access (The Silver Lining)

There has been significant progress in making higher education more inclusive:

**Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER):** Rose from 16% (2011) to 28% (2022), aligning India with other lower-middle-income nations.

**Social Equity:** Enrolment for Scheduled Castes (SC) rose from 11% to 26% and for Scheduled Tribes (ST) from 8% to 21% between 2011-2022.

**Gender Parity:** The gap between male and female enrolment has almost closed, reflecting a societal shift in valuing women's education.

## Structural Barriers: The "Cost" of Equity

Despite better enrolment, the type of education remains split by economic class:

**The Stream Divide:** Students from the richest 20% of households dominate professional courses like **Medicine and Engineering**.

**The Cost Barrier:** An engineering degree costs roughly ₹72,600/year and medicine ₹97,400/year (as of 2017-18 data). For the bottom 20% of Indian households, these fees often exceed their total annual per capita expenditure, forcing them into lower-cost Humanities or Commerce streams with lower market returns.

**The Employability Gap:** Nearly 40% of graduates under age 25 remain unemployed, suggesting that degrees are often "credentials" without "capabilities."

## Key Challenges & The Path Ahead

Challenge	Recommended Reform (NEP 2020 & Beyond)
<b>Faculty Vacancy</b>	Filling over 6,000+ vacant positions in Central Universities and incentivizing Ph.D. holders.
<b>Funding Equity</b>	Increasing Higher Education Financing Agency (HEFA) support and expanding scholarships for professional courses.
<b>Regulatory Overhaul</b>	Replacing the UGC with the Higher Education Commission of India (HECI) to separate funding, accreditation, and regulation.
<b>Vocational Linkage</b>	Integrating ITIs and vocational training with mainstream degrees to reduce graduate unemployment.

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**Conclusion**

The State of Working India 2026 serves as a wake-up call: a degree is not a guarantee of a job, and an institution is not a guarantee of education. As India moves toward Viksit Bharat @2047, the focus must shift toward "Outcome-based Education." Equity must not just mean "getting into college," but "getting into the right course" regardless of one's financial background. Without addressing the teacher shortage and the cost of professional degrees, India risks a "degree inflation" that leaves its youth over-educated but under-employed.

**UPSC Prelims Exam Practice Question**

**Ques :** Which of the following statements best describes "Student-Teacher Ratio (STR)"?

- (a) Ratio of teaching to non-teaching staff
- (b) Average number of students per teacher in an institution
- (c) Ratio of male to female students
- (d) Ratio of enrolled to graduated students

**Ans: a)**

**UPSC Mains Exam Practice Question**

**Ques:** India's higher education expansion has been quantity-driven rather than quality-driven. Critically examine. (250 Words)

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**Page : 10 : GS II & III : International Relations & Indian Economy / Prelims Exam**

India is currently undertaking a massive strategic shift toward Piped Natural Gas (PNG) to modernize its energy infrastructure and safeguard national security. The following analysis breaks down the drivers, mechanics, and hurdles of this transition based on current 2026 data.

## Why is India pushing piped gas now?

Can PNG replace LPG for cooking? Why has LPG been preferred so far? How is LNG transported and used? What is holding back PNG expansion? Can domestic production meet demand? Will PNG reduce LPG import dependence?

**EXPLAINER**

**M. Kalyanaram**

**The story so far:**  
 India has a total of 33 crore LPG connections. Recently, Anjan Kumar Mishra, Secretary at the Petroleum and Natural Gas Regulatory Board, said that domestic natural gas production alone could cater to 30 crore connections if all were to switch to piped natural gas (PNG).

**What is the difference between LPG, LNG, PNG, and CNG?**  
 LPG is a by-product of oil refining and natural gas processing. That is, its production depends on the processing of both crude oil and natural gas. Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG), as the name suggests, is natural gas that has been cooled to below -160 degrees Celsius to turn it into a liquid for shipping. Liquefaction reduces its volume by 1,000 times. Compressed Natural Gas (CNG) is primarily used as a vehicular fuel. It involves compressing natural gas to a pressure of 200-250 kg/cm<sup>2</sup> (g) to reduce its volume and enable efficient distribution.

**How are LPG and natural gas transported to the user?**  
 Propane and butane gases are mixed, pressurized, and cooled to below 40 degrees Celsius, and then transported from the source to consuming countries via ships. LPG is bottled in cylinders and physically delivered to customers. Piped natural gas is transported through pipelines. Before this, imported natural gas is liquefied and transported through LNG carriers. "LNG carriers use special cargo tanks and insulation systems designed for ultra-low temperatures," stated Mitul O.S.K. Lines to *The Hindu*. "Put simply, the basic task is to move a very cold liquid onto the ship while preventing it from warming up too much." At the destination, LNG is regasified and transported to the final consumer through pipes. Last-mile delivery of LPG is easier through trucks and tricycles than building an extensive pipeline network covering every household for natural gas. This has been a key reason why India adopted LPG for domestic cooking.

**Why the push for piped gas against LPG now?**  
 India's dependence on LPG imports is currently higher. For instance, in natural gas, India's one-year import was about 27 million tonnes of LNG last year, and production was roughly the same, according to government data. On the other hand, India - until recently - imported three fifths of its LPG requirements, of which 90% was routed through the Strait of Hormuz, which has now been blocked due to the war in West Asia. Typical annual LPG consumption is 34 million tonnes, out of which 12 million tonnes are produced in India. If gas is to be imported, LNG has many more sources across the world. In LPG, India was largely reliant on Saudi Arabia and Qatar and the supplies had to pass through the Strait to reach India. "Globally large capacities of liquefaction plants for natural gas are coming online over the next few years, so availability should be healthy," said Prashant Vasisht, Senior Vice President of ICRA.



A domestic LPG cylinder supplier carries cylinders for delivery in Bengaluru on March 30. | ALLEN EGENUSE

**THE GIST**

- India has 33 crore LPG connections, but domestic natural gas production could cater to 30 crore connections if households switch to piped natural gas (PNG).
- LPG is delivered in cylinders, while natural gas is transported through pipelines or as LNG and regasified, with PNG emerging as a drop-in replacement for cooking.
- The government is pushing PNG to reduce high LPG import dependence, but pipeline expansion, last-mile connectivity, and supply constraints remain key challenges.

**Can natural gas replace LPG straight?**  
 Natural gas is much lighter than LPG. But one kilogram of natural gas can deliver more energy than one kilogram of LPG. For cooking purposes, these differences are not significant, making PNG a drop-in replacement for LPG. However, in industrial uses, the equipment may need to be tuned to a different setting or even altered. For instance, LPG is widely used by MSMEs for welding and cutting. Reports from the government indicate that while the government is encouraging industrial users to switch, a lack of awareness and technical know-how may hamper adoption.

**How is the government pushing for natural gas?**  
 On March 26, *The Hindu* learnt from senior government officials that over the next two weeks, India could add another 15 lakh new PNG connections. The official said that instituting last-mile connectivity amidst unfavourable city infrastructure in certain areas was among the major hurdles in expanding the piped gas network. To speed it up, in a gazette notification, the Centre instituted provisions to help accelerate the uptake, which, among other things, included specific timelines for approving pipeline expansion in housing and non-housing areas. The Ministry of Petroleum and Natural Gas (MoPNG) told the Parliamentary Standing Committee, which is assessing its demand for grants for FY 2026-27, that it is targeting to have in place a pipeline network that would cover 12 crore PNG connections by 2034. The committee, in an earlier report, had asked the Ministry to help City Gas Distribution (CGD) entities to overcome difficulties in pursuing expansion, such as in obtaining permissions, land, bidding criteria, and NOC requirements from local authorities. Across towns and cities, such as in Maharashtra or Coimbatore in Tamil Nadu, where the GAIL pipeline runs close, the government is now pushing for piping infrastructure for local distribution. As of December, the government announced that India's gas pipeline network spans about 25,000 kilometres, with an additional 10,500 kilometres under construction. The government is also ensuring that PNG pricing remains competitive with LPG. "PNG connections have now crossed 1.5 crore. A recent government gazette notification reinforces this direction, mandating that households cannot hold both LPG and PNG connections. As a result, roughly 6 million households will be required to surrender their LPG connection and transition fully to PNG within a three-month timeframe. This will bring total household PNG connections to 2 crore soon," said Manish Sepwal, Senior Vice President at Rystad Energy. "Since the 2020-21, the compounded annual growth rate in connections has been some 18%. A CAGR of 24% would be needed to reach 12 crore connections by 2034-35," he added.

**What are the challenges?**  
 The GAIL pipeline network is currently concentrated in western and northern India, with some coverage in Kerala and Bengaluru. The 10,000-kilometre-plus pipelines under construction cover tier-2 and tier-3 cities in parts of central and eastern India, as well as some parts of Tamil Nadu connecting to the Bengaluru leg, and one section going to the northeast. However, large regions in central, southern, and northeastern India remain uncovered. Further, the alignment of the gas pipeline network is more intended to serve industrial needs than households. The government has aggressively given CGD licences that would cover more than 300 geographical areas covering households, small industries, hotels and restaurants. As of now, some 90 of them are still not connected to the main trunk pipeline. Last-mile connectivity remains an immediate challenge.

Even if projections of 12 crore PNG connections are met in another 10 years, PNG connections will still be more than 20 crore, leaving India requiring to import significant amounts of LPG. A little less than 30% of natural gas use goes into making fertilizers, while power plants account for 13% and city gas distribution around 20%, said ICRA's Mr. Vasisht. Some 35% goes to sectors like refineries and industries. A major diversion from these sectors such as power may be needed to cater to cooking gas demand. Mr. Vasisht said industrial consumers can switch to naphtha and furnace oil. PNGRB secretary Mr. Mishra had said that as of now some 1.2 crore PNG connections consume three million metric standard cubic metres of gas every day. To supply 13 crore connections, India will have to increase domestic production by at least one third. Industry observers say that an increase in domestic production from Oil and Natural Gas Corporation (ONGC) fields is possible. Rystad Energy projects a 25% increase. For instance, ONGC commenced production in the KG-DWN 98/2 block in the KG basin in 2024. Peak production of the field is expected to be over 10 million metric standard cubic metres per day of gas, which would mean increasing today's overall gas production in India by 10%. Site officials expect the 98/2 block to increase ONGC gas output by 15% through more wells. Increasing imports through LNG may well be required if natural gas consumption is ramped up. India has some nine import terminals covering both coasts. It will have to truly ramp up the pipeline network to leverage the imports. Further, India's LNG system is even more of a just-in-time system than LPG, with little long-term storage, unlike in Europe. Any disruption in imports will have an immediate impact on availability. (With inputs from Saptarsho Chosh and Anpola Naidu)

**Why the Push for Piped Gas (PNG) Now?**

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The primary driver is Energy Security.

**The Hormuz Crisis:** Approximately 90% of India's LPG imports pass through the Strait of Hormuz. Recent regional conflicts in West Asia (2025–26) have made this route highly vulnerable. Piped gas allows India to diversify its sources.

**Import Dependence:** India imports about 60% of its LPG. In contrast, India produces nearly half of its natural gas demand locally.

**Source Diversification:** Unlike LPG, which is a specific byproduct largely sourced from a few Gulf nations, **LNG (Liquefied Natural Gas)** is a global commodity with massive new capacities coming online from the US, Qatar, and Australia, offering greater supply stability.

### Can PNG Replace LPG?

Yes, for domestic cooking, PNG is a "drop-in" replacement.

**Efficiency:** While 1kg of natural gas provides more energy than 1kg of LPG, the difference is negligible for household cooking.

**Safety:** PNG (Methane) is lighter than air. In the event of a leak, it dissipates quickly upward. LPG (Propane/Butane) is heavier than air, meaning it settles on the floor, posing a higher risk of pooling and explosion.

**Convenience:** PNG offers an uninterrupted supply via pipes, eliminating the need for booking refills, waiting for delivery, or handling heavy cylinders.

### Why was LPG Preferred So Far?

LPG was the "low-hanging fruit" for rapid expansion:

**Ease of Last-Mile Delivery:** Cylinders can be transported via trucks, boats, or bicycles to any remote corner of India.

**Infrastructure Lead Time:** Building a nationwide pipeline network is a multi-decade engineering project. Filling a cylinder and putting it on a truck takes days.

**Cost vs. Access:** For a long time, the capital expenditure (Capex) required to dig up city streets to lay pipes was seen as too high compared to the established LPG bottling plant model.

### How is LNG Transported and Used?

Natural gas follows a complex "cold chain" before it reaches your stove:

**Liquefaction:** Natural gas is cooled to  $-160^{\circ}\text{C}$ , turning it into a liquid (LNG) and reducing its volume by 600 times.

**Shipping:** It is transported across oceans in specialized Cryogenic Tankers (giant thermos-like ships).

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## Daily News Analysis

**Regasification:** At Indian coastal terminals (like Dahej or Kochi), the

LNG is warmed back into a gas.

**Distribution:** The gas is then pumped into the National Gas Grid and eventually into the City Gas Distribution (CGD) networks for homes (PNG) and cars (CNG).

### What is Holding Back PNG Expansion?

Despite the push, several "bottlenecks" remain:

**Last-Mile Permissions:** Laying pipes in old, congested Indian cities requires "No Objection Certificates" (NOCs) from multiple local bodies (municipalities, traffic police, etc.).

**Structural Barriers:** It is physically difficult to retro-fit gas pipes into old high-rise buildings or narrow urban lanes where water and sewage lines already compete for space.

**Geographic Concentration:** Currently, the network is robust in Western (Gujarat/Maharashtra) and Northern India, but large parts of the South, East, and Northeast are still being connected.

### Can Domestic Production Meet Demand?

**Potentially, yes.** According to the Petroleum and Natural Gas Regulatory Board (PNGRB), India's current domestic natural gas production (roughly 90 MMSCMD) is theoretically enough to support 30 crore PNG connections if prioritized for households.

**The Catch:** Currently, a large portion of this gas goes to the Fertilizer and Power sectors. To meet 100% domestic PNG demand, India would either need to divert gas from these industries or successfully ramp up production from new fields like the KG Basin (ONGC 98/2 block).

### Will PNG Reduce LPG Import Dependence?

Significantly. The government's goal of 12 crore PNG connections by 2034 would transition nearly 40% of the current LPG user base to a more secure, pipeline-based system. While India will likely still need some LPG (especially for rural and hilly areas where pipes aren't feasible), the shift to PNG reduces the "Hormuz risk" and leverages India's growing domestic gas output, ultimately lowering the national import bill and enhancing energy sovereignty.

**UPSC Prelims Exam Practice Question**

**Ques:** With reference to Piped Natural Gas (PNG), consider the following statements:

1. PNG primarily consists of methane.
2. PNG is heavier than air and tends to accumulate near the ground in case of leakage.
3. PNG is supplied through City Gas Distribution (CGD) networks.

**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 Exam Practice Question**

**Ques:** Discuss the role of City Gas Distribution (CGD) networks in India's energy transition. Highlight the challenges in their expansion. **(250 Words)**

**Page : 08 : Editorial Analysis**

*A textbook, criticism, the Court and contempt*

It is prime news ever since the Supreme Court reacted to the treatment of the judiciary in the Class eight textbook brought out by the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT). The Court has shelved the book and the authors, and a new committee of legal eminences is to decide what our children should read.

**Contempt and the handling of criticism**  
What is this power of contempt? It consists of two types. The first is civil contempt, invoked for disobedience of a court order. That is clear. The second is criminal contempt, and that is for obstructing the administration of justice, or prejudicing judicial proceedings. And, importantly, scandalising or lowering the authority of the court by hostile criticism that shakes public confidence in the judiciary. This is a little more complicated, requiring lines to be drawn.

Criminal contempt is not to be invoked because an individual judge's sense of pride or ego is offended. It is invoked because a false image of the court is spread which can be deleterious and prejudicial. Why should this be actionable? Because the court and public opinion are connected by multiple twists of the democratic thread.

Judges do not have the power of the purse, or the sword. They have their power under the Constitution and the law. But the real substratum of their power, the hard rock, is the faith the public vests in the courts. Every government knows that, and that is the reason they do not mess with the courts. That goodwill and trust are garnered over countless judicial actions upholding the law, delivering justice and being the bulwark for the protection of precious rights. It is that public goodwill and trust which constitute the real power of the court, the unspoken major premise in the balance of power doctrine. That favourable opinion and support are threatened by motivated reports denigrating the judiciary, especially when repeatedly and widely spread.

Over the years, great judges have made one thing clear – that they are not immune from criticism. Chief Justice of India (CJI) Sabyasachi Mukherjee spoke about the inability of the courts to deliver quick and substantial justice and said that this criticism should turn the search light inward.

Here is CJI P.B. Gajendragadkar: "We ought never to forget that the power to punish for contempt, large as it is, must always be exercised cautiously, wisely and with circumspection. Frequent or indiscriminate use of this power in anger or irritation would not help to sustain the dignity and status of the court but may sometimes affect it adversely. Wise judges never



**Sriram Panchu**  
Senior advocate and mediator

forget that the best way to sustain the dignity and status of their office is to deserve respect from the public at large by the quality of their judgments, the fearlessness, fairness and objectivity of their approach, and by the restraint, dignity and decorum which they observe in their judicial conduct."

There is also the broad shoulder approach. CJI S.P. Bharucha, while disapproving of the statements of Medha Patkar and Arundhati Roy, explained that he was dropping action against them because "the Court's shoulders are broad enough to shrug off their comments". This seems rather apposite now. Justice Bharucha was one of the earliest to come out loud about corruption in the judiciary; he even offered a percentage estimate. Several other judicial leaders have since voiced concerns. It is nowhere near the malaise that affects the other branches; but even one corrupt judge is an aberration and is not to be tolerated. And, unfortunately, it is the one bad apple that makes news and taints the rest.

And from abroad the ringing voice of the great Lord Denning: "Let me say at once that we will never use this jurisdiction as a means to uphold our own dignity. That must rest on surer foundations. Nor will we use it to suppress those who speak against us. We do not fear criticism, nor do we resent it. For there is something far more important at stake. It is no less than freedom of speech itself. It is the right of every man, in Parliament or out of it, in the press or over the broadcast, to make fair comment, even outspoken comment, on matters of public interest... We must rely on our conduct itself to be its own vindication."

Here is another example, humorous yet telling. After the Spycatcher judgement in 1987, the *Daily Mail* called the judges "Old Fools". Contempt action did not follow. Lord Templeman said he could not deny that he was old, and being a fool was a matter of opinion – obviously, he could not be bothered about the Mail's.

**Where the line is drawn**

But the Court draws a line. The criticism must be founded on facts set forth correctly. It must not be reckless. It must not be ill-motivated to denigrate the institution. Because, as said above, bringing down its image lessens its capacity to deliver justice to people and institutions at large. And lessens a crucial power it holds in our country, the power of judicial review over acts of legislature and executive. This is the birthing ground for millions of cases seeking relief against administrative wrongdoing and legislative excess. Politicians and bureaucrats rail against the court invoking this power, but it is this which ensures accountability, transparency and good governance. The other branches do not value these, the judiciary does. And it can hold and

exercise this power because people welcome judicial relief, and place the judiciary in high esteem. The cord that binds the court and the common man sustains both in a commonality of purpose and benefit. We must, therefore, not be at ease when that connective tissue comes under threat. When it is a piece of writing that comes under the lens of contempt of court, wise judges tread cautiously. After all, they are the protectors of free speech when policemen and other harassers pick on citizens. And academic freedom, not chilling silence, is what judges would seek to protect.

Perhaps we could have avoided this scenario if the writers, who were senior academicians, had been put on notice and given an opportunity to explain their comments or conclusions. Who knows? A suitable rectification or clarification could have been undertaken. A cautionary admonition may have sufficed. The judges may have come around to amend their initial assessment of the impact on the institution and simply dropped the proceedings. It may have passed off as a storm in a teacup, or the broad shoulders would have simply shrugged. Due process works in wondrous ways. One hopes that the matter will end soon, and satisfactorily, with respect for the Court being dimmed not a whit, and free speech and fair comment not seen as adversarial to the Court. As wisely observed, when the Court onboard criticism, it affirms the system that we are all under the rule of law.

Once we cross this bridge, there is much to do. Students must be duly apprised of the role of the judiciary, not just in resolving disputes between individuals and entities, but also in its stellar role as the protector and enforcer of the Constitution. The importance of fundamental rights including the right to equality, free speech, practice of religion, and the judiciary's role in their preservation and enhancement must be set forth. As also the challenges which it faces, of infrastructure, manpower and corruption.

**The end note**

One parts with a concern. The judiciary is struggling to develop adequate instruments to tackle this menace within. Impeachment is lengthy; politics plays its part there. Transfer is resorted to, but may just be a location change. In-house inquiry procedures show that action is taken, but may be futile if there is resistance from the offender. Our original constitutional scheme did not envisage encountering judicial corruption beyond the odd instance, and we now have to fashion deterrents and remedies for wider application. This will be of great benefit to hardworking and honest judges, who constitute the vast majority, as well as to the system of administration of justice. Textbook improvement will follow.

The NCERT textbook controversy should be resolved without diminishing judicial respect or free speech



**GS Paper II: Indian Polity**

**UPSC Mains Exam Practice Question:** The power of contempt is essential for maintaining judicial authority, but its misuse can undermine democratic freedoms. Critically examine. (150 Words)

**Context :** In a significant legal and educational development, the Supreme Court of India recently intervened regarding the portrayal of the judiciary in NCERT's Class 8 social science textbooks. Arguing that certain portions "scandalized" the court or lowered its authority in the eyes of students, the Court shelved the book and appointed a committee of legal experts to oversee revisions. This move has reignited a national debate on where Criminal Contempt ends and Fair Academic Criticism begins.

### **Understanding the Power of Contempt**

The analysis by senior advocate Sriram Panchu highlights two distinct forms of contempt:

**Civil Contempt:** Disobeying a specific court order. (Clear and objective).

**Criminal Contempt:** Actions that "scandalize" the court or lower its authority. (Subjective and complex).

**The Rationale:** Unlike the Executive (which has the "sword") or the Legislature (which has the "purse"), the Judiciary's power rests solely on public faith. If that faith is eroded through reckless or ill-motivated criticism, the court's ability to protect constitutional rights is weakened.

### **The "Broad Shoulders" Philosophy**

Historically, the Indian judiciary has often followed a policy of restraint. The analysis recalls several landmark stances:

**The S.P. Bharucha Approach:** The Court's shoulders are "broad enough to shrug off" comments (e.g., the Medha Patkar/Arundhati Roy cases).

**The Searchlight Inward:** CJI Sabyasachi Mukherjee famously argued that criticism regarding judicial delays should lead to internal reform rather than punishment.

**The Global Standard:** Lord Denning's famous view that the court's dignity must rest on "surer foundations" than the power to suppress speech.

### **The NCERT Controversy: What Went Wrong?**

The current friction arises from how textbooks address judicial challenges. The Court's primary concern is that academic writing must be:

**Fact-based:** Not founded on reckless generalizations.

**Well-Motivated:** Aimed at education, not institutional denigration.

**Criticism of the Court's Move:** Analysts argue that the authors (senior academicians) should have been given Due Process—an opportunity to explain their conclusions or rectify the text—rather than a summary shelving of the work. There is a fear that this creates a "chilling effect" on academic freedom.

### **Key Challenges Highlighted**

The textbook debate inadvertently brings to light the very issues the Court is sensitive about:

**Internal Corruption:** The judiciary lacks a swift mechanism to tackle "bad apples" beyond the cumbersome process of impeachment.

**Infrastructure & Manpower:** Chronic shortages lead to the "inability to deliver quick justice," a valid point of public criticism.

**Judicial Review:** The power to hold the Executive accountable is the judiciary's greatest strength, but it requires the common man's unwavering support to remain effective.

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**Conclusion: The Path Forward**

The resolution of the NCERT case must strike a balance. While students must be taught to respect the Judiciary as the bulwark of the Constitution, they must also be allowed to understand its real-world challenges—including corruption and delays.

True "textbook improvement" will occur when the judiciary handles criticism with the "restraint and decorum" advised by past luminaries. When the Court onboards fair criticism, it does not lose authority; rather, it affirms the Rule of Law and its own commitment to transparency.

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