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The Hindu Important News Articles & Editorial For UPSC CSE

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Add- 21/B, Om Swati Manor Chs, J.K. Sawant Marg, Opp. Shivaji Natyamandir, Behind Cambridge Showroom, Dadar (West) Mumbai – 400028
Con.- 09820971345, 9619071345, 9223209699
G-mail-lakshyaacademymumbai@gmail.com

Page 01 :GS III :Indian Economy / Prelims Exam

In a significant macroeconomic intervention, the Central Government has drastically increased the effective import duty on gold and silver to **15%** (comprising a 10% Basic Customs Duty and a 5% Agriculture Infrastructure and Development Cess). This decision follows a public appeal by Prime Minister Narendra Modi urging citizens to practice austerity and defer gold purchases for a year.

While the measure is designed as a pre-emptive shield to defend India's external balance sheet amid the West Asia (Iran) conflict, it has drawn sharp criticism from industry stakeholders who term it a "retrograde" step that could reverse gains made against illicit trade.

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

T.C.A. Sharad Raghavan
NEW DELHI

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

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

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

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

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

Customs duty up to 10%

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

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

"The current geopolitical situation has created significant volatility in global crude oil markets and international shipping routes," a government source explained. "As a large importer of crude oil, India remains vulnerable to elevated energy prices and supply-side disruptions, which can increase the import bill, exert pressure on inflation, and the CAD."

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

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

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

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

This sentiment was echoed by Sachin Sawrikar, founder and managing partner at Artha Bharat Investment Managers, who termed the import duty hike as a "blunt instrument that history tells us rarely achieves its intended purpose".

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

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

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

Lack of transparency

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

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

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

Bullion burden

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

Tax	Earlier	Now
Basic customs duty	5%	10%
Agriculture Infrastructure and Development Cess	1%	5%
Integrated Goods and Services Tax*	3%	3%
Total	~9.2%	~18.4%

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

The Core Economic Rationale: Why the Government Acted

The government's decision is fundamentally a defensive maneuver to safeguard India's macroeconomic stability against external shocks:

- **Defending Foreign Exchange Reserves:** Due to the escalating war in West Asia and disruptions in the critical Strait of Hormuz shipping lane, global crude oil prices have surged above $107 per barrel. Because India imports nearly 87% of its crude oil, its dollar outflow has accelerated sharply, causing forex reserves to slide by nearly $38.5 billion in just ten weeks.
- **Managing the Current Account Deficit (CAD) & Rupee Depreciation:** The Indian Rupee recently touched an all-time low of over 95.50 per US dollar, making it one of Asia's weakest-performing currencies in 2026. Gold is India's second-largest import item after crude oil, costing a record $71.98 billion in FY26 (a 24% surge driven by soaring global prices). By checking gold inflows, the government aims to contract the trade deficit and ease structural pressure on the CAD.
- **Prioritizing Essential vs. Non-Essential Imports:** The state is actively rationing foreign exchange. It is prioritizing dollars for growth-critical and non-discretionary imports—such as crude oil, fertilizers, industrial raw materials, and defense equipment—while penalizing investment- and consumption-driven precious metals.
- **Promoting Recycling and Circular Economy:** Interestingly, the notification keeps a lower, concessional tariff (4.35%) on the import of spent catalysts and precious metal ash. This acts as a policy nudge to incentivize the domestic recycling of gold rather than relying on fresh, dollar-draining imports.

Why the Move is Criticized as "Retrograde" and "Blunt"

Industry experts, economists, and think-tanks like the Global Trade Research Initiative (GTRI) have raised major red flags regarding the structural fallout of this policy:

A. Re-ignition of the Gold Smuggling Grey Market

- Legitimate duty cuts in the 2024 Budget to 6% had successfully decimated parallel smuggling networks, dropping illicit inflows from 156 tonnes in 2023 to just 20.4 tonnes in 2025.
- With the new effective tax rate, the arbitrage margin for grey-market operators has widened to an enticing 18%. This creates a high financial incentive for syndicates to revive illegal smuggling routes through neighboring porous borders, shifting formal cash transactions into an unaccounted parallel economy.

B. Severe Liquidity and Operational Distress for MSMEs

- The Gems and Jewellery sector is highly labor-intensive, and Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) make up roughly 80% of its fabric.
- The instant 6% spike in domestic gold prices compresses retail footfall and spikes working capital requirements. Smaller, unorganized jewellers face an acute liquidity crunch, threatening widespread sectoral job losses.

C. Inelasticity of Indian Gold Demand

- Historical data demonstrates that Indian gold demand is culturally and structurally inelastic. Gold is deeply valued as a financial buffer in rural areas, a hedge against inflation, and a swift collateral asset via gold loans.
- Past tariff hikes (e.g., during the 2012–13 CAD crisis) failed to fundamentally suppress long-term physical demand; they merely inflated domestic prices and altered how demand was met.

D. Governance and Transparency Concerns

- **Complex Tariff Architecture:** Think-tanks have criticized the drafting of these fiscal changes. Rather than implementing a clean, transparent taxation slate, the duties are altered via overlapping amendments, cess adjustments, and exemptions piled on top of decades-old tariff acts. This runs counter to the government's stated mandate of fostering the "Ease of Doing Business."

Way Forward

- **Strengthening Digital and Paper Gold Alternatives:** To curb the structural hunger for physical gold, the government should revitalize and aggressively promote financial alternatives like Sovereign Gold Bonds (SGBs) and digital Gold ETFs. This absorbs investment-driven demand without triggering physical imports.
- **Revamping the Gold Monetization Scheme (GMS):** India holds an estimated 25,000 tonnes of idle gold in households and religious institutions. Enhancing public participation in the GMS through better interest yields and simpler compliance can unlock domestic gold, drastically cutting dependence on fresh imports.
- **Fiscal Transparency and Rationalization:** Customs and tax notifications must be simplified. A single, transparent tariff line without complex layers of AIDC, SWS, and IGST would improve compliance and prevent legal ambiguities.

Conclusion

- The doubling of the basic import tariff framework on precious metals highlights a classic macroeconomic trilemma where short-term stability goals clash with long-term structural reforms.
- While the fiscal barrier is an understandable emergency brake to shield India's foreign exchange reserves from volatile geopolitical fires, history cautions that high tariff walls on highly liquid, inelastic assets rarely achieve their goals smoothly.
- For long-term macroeconomic resilience, the state must transition from punitive, "blunt" trade barriers toward deep-seated structural reforms that effectively monetize the vast reservoir of gold already sitting within Indian borders.

UPSC Prelims Exam Practice Question

Ques: Which of the following best explains the term "inelastic demand" in economics?

(a) Demand changes sharply with price changes

(b) Demand remains relatively unchanged despite price changes

(c) Demand becomes zero after tax increases

(d) Demand is controlled entirely by the government

Ans :b)

UPSC Mains Exam Practice Question

Ques: "High import duties on precious metals may provide short-term macroeconomic relief but can generate long-term structural distortions." Discuss in the context of India's recent increase in gold import duties.**(150 Words)**

Page 02 :GS III :Disaster Management

In a significant step toward strengthening India's coastal disaster resilience, the **Indian National Centre for Ocean Information Services (INCOIS)** has deployed its second **Coastal Flood Monitoring System (CFMS)** near the Kollam Harbour in Kerala. This deployment aims to closely monitor and improve the forecasting accuracy of **Kallakkadal (swell surge)** events, which frequently devastate the fishing communities and infrastructure along India's southwestern coast.

INCOIS expands coastal flood monitoring to tackle *Kallakkadal* surges in Kollam

V. Geetanath
HYDERABAD

The Indian National Centre for Ocean Information Services (INCOIS), headquartered in Hyderabad, has installed a second Coastal Flood Monitoring System (CFMS) near the Kollam harbour in Kerala to enhance the accuracy of *Kallakkadal* (swell surge) forecasts along India's southwest coast.

Kallakkadal events – sudden and powerful swell surges – pose a significant threat to fishing communities and coastal infrastructure. These surges are typically triggered by long-period swells generated by distant storms in the southern Indian Ocean, nearly 10,000 kilometres from the Indian coastline, said INCOIS Director T.M. Balakrishnan Nair.

INCOIS's second Coastal Flood Monitoring System near Kollam Harbour in Kerala.

The first observational evidence of such waves in Indian waters was recorded during the initial deployment of the CFMS at Vizhinjam last year. The system was operated between February and May, covering the pre-monsoon season when these swell surges are most frequent.

Scientists observed that these swells, with periods ranging from 30 to 300 seconds, can substantially elevate coastal water levels. The aim, they said, is to identify patterns in southern ocean swells and refine forecasting models for improved accuracy.

CFMS integrates a coastal automatic weather station with four high-frequency pressure sensors installed in shallow waters at depths of three to seven metres. This configuration enables precise monitoring of nearshore wave transformation processes, providing valuable real-time data. Kollam was chosen for the second system due to its frequent exposure to such events. INCOIS aims to strengthen coastal resilience and reduce the risks posed by *Kallakkadal* events.

Understanding "Kallakkadal" (Swell Surges)

- **Definition:**Kallakkadal is a term derived from Malayalam (meaning "thief-like sea"). It refers to sudden, flash-flood-like coastal flooding caused by powerful **swell waves** without any local wind or storm activity to give prior warning.
- **Mechanism of Origin:** These waves are not generated by local weather. Instead, they are triggered by intense, long-duration storms and strong winds in the **Southern Indian Ocean** (near Antarctica), approximately 10,000 kilometers away from the Indian peninsula.

- **The Journey:** The energy from these distant storms travels northward across thousands of miles of open ocean as long-period, low-amplitude waves (swells). Because they travel underwater with very long wave periods (30 to 300 seconds), they remain unnoticed in the deep ocean.

- **The Coastal Impact:** When these swells reach the shallow, tapering continental shelf of southwestern India, they slow down, compress, and dramatically gain height. They crash onto the shore as massive, energy-packed surges, causing sudden inland flooding even on bright, sunny days.

The Technology: Coastal Flood Monitoring System (CFMS)

To decode these complex wave patterns, INCOIS has developed a localized, high-tech observational network:

- **Core Components:** The CFMS integrates a **Coastal Automatic Weather Station (AWS)** with **four high-frequency pressure sensors**.

- **Deployment Zone:** These sensors are strategically installed in shallow waters at depths of just **3 to 7 meters**.

- **Scientific Function:** The system tracks the exact moment the deep-sea swells transform into shallow-water nearshore waves. By analyzing waves with periods up to 300 seconds, scientists can measure exactly how much these swells elevate coastal water levels in real time.

- **Evolution:** The pilot system was successfully tested at Vizhinjam, Kerala, during the volatile pre-monsoon season (February to May). The Kollam installation is the second node, chosen due to its high vulnerability and frequent exposure to these surges.

Relevance and Benefits of the Expansion

A. Overcoming a Blind Spot in Early Warning Systems

Conventional disaster warning frameworks rely heavily on tracking local meteorological indicators like dropping atmospheric pressure, rising local winds, or nearby depressions (e.g., cyclones). Because Kallakkadal occurs under completely calm local weather, it bypasses standard coastal radar. The CFMS fills this crucial data vacuum.

B. Protecting the Blue Economy and Coastal Livelihoods

The southwestern coast, particularly Kerala, has one of India's highest densities of traditional fishing communities. Sudden swell surges smash artisanal fishing boats, destroy expensive nets, erode beaches, and flood coastal homes. Enhanced, localized forecasts will allow authorities to issue micro-targeted alerts to fishermen.

C. Climate Change Adaptation and Disaster Management

With rising sea levels and an increase in the frequency of intense storms in the Southern Ocean due to global warming, swell surge events are projected to become more frequent and severe. The data harvested from the Kollam and Vizhinjam systems

will help refine INCOIS's oceanographic computer models, transitioning India from reactive disaster response to predictive disaster mitigation.

Way Forward

- **Expanding the Grid:** The CFMS network should be scaled across the entire western coastline, particularly touching vulnerable zones in Lakshadweep, Karnataka, and Goa.
- **Community-Level Last-Mile Connectivity:** The high-quality forecasts generated by INCOIS must be seamlessly translated into actionable local languages and broadcasted through SMS alerts, community radio, and fisherfolk cooperatives.
- **Nature-Based Coastal Defenses:** Alongside tech-driven monitoring, state governments must invest in ecological buffers, such as mangrove restoration and bio-shields, to naturally absorb the heavy kinetic energy of incoming swell surges.

Conclusion

The expansion of the Coastal Flood Monitoring System to Kollam highlights India's growing technological self-reliance in oceanography. By bridging deep-sea scientific observations in the Southern Ocean with real-time shallow-water telemetry on the domestic front, INCOIS is transitioning India toward an advanced era of climate-resilient coastal management. This tech-driven foresight is essential to safeguarding both India's vital marine infrastructure and the fragile lives of its coastal communities.

UPSC Mains Exam Practice Question

Ques: Climate change is increasing the vulnerability of India's coastal regions to non-traditional marine disasters. Analyze in the context of swell surge events along the southwestern coast of India.(**150 Words)**

Page 03:GS II :International Relations / Prelims Exam

At the "Diplomacy and Sustainability Dialogues 2026," veteran Indian diplomats highlighted a critical consensus: the ongoing United States-Israel-Iran war underscores that military force alone cannot resolve deep-seated geopolitical conflicts. The crisis emphasizes the urgent need for political and diplomatic resolutions.

For India, the conflict is no longer a distant foreign policy issue; it is a direct domestic challenge impacting its macroeconomic stability, energy security, and long-term strategic alignments in West Asia.

'Iran war shows military force alone is no solution to conflicts'

Iran's insistence on a permanent solution of the issues involved has put the focus once again on political resolutions of wars and conflicts, in the region and beyond, says former diplomat T.S. Tirumurti at the Diplomacy and Sustainability Dialogues

The Hindu Bureau
CHENNAI

The inaugural session of Diplomacy and Sustainability Dialogues 2026 featured former diplomats and experts. L.V. Navaneeth, CEO, The Hindu Group, N.M. Veeraiyan, Chancellor, SIMATS Chennai, Suhasini Haidar, Diplomatic Editor, *The Hindu*, were present. J. JOHAN SATHYADAS

The United States-Israel-Iran war has clearly exhibited that military action alone was not enough to find resolution to conflicts and that a political follow-up was pertinent, T.S. Tirumurti, former Ambassador and Permanent Representative of India to the United Nations, New York, said in Chennai on Wednesday.

Speaking at the inauguration of Diplomacy and Sustainability Dialogues 2026, jointly organised by Saveetha Institute of Medical and Technical Sciences (SIMATS) and *The Hindu*, the former Ambassador said, "...what has changed is that the Iran war has shown us once again that military force by itself cannot be a solution unless followed up with a political solution, whether in Ukraine or in Gaza or in Iran. With the U.S. and China having almost parallel visions of the world order, political resolution of conflict is one area which has been receiving less and less attention, especially from the P5 countries - the permanent five countries of the United Nations."

On political resolutions

The Iranian insistence on a permanent solution of the issues involved, he said, has put the focus once again on political resolutions of wars and conflicts, both in the region and beyond.

Referring to the various conflicts and proxy wars in Africa fought by external players, historical conflicts in West Asia, including the Palestinian issue, and threats and conflicts in Latin America, Mr. Tirumurti said that terrorism has added one more layer of conflict by State or by non-State actors.

"We ignore all of them at our own peril. It is time we took the right lessons from the Iran war," he warned.

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Diplomacy & Sustainability Dialogues 2026
THE FEDERAL

'New world order'

Talmiz Ahmed, former Ambassador to Oman, the UAE, and Saudi Arabia, and Distinguished Professor of International Studies, Symbiosis International University, Pune, said the expression "we are in the cusp of a new world order" was something international relations experts were grappling with of late; and that it was a coming together of a "large number of significant changes".

"It will take some effort on your part to realise that many of the things that are given in your life are changing and are likely to change very significantly," Mr. Ahmed said pointing at what he called a "seismic change in political order" in Tamil Nadu, and the government elected in Delhi 12 years ago that was revamping the basis of the idea of India enshrined in the Constitution. Quoting Lord Byron, he said, "...first freedom, then glory, then wealth, vice, corruption, barbarism at last...we are looking at the age of barbarism. This is what explains the extraordinary violence that has been wreaked all across West Asia with total impunity."

Sunjay Sudhir, former Ambassador to the UAE and Maldives, and Distinguished Fellow, IIM Ahmedabad, said that the West Asia conflict has had a deep impact on India that was visible in its GDP, inflation, fall of the rupee, and the current account deficit, and was also having a deep cascading effect on its industries, especially petrochemicals and fertilisers. "When the war ends, when there is this so-called settlement that satisfies all sides, I think it will be a big challenge for us, because not only is there a new axis forming - Pakistan, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt - but with the politics of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) itself changing, I think that will put our diplomacy to a big test," he added.

> Through activities connected with the UN Sustainable Development Goals , we are committed to developing socially responsible students
> **N.M. VEERAIYAN**
> Chancellor, SIMATS Chennai

N.M. Veeraiyan, Chancellor, SIMATS Chennai, said that the university believed in the principle of providing more than education, equipping students to contribute to society through innovation, research, policy, and sustainable development. "Through activities connected with the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDG), we are committed to developing socially responsible students, ethical leaders, and researchers who can solve real world problems by themselves," Dr. Veeraiyan added.

In his welcome address, L.V. Navaneeth, CEO, *The Hindu* Group of Publications, said dialogues such as these create informed public discourse, bringing together voices that helped society think deeper, engage better, and understand the larger forces shaping the future.

"At a time when the world is witnessing deep geopolitical shifts, economic uncertainty, energy insecurity, and increasing sustainability concerns, conventions such as these become not just relevant but a necessity," Mr. Navaneeth added.

Earlier, setting the stage for the deliberations, Dhanraj Ganapathy, Dean of Sustainability, SIMATS, said that India's position in the present geopolitical context was very "delicate" and it needed to tread cautiously while choosing between "the worse and the worst". SIMATS, he said, would consolidate the day's deliberations in the form of a document and present it to the Government of India.

S. Sundaresan, Vice-President, Advertisement Sales - South, *The Hindu*, proposed a vote of thanks at the end of the event.

The Core Theme: Limits of Military Might and the Decline of Multilateralism

- **The Fallacy of Purely Military Solutions:** Former UN Ambassador T.S. Tirumurti noted that whether in Ukraine, Gaza, or Iran, protracted military campaigns have failed to yield stable outcomes. True resolution requires a structured political follow-up. Iran's insistence on a permanent framework highlights that ceasefire agreements must be backed by sustainable political settlements to prevent recurring cycles of violence.

- **The Paralysis of the UN Security Council (P5):** The dialogue highlighted a dangerous trend: the Permanent Five (P5) nations are increasingly neglecting political conflict resolution. With the U.S. and China operating under parallel, competing visions for the global order, the UN's traditional peacekeeping and diplomatic machinery has faced institutional paralysis, allowing conflicts to persist with impunity.

Macroeconomic and Strategic Fallout on India

Former Ambassador Sunjay Sudhir detailed how the escalation in West Asia directly ripples through India's domestic economy and foreign policy:

A. Domestic Economic Vulnerabilities

- **Inflation and GDP:** As a nation importing over 85% of its crude oil, any supply disruption or risk premium in the Gulf instantly inflates India's energy bill, triggering domestic fuel price hikes and cascading inflation.

- **Currency and External Balance Sheet:** The crisis has exacerbated India's Trade Deficit, putting substantial depreciary pressure on the Indian Rupee and widening the Current Account Deficit (CAD).

- **Industrial Disruptions:** Downstream industries, particularly petrochemicals and fertilizers, face severe raw material volatility. Because India relies heavily on West Asian fertilizers to sustain its agricultural sector, this volatility threatens domestic food security and hikes the government's subsidy burden.

B. The Emerging Geopolitical "New Axis"

Diplomats warned of a structural realignment taking place in India's extended neighborhood:

- **The Realignment:** A new strategic axis comprising **Pakistan, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt** is beginning to take shape.

- **The Diplomatic Test:** Historically, India has successfully de-hyphenated its ties in the region—maintaining strong bilateral relations with Israel, Iran, and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) independently. However, a mutating GCC political landscape, combined with this emerging axis, will test India's traditional strategic autonomy and demand highly nuanced diplomatic maneuvers.

The Changing World Order and the "Age of Barbarism"

Reflecting on the broader systemic shifts, Ambassador Talmiz Ahmed pointed out that the international community is navigating a profound transition:

- **Erosion of International Law:** The extraordinary scale of violence across West Asia, met with global inaction, signifies a breakdown of the rules-based international order.
- **The "Delicate" Indian Position:** India finds itself in a highly complex position. It must carefully balance its deep strategic and defense ties with Israel, its energy and logistical connectivity stakes with Iran (e.g., the Chabahar Port), and its massive economic and diaspora links with the Arab Gulf states.

Way Forward for Indian Diplomacy

- **Advocating for Restructured Multilateralism:** India must leverage its leadership in the Global South (via platforms like the G20 and BRICS) to advocate for a return to dialogue and diplomacy, filling the vacuum left by a paralyzed UN Security Council.
- **Deepening Ties with the GCC:** To counter any unfavorable emerging axes, New Delhi must double down on its comprehensive strategic partnerships with key Gulf nations like the UAE and Saudi Arabia, moving beyond buyer-seller energy dynamics into deep institutional, security, and technology integration.
- **Securing Alternative Supply Chains:** Domestically, India must fast-track strategic petroleum reserves, diversify fertilizer import sources (e.g., expanding footprints in African nations), and accelerate renewable energy transitions to insulate its economy from West Asian shocks.

Conclusion

The insights from the Diplomacy and Sustainability Dialogues 2026 serve as a stark reminder that in an interconnected global economy, geopolitical vacuums quickly translate into domestic economic pain. For India, maintaining strategic autonomy is no longer just about choosing sides; it is about actively engaging in diplomatic statecraft to protect its core economic interests. As the world transitions toward a fragmented global order, India's ability to navigate these shifting West Asian dynamics will be a defining test for its aspirations as a leading global power.

UPSC Prelims Exam Practice Question

Ques: Which of the following best explains the term "Strategic Autonomy" in India's foreign policy?

(a) Complete isolation from global powers

(b) Military neutrality in all conflicts

(c) Ability to pursue independent foreign policy choices based on national interest

(d) Dependence on multilateral institutions for decision-making

Ans :c)

UPSC Mains Exam Practice Question

Ques: Analyze the impact of the US-Israel-Iran conflict on India's energy security, macroeconomic stability, and strategic autonomy.**(150 Words)**

Page :10:GS III :Environment / Prelims Exam

The India Meteorological Department (IMD) has announced a transformative shift in how it predicts and communicates monsoon data for 2026. Moving away from broad regional estimates, the agency is prioritizing "actionable" data to mitigate the agricultural risks associated with an erratic monsoon season.

What has the IMD announced ahead of this year's monsoon?

Why are the 15 States in the monsoon core zone the first to receive block-level forecasts?

Jacob Koshy

The story so far:
The India Meteorological Department on Tuesday unveiled a new forecast system that, for the first time, will generate block-level forecasts of the monsoon's arrival. The system covers 15 States and one Union Territory, taking in 3,196 blocks – roughly half of India's 7,200-odd blocks. Until now, monsoon onset estimates have been available at best at the State or district scale.

Why does this granularity matter?
The conventional district-scale forecast obscures a basic feature of the Indian monsoon: its patchiness. The arrival dates familiar to most people – around June 10 for Mumbai, June 29 for Delhi – describe the monsoon reaching a city or a district boundary. But within the same district, several blocks and villages can remain rainless even after the monsoon has officially "arrived." For a farmer deciding when to sow, knowing that the monsoon has reached the district headquarters is of limited use if her own block is still dry. Hyper-local forecasts have been a long-standing aim of the IMD precisely to close this gap and help farmers time their sowing.

How does the new system work?
At its core are two forecasting models whose outputs are "blended" to sharpen accuracy. From the date of the monsoon's onset over Kerala, the system draws on AI-based analysis, the IMD's trove of nearly a century of meteorological data, and global weather models to project the monsoon's itinerary at a much finer scale than before.

The blending framework was developed by the Indian Institute of Tropical Meteorology, a Pune-based research institute under the Ministry of Earth Sciences. It issues probabilistic forecasts for the next four weeks.

Why these particular 15 States?
The States covered are part of what meteorologists call the monsoon core zone. As M. Ravichandran, Secretary in the Ministry of Earth Sciences, put it at a press briefing, these are "the regions that are largely rainfed and are most sensitive to southwest monsoon dynamics." They are also the regions where forecast errors translate most directly into crop losses. The ambition is eventually to extend block-level forecasts across all of India, but Mr. Ravichandran said this would require a denser network of observational data than is currently available in many States.

How well will it work in its first season?
The system has cleared two trial runs, but this year will be a stiff test. The IMD and global models are expecting "below normal" rainfall from July onwards, in the light of a developing El Niño – a pattern in the Pacific Ocean that has frequently coincided with weak monsoon rains in India. Forecasting a weak, erratic monsoon at block resolution can be harder than forecasting a robust one.

What is the separate announcement about Uttar Pradesh?
The IMD also launched a 10-day monsoon forecast model specifically for Uttar Pradesh at a resolution of 1 km – meaning the model resolves weather features down to that scale. This was possible because of Uttar Pradesh's unusually extensive network of automatic weather stations, whose observations allowed a weather model called Mithuna, which natively runs at 12.5 km, to be "downscaled" to 1 km. Mr. Ravichandran said other States were being encouraged to share their station data with the IMD so that similarly high-resolution forecasts could be produced for them.

What is the broader picture?
Two trends are converging. One is a push, driven by the agriculture ministry, to make forecasts agriculturally actionable rather than merely meteorologically accurate. The other is the IMD's increasing willingness to combine traditional physics-based models with AI and to lean on State-level observational networks where they exist. Block-level forecasting is the first concrete product of that combination – and the 2026 monsoon, El Niño and all, will be its proving ground.

THE GIST

- The IMD has launched a new block-level monsoon forecast system using AI-based analysis, meteorological data and global weather models to provide hyper-local forecasts for farmers in the monsoon core zone.
- The 2026 monsoon will test the new blended forecasting framework as India faces the possibility of below-normal and erratic rainfall linked to a developing El Niño.

The Major Announcement: Block-Level Forecasting

For the first time in its history, the IMD has launched a system to generate **block-level forecasts** for the monsoon's arrival.

- **Scale:** The system covers **3,196 blocks** across 15 States and one Union Territory. This represents roughly half of the blocks in India.
- **The Shift:** Previously, forecasts were limited to State or district scales. District-level data often failed to account for the monsoon's **"patchiness,"** where one village might receive heavy rain while another just a few kilometers away remains dry.
- **Utility:** For farmers, this granularity is critical. It allows for precise timing of sowing and resource management, reducing the risk of crop failure due to "false starts" of the monsoon.

Why the "Monsoon Core Zone" States?

The 15 States selected for this rollout belong to the **Monsoon Core Zone (MCZ)**. These regions are the primary focus for two reasons:

- **Rainfed Dependency:** Unlike areas with extensive canal irrigation, these states are largely rainfed. Their agricultural output is directly and sensitively tied to the dynamics of the Southwest Monsoon.
- **Economic Impact:** These regions are the most vulnerable to forecast errors. A slight deviation in the monsoon's arrival or intensity here translates directly into significant national crop losses.
- **Observational Data:** Extension to all of India is currently limited by the density of weather stations; the core zone currently has the necessary data network to support these high-resolution models.

The Technology: AI-Model "Blending"

The new system is not based on a single model but a **"blending framework"** developed by the Indian Institute of Tropical Meteorology (IITM), Pune.

- **Probabilistic Approach:** It issues forecasts for a four-week window.
- **Data Fusion:** It combines nearly a century of historical meteorological data with modern global weather models and **AI-based analysis**.
- **The "Mithuna" Model:** In Uttar Pradesh, the IMD has achieved a resolution of **1 km** by "downscaling" the Mithuna model (which normally runs at 12.5 km). This was made possible by UP's extensive network of automatic weather stations.

The Challenges: El Niño and Trial by Fire

The 2026 monsoon will be the "proving ground" for this system under difficult conditions:

- **El Niño Factor:** Global models predict a developing El Niño, which typically coincides with weak or erratic rainfall in India.
- **Complexity:** It is mathematically harder to forecast a weak, patchy monsoon at a block level than a robust, uniform one. The system's accuracy will be tested against these volatile conditions from July onwards.

UPSC Prelims Exam Practice Question

Ques: The recent block-level monsoon forecasting initiative of the India Meteorological Department (IMD) primarily aims to:

(a) Replace satellite-based weather forecasting completely

(b) Improve military weather surveillance

(c) Provide localized and actionable monsoon forecasts for farmers

(d) Monitor ocean salinity changes in coastal areas

Ans: c)

UPSC Mains Exam Practice Question

Ques: Discuss the significance of block-level monsoon forecasting for India's agricultural resilience and rural economy.**(250 Words)**

In March 2026, the **Central Electricity Authority (CEA)** released the **National Generation Adequacy Plan (NGAP) 2026–2036**. It serves as India's blueprint for a reliable power mix, aiming for over **1,100 GW** of total capacity by 2036. While the plan is hailed for its 70% non-fossil target, it includes a controversial addition of **87.2 GW of new coal capacity**. Experts are now calling for a "clear counterfactual"—a transparent stress-test to see if this coal gap can be bridged entirely by Renewable Energy (RE) and Storage.

Why India's generation adequacy plan needs a clear counterfactual

As India imports 25-30% of its coal, fuel price risk over a 20-25 year asset life cannot be ignored. In contrast, renewable energy generation reduces exposure to recurring fuel supply risks and shifts the cost structure toward upfront investment and system integration

NEWS ANALYSIS

Alexander Hogeveen Rutter
Martand Shardul

Reliable renewables: If renewable energy is deployed as an alternative to coal, the system must reliably meet demand across all time blocks. FILE PHOTO

In March 2026, the Central Electricity Authority released the National Generation Adequacy Plan (NGAP) for 2026-27 to 2035-36. It is one of the most comprehensive power planning exercises, combining least-cost optimization, dispatch modelling and probabilistic reliability analysis to develop a generation mix for 2035-36. It projects a total capacity of over 1,100 GW, with about 70% non-fossil capacity and around 174 GW/888 GWh of storage.

An important output is the addition of 87.2 GW of coal capacity between 2025-26 and 2035-36. Given the scale and its long-term implications, an important question arises: can this planned coal capacity be replaced with additional renewable energy (RE) and storage while maintaining the same adequacy and reliability standards?

The authors undertook a deterministic stress-test modelling exercise to evaluate whether the incremental energy and adequacy contribution expected from the planned 87.2 GW coal addition could be approximated through additional renewable energy and storage under simplified stress conditions.

Indicative modelling suggests that an additional 191 GW of solar, 51 GW of wind, 29 GW of battery energy storage systems, and 9 GW of pumped storage may be required to approximate this contribution under the deterministic assumptions used. This would increase overall RE installations to about 1,006 GW, compared with around 764 GW in the NGAP pathway.

However, unlike NGAP, the exercise does not evaluate full-system interactions across the entire generation fleet and should therefore be interpreted as a targeted stress-test exercise rather than a full-system optimization outcome.

Indicative early results suggest that such an RE pathway could reduce system costs by over ₹1.4 lakh crore per year, even under conservative assumptions on overbuild and storage requirements needed to manage stress periods such as weak wind conditions. These estimates remain sensitive to assumptions regarding fuel prices, storage costs, financing conditions and system integration requirements. If coal fuel price escalation is considered, the divergence becomes larger over the asset lifecycle.

> RE generation reduces exposure to recurring fuel supply risks and shifts the cost structure toward upfront investment and system integration

Further, as India imports 25-30% of its coal, fuel price risk over a 20-25 year asset life cannot be ignored. In contrast, RE generation reduces exposure to recurring fuel supply risks and shifts the cost structure toward upfront investment and system integration.

An important aspect of NGAP is its emphasis on adequacy and reliability. Therefore, if RE is deployed as an alternative to coal, the system must reliably meet demand across all time blocks. Therefore, three system constraints become pivotal.

First, storage continuity is essential. Storage must remain available across consecutive demand cycles. If renewable output is weak for several days, storage levels can fall. Once depleted, the system becomes exposed and can lead to demand supply gaps.

Second, charging sufficiency must be ensured. Storage can only discharge what has been charged. With round-trip efficiencies of 80-88%, renewable generation must exceed demand in order to both serve load and recharge. This creates a requirement for surplus capacity and/or overbuild, along with periodic curtailment. Testing system behaviour across consecutive days shows that adequacy depends not only on installed capacity (MW), but also on available stored energy (MWh).

Third, even when annual energy is sufficient, shortfalls can emerge in specific time windows, for example, during the transition from solar to non-solar hours or extended low-wind periods resulting in block level deficits.

NGAP already captures many of these dynamics through sophisticated probabilistic modelling and chronological dispatch analysis. However, the published results do not make it easy to evaluate how the system behaves under explicit coal-replacement stress scenarios, particularly across consecutive periods of low renewable output or storage depletion.

Stress tests

Deterministic stress tests can complement the NGAP framework by making these system behaviours more transparent and interpretable. This would not replace NGAP's methodology, but could improve transparency around key planning choices. It would also help establish whether the identified coal capacity reflects binding system constraints such as storage duration, transmission readiness or deployment timelines, or whether outcomes are sensitive to assumptions that could evolve over time.

Given that thermal plants typically require 6-8 years to be commissioned, while storage systems can often be deployed faster, evaluating alternatives transparently becomes increasingly important. Episodes of El Nino and La Nina impact power demand and hence reserve capacityplanning to mitigate deficits, where thermal, storage and hydro can play a profound role, must account forsuch climate impacts.

For too long, India's RE targets have been framed as part of an energy transition story. Instead, RE, storage and thermal targets should be set based on what minimizes costs to consumers while still maintaining adequacy and system reliability under uncertainty.

NGAP's rigorous methodology has already provided a strong foundation. The next step is to test alternative pathways under stress conditions to identify the route which can best maximize affordability, reliability and energy security.

(Alexander Hogeveen Rutter is an independent energy expert with experience in resource adequacy planning, and an Emergent Ventures grantee focused on energy policy. Martand Shardul is former Policy Director (India) at GWEC and a former Fellow at TERI. All views are personal)

The Core Conflict: Coal vs. Reliable Renewables

The NGAP argues that coal is necessary for "adequacy"—the ability of the grid to meet demand at all times, especially when the sun isn't shining or wind isn't blowing. However, independent modelling suggests an alternative:

- **The RE Alternative:** To replace the planned 87.2 GW of coal, India would need an additional **191 GW of solar, 51 GW of wind, and 38 GW of total storage (Battery + Pumped Hydro)**.
- **Capacity Gap:** This would push India's total RE target to **1,006 GW** by 2036, significantly higher than the current NGAP pathway of 764 GW.
- **The Economic Case:** Shifting to this RE-heavy pathway could save India over **₹1.4 lakh crore annually**.

Why India Needs a "Counterfactual" (Stress-Test)

A "counterfactual" is a simulated alternative scenario used to challenge existing assumptions. Experts argue that while NGAP is rigorous, it doesn't clearly show why coal is "binding." A deterministic stress-test would highlight three pivotal system constraints:

A. Storage Continuity (The "Depletion" Risk)

Storage (Batteries/Pumped Hydro) is not a primary source; it is a buffer. If renewable output (wind/solar) remains weak for several consecutive days, storage levels deplete. Without a backup (like coal or long-duration storage), the system faces a supply gap.

B. Charging Sufficiency (The "Overbuild" Requirement)

To charge storage while simultaneously meeting live demand, RE generation must be significantly higher than the actual load. This requires **"Overbuild"**—installing more capacity than needed on a normal day to ensure there is enough surplus to refill batteries for "stress days."

C. Transition Windows (The "Dusk" Challenge)

Shortfalls often emerge during specific "ramping" periods, such as when solar power drops off in the evening before wind or storage fully takes over. Ensuring reliability during these block-level transitions is the hardest part of a non-fossil grid.

Strategic Implications for India

- **Fuel Price Risk:** India imports **25–30% of its coal**. Unlike RE, which has high upfront costs but zero fuel costs, coal assets face 25 years of volatile international price risks and supply chain disruptions.
- **Deployment Timelines:** Thermal plants take **6–8 years** to build, whereas solar and battery storage can be deployed in **1–2 years**. This speed makes RE a more "agile" response to India's rapidly growing power demand.
- **Climate Impacts (El Niño/La Niña):** Climate cycles significantly impact hydro-power availability and peak cooling demand. A "reliable" plan must account for these extreme weather uncertainties.

Way Forward: From "Transition" to "Optimization"

For years, India's RE targets were seen as a moral or environmental choice (Energy Transition). The authors argue they should now be treated as a **Techno-Economic Choice**.

1. **Transparency in Planning:** The CEA should publish "Coal-Replacement" scenarios to prove whether coal is truly a technical necessity or if it can be replaced by cheaper storage as technology costs fall.
2. **Focus on MWh, not just MW:** Planning must move from just "Installed Capacity" (MW) to "Available Energy" (MWh) to ensure storage can last through extended low-wind/cloudy periods.
3. **Incentivizing Overbuild:** Policy frameworks need to reward developers for building "surplus" capacity that ensures grid stability during stress periods.

Conclusion

The National Generation Adequacy Plan 2026 is a landmark in scientific power planning. However, to ensure India's energy security is both **affordable and sovereign**, the plan must move beyond the "safety net" of coal. By transparently testing alternative RE-plus-storage pathways, India can identify the route that minimizes costs for consumers while maximizing reliability in an increasingly uncertain climate.

Why did NTA's 'Zero Error' policy fail?

Why has NEET landed in controversy again? How has NEET faced repeated paper leak allegations? Why are paper leak concerns persisting despite NTA's safeguards? What reforms were proposed after the 2024 row? Can NEET shift to a computer-based format?

EXPLAINER

Maitri Porecha
Srinidhi Madurai K.

The story so far:

Nine days after nearly 22 lakh medical aspirants wrote the National Eligibility cum Entrance Test (NEET), which paves the way for admission to medical colleges, they were in for a rude shock. On May 12, the National Testing Agency (NTA) stated that the exam had been 'compromised,' and that there would be a re-test.

The decision has created a furore among students across the country, with the Federation of All India Medical Association (FAIMA) moving the Supreme Court with a plea to either replace NTA or conduct major restructuring reforms.

What controversies has NEET faced over the years?

The decision to conduct re-examination for nearly 22 lakh students is unprecedented in NEET's history, but concerns over paper leaks are not new. In 2024, the declaration of the NEET-UG results coincided with the announcement of national election results. For the first time, 67 out of the top 100 scorers received full marks. In comparison, only two students achieved full marks in 2023, while none did so in 2022. A high concentration of students achieving full marks led to massive rank inflation, with multiple aspirants who had scored high marks competing for a single seat in reputed medical colleges.

In 2024, 13 lakh students qualified and were competing for approximately 1.1 lakh MBBS seats across government and private medical colleges. Allegations of a paper leak later surfaced, with investigations revealing that 155 students had allegedly benefited from leaked question papers. Students had then demanded a re-examination, but their request fell on deaf ears.

Nearly 22 lakh medical aspirants wrote the National Eligibility cum Entrance Test. K.V.S. GIRI

Why has NTA's 'Zero Error' promise fallen short?

With repeated cases of paper leaks surfacing year after year, the NTA appears not to have learnt from its chequered past. The overhaul of NTA merely remained lip service. After the 2024 debacle, IAS officer Subodh Kumar Singh, then Director General of the NTA, was removed from the post and transferred to the Ministry of Steel as Additional Secretary. He is currently serving as Principal Secretary to the Chief Minister of Chhattisgarh.

Following his transfer, the NTA remained without a full-time chief for over a year, with retired 1985-batch IAS officer Pradeep Singh Kharola holding 'additional interim charge'. In March this year, former IndiaAI Mission CEO Abhishek Singh took charge of NTA and declared that there would be a 'Zero Error, Zero Tolerance' policy.

After the NEET-UG 2026 examination was conducted on May 3, the NTA underscored on social media the "smooth manner" in which the exam had been held across 5,432 centres, with 22.79 lakh candidates appearing. It stated that more than two lakh personnel were involved in conducting the examination.

The agency also claimed that there was end-to-end secure handling of confidential materials under sealed protocols, GPS-enabled vehicles with police escorts for the movement of examination material, CCTV surveillance at all examination centres (up to 1,50,000), with feeds linked to centralised control rooms, mandatory frisking through high-sensitivity metal detectors before entry, with strengthened manpower and equipment at every centre, Aadhaar-based biometric authentication to prevent impersonation and real-time monitoring through centralised control systems.

Mr. Abhishek Singh told *The Hindu* that the NTA had blocked 120 Telegram channels for circulating fake question papers and rumours, aimed at defrauding candidates.

Despite these measures, investigations by the Rajasthan Police revealed that a "guess paper" containing 120 out of 410 questions from the final examination had allegedly been circulating for nearly a month before the exam, a massive oversight by the NTA.

What did the Radhakrishnan panel recommend?

Following the NEET-UG 2024 controversy, the Ministry of Education formed a high-level committee headed by former ISRO chairman K. Radhakrishnan. However, the committee's recommendations were not followed in letter and spirit by either the NTA or the Ministry.

The report, submitted in October 2024, highlighted the pen-and-paper testing (PPT) model as 'a major security risk.' It recommended a transition to Computer-Based Testing (CBT) format, similar to the Joint Entrance Examination (JEE) Main, which is also conducted by NTA.

The committee also recommended Computer-assisted Secure PPT, where encrypted papers are delivered digitally to exam centres and printed locally just before the test. NTA has made no claim of implementing it. Instead, it relied on GPS vehicles and police escorts.

Mr. Abhishek Singh said that the NTA has the capacity to conduct CBT tests for only about 1.5 lakh students in a day. He added that shifting NEET to CBT mode is a 'high-level ministry call' involving both the Ministries of Health and Education.

In 2024, the NTA floated a tender to increase its capacity of computer labs, but the process could not be finalised. In 2026, the NTA has around 552 CBT centres, which are primarily used for JEE and CUET examinations. Since the Radhakrishnan Committee report came out in 2024, the NTA has not been able to augment its infrastructure to add more centres.

Multiple proposals to administer NEET-UG exams online were sent to the Ministry of Education, but in vain, officials at the NTA told *The Hindu*. "Talks for administering the NEET-UG in CBT mode have been ongoing for at least five years now. The recent paper leak fiasco should serve as an eye-opener to change the format of the exams," an official said.

THE GIST

- The NTA announced a re-test for nearly 22 lakh NEET aspirants after the exam was found to be "compromised", triggering outrage and fresh concerns over paper leaks.
- Despite "Zero Error, Zero Tolerance" claims and multiple security measures, a "guess paper" containing 120 of 410 questions allegedly circulated before the exam, renewing calls for reforms and a shift to computer-based testing.

GS PaperII:Governance

UPSC Mains Exam Practice Question:"The credibility of public institutions depends not only on technology adoption but also on systemic integrity." Discuss in the context of the recent NEET controversies.**(250 Words)**

Context :

The National Testing Agency (NTA), established to conduct high-stakes entrance exams with clinical precision, is currently facing its most severe credibility crisis. Despite the "Zero Error" promise, the 2026 NEET-UG cycle has been marred by a massive re-test order following evidence of a paper leak.

1. Why NTA's 'Zero Error' Policy Failed

The "Zero Error" policy was intended to be a robust framework involving Aadhaar-biometrics, GPS-tracked transportation, and CCTV surveillance. However, it failed due to **vulnerabilities in the physical supply chain**:

- **The "Guess Paper" Oversight:** Investigations by Rajasthan Police found that a paper containing 120 actual exam questions was circulating a month prior. This suggests a leak at the **printing or storage stage**, long before the "secure" GPS transportation protocols began.
- **Infrastructure Gaps:** While NTA focused on preventing impersonation at centers (Aadhaar/Frisking), it failed to secure the digital ecosystem, as evidenced by the 120 Telegram channels used to defraud candidates and spread leaked content.

2. Why NEET is Mired in Controversy (2024–2026)

The controversy stems from a pattern of **unprecedented results and leak allegations**:

- **Rank Inflation (2024):** In 2024, 67 students scored full marks (720/720), leading to massive rank inflation. This made it nearly impossible for high scorers to secure seats in premier institutes like AIIMS.
- **The 2026 "Compromise":** Following the May 3 exam, NTA admitted the process was "compromised," forcing a re-test for 22 lakh students. This has led to a "furore" and legal challenges by bodies like FAIMA, calling for a total NTA restructuring.

3. The Pen-and-Paper Model: A "Major Security Risk"

The persistence of paper leaks is largely attributed to the **Pen-and-Paper Testing (PPT)** format.

- **Logistical Complexity:** Moving physical papers for 22 lakh students across 5,432 centers creates thousands of "leak points" (printing presses, bank vaults, transport vans, and center invigilators).
- **Static Content:** Once a physical paper is printed, it cannot be easily changed or encrypted.

4. Proposed Reforms: The Radhakrishnan Committee (2024)

Following the 2024 row, a panel led by former ISRO chief K. Radhakrishnan proposed a major overhaul:

- **Shift to CBT:** Transitioning to **Computer-Based Testing (CBT)** to eliminate physical paper handling.
- **Hybrid Model:Computer-assisted Secure PPT**, where encrypted papers are sent digitally and printed locally at the center just minutes before the exam starts.
- **Multi-Stage Exams:** Recommendations have also floated the idea of breaking NEET into two stages (Prelims and Mains) to reduce the burden on a single day's logistics.

5. Can NEET Shift to a Computer-Based Format?

While the JEE (Engineering) successfully uses CBT, shifting NEET remains a massive challenge:

- **The Capacity Crunch:** NTA currently has the infrastructure to test only **1.5 lakh students per day** in CBT mode. Accommodating 22 lakh students would require the exam to be spread over 15+ days.
- **Normalization Issues:** Testing over multiple days requires "normalization" of scores (adjusting for varying difficulty levels), which is often unpopular with medical aspirants who prefer a single-day, single-paper merit list.
- **Administrative Delays:** Despite floating tenders in 2024 to increase computer lab capacity, the NTA has failed to significantly augment its infrastructure by 2026.

Conclusion

The 2026 NEET fiasco highlights that technological "eye-wash" (like GPS and CCTV) cannot fix a fundamentally flawed physical distribution system. The Radhakrishnan Committee's report served as a warning that went unheeded. For NEET to regain its sanctity, the Ministry of Education must decide between the logistical nightmare of a multi-day CBT or the security risks of an outdated pen-and-paper model.