

**The Hindu Important News Articles For UPSC CSE**

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The Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) of India, in coordination with the African Union (AU), announced the postponement of the Fourth India-Africa Forum Summit (IAFS-IV), which was scheduled to be held in New Delhi from May 28 to 31. This decision follows the World Health Organization (WHO) declaring the recent Ebola virus outbreak in parts of Central and East Africa (predominantly the Democratic Republic of Congo, Uganda, and South Sudan) as a Public Health Emergency of International Concern (PHEIC). While the postponement ensures biosecurity and emphasizes international caution, it draws attention to the structural challenges of scheduling multilateral diplomacy in an era of recurring global health emergencies.

## Ebola crisis: India-Africa summit postponed

Decision taken after consultations regarding 'the emerging public health situation on the continent'

New dates for summit, its associated meetings will be communicated in due course, says MEA

Last such summit was held in 2015; it had also been delayed by one year due to Ebola outbreak

**Kallol Bhattacharjee**  
NEW DELHI

The Ebola public health emergency in Africa cast its shadow on India's diplomatic calendar on Thursday, with the Ministry of External Affairs and the African Union announcing the postponement of the India-Africa Forum Summit-IV that was scheduled to take place here on May 28 to 31.

In a joint statement, the MEA and the AU hinted at the Ebola crisis, saying that the decision was taken in view of the "evolving health situation in parts of Africa". The last such summit was held over a decade ago, and had also been postponed by a year due to an Ebola outbreak.

Consultations were held between the Indian go-

vernment and the Chairperson of the African Union and the African Union Commission regarding the "emerging public health situation on the continent", the MEA and the AU said in their statement.

"Following these consultations, the two sides agreed that it would be advisable to convene the Fourth India-Africa Forum Summit at a later date," they added.

There were several other Africa-related events to be hosted by the Indian Council of World Affairs and the Indian Council for Cultural Relations that have been cancelled, though some African delegates have arrived in New Delhi.

New dates for the Summit and its associated meetings "will be finalised through mutual consulta-



**Health concern:** India has pledged to help governments of African nations to deal with the Ebola crisis. AP

tions and communicated in due course," the MEA said. The cancellation of the summit is being viewed as a setback to India-Africa ties, though officials insisted that the decision was taken in the best interest of all stakeholders.

India expressed "solidarity with the peoples and Governments of Africa" and pledged to help them in dealing with the crisis with an "Africa-led" approach.

Earlier, the African Union had called for "collec-

### Big cat meet in capital also put on hold

NEW DELHI

In the wake of concerns over the Ebola virus, India has postponed the International Big Cat Alliance (IBCA) Summit that was scheduled in New Delhi on June 1. The First IBCA Summit was scheduled in conjunction with the Fourth India-Africa Forum Summit as several African countries host big cats.

tive international solidarity and cooperation" to deal with the outbreak of Ebola virus that affected multiple countries including Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Uganda.

Responding to queries from *The Hindu* earlier this

week, a spokesperson for Mahmoud Ali Youssouf, the Chairperson of the African Union Commission, had said the fourth India-Africa Forum Summit would provide an opportunity to work on "future pandemics" and response mechanism.

### 'Collective cooperation'

"While the Ebola outbreak is affecting a number of African countries, it is important to underscore that pandemics and public health emergencies respect no borders and require collective international solidarity and cooperation," the spokesperson, Nuur Mohamad Sheekh, said in an email response to *The Hindu* on Monday. That came a day after the World Health Organization declared that the Ebola outbreak in the

DRC and Uganda was "a Public Health Emergency of International Concern (PHEIC)".

Mr. Youssouf had earlier expressed deep concern about the Ebola virus disease, vowing that Africa would "overcome" this latest public health challenge through "unity, coordination and collective action."

The fourth India-Africa Forum Summit was planned to be held between May 28 and 31, after a gap of nearly 11 years. Indian officials have blamed the COVID-19 pandemic for the long gap since the last such summit was held in 2015.

Former Indian Ambassador to Ethiopia, Gurjit Singh, expressed confidence that the summit would be held once the latest health emergency stabilises in Africa.

### Key Highlights of the Development

- **A Prolonged Interregnum:** The last IAFS was held over a decade ago in **2015 (IAFS-III, New Delhi)**. The 11-year gap is attributed to the disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and previous regional health challenges. Ironically, the 2015 summit had also been delayed by a year due to the West African Ebola epidemic (2014–2016).
- **Collaborative Postponement:** The decision was reached through consensus between India and the leadership of the African Union Commission, reflecting shared diplomatic prudence.
- **Concomitant Health Measures:** Mirroring the postponement, India's Ministry of Health has stepped up surveillance at points of entry, issuing travel advisories and mandates for thermal screening of inbound passengers arriving from high-risk African nations.

### Analytical Dimensions for UPSC

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## A. Implications for India-Africa Strategic Ties

- **Momentum Deficit:** Africa has become a cornerstone of India's global south leadership strategy. The delay temporarily breaks the diplomatic momentum necessary to compete with other massive players on the continent (such as China via the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation - FOCAC).
- **Opportunities for Institutional Continuity:** Despite the physical deferral, the pause allows both blocs to refine agendas on post-pandemic recovery, digital public infrastructure (DPI) transfer, and defense cooperation.

## B. The Pivot to Health Diplomacy and "Africa-Led" Responses

- **Shift from Patronage to Partnership:** India's response explicitly underscores solidarity through an "Africa-led" response by offering aid to the **Africa CDC** (Centres for Disease Control and Prevention). This distances India's approach from western-style prescriptive health interventions, aligning with the "Kampala Principles" of national ownership.
- **Vulnerability of Multilateralism:** The situation demonstrates how non-traditional security threats (like pandemics and zoonotic spillbacks) dictate the timelines of traditional hard-power geopolitics.

## C. Institutional Mechanisms: The Role of IAFS

The IAFS operates on a multi-tiered structural system aimed at three levels:

1. **Pan-African Level:** Engaging directly with the African Union.
2. **Regional Level:** Partnering with Regional Economic Communities (RECs).
3. **Bilateral Level:** Direct state-to-state developmental partnership.

## Way Forward

- **Institutionalizing Virtual Diplomacy:** Until physical summits resume, intermediate ministerial interactions should leverage digital platforms to execute ongoing projects under Lines of Credit (LoCs).
- **Strengthening "Vaccine Maitri 2.0" and Genomic Surveillance:** India must proactively use its biopharmaceutical prowess to assist Africa in diagnostics and therapeutics for Ebola, securing its status as the 'Pharmacy of the World'.
- **Deepening Tripartite Cooperation:** Partnering with like-minded bodies (such as the EU or Japan through the Asia-Africa Growth Corridor) to fund health infrastructure inside Africa can mitigate the logistical risks of future outbreaks.

## Conclusion

The deferral of the Fourth India-Africa Forum Summit due to the resurgence of Ebola highlights that modern foreign policy cannot be decoupled from transnational public health realities. While the cancellation is a short-term diplomatic setback to an

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eagerly anticipated re-engagement, India's proactive alignment with the African Union's own health architecture showcases a mature, resilient partnership. True to the spirit of Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam and South-South Cooperation, the postponement should be viewed not as a pause in ties, but as an active window for India to deploy its humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR) capabilities, thereby reinforcing its credibility as a reliable, structural ally to the African continent.

### UPSC Prelims Exam Practice Question

**Ques:** With reference to the India-Africa Forum Summit (IAFS), consider the following statements:

1. The first India-Africa Forum Summit was held after the establishment of the African Union.
2. The IAFS operates only at the bilateral level between India and African countries.
3. The Fourth India-Africa Forum Summit (IAFS-IV) was postponed due to the Ebola outbreak declared as a Public Health Emergency of International Concern (PHEIC).

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

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

**Ans: a)**

### UPSC Mains Exam Practice Question

**Ques:** Examine the significance of the India-Africa Forum Summit (IAFS) in advancing India's engagement with Africa. How can India sustain diplomatic momentum despite disruptions caused by global health crises?(150 Words)

**Page 07:GS II : Social Justice / Prelims Exam**

A persistent and intensifying multi-dimensional challenge highlights the intersection of the **Urban Heat Island (UHI) effect**, inadequate public housing, and compromised maternal health among marginalized communities in Chennai's resettlement colonies (e.g., Perumbakkam, Ezhil Nagar). As rising global temperatures compress the physiological coping mechanisms of vulnerable groups, the lack of climate-resilient urban design acts as a risk multiplier.

This scenario reflects a critical governance gap where low-cost public housing, designed primarily for density and economic efficiency, inadvertently exacerbates environmental injustices and worsens public health disparities.

## For pregnant women in Chennai's tenements, summer offers no escape

Living in densely packed houses with little to no green cover, these women spend most days managing fatigue and the heat; studies have found that pregnant women exposed to high temperatures face significantly higher risks of miscarriage, preterm birth, low birthweight and intrauterine growth restriction

**Geetha Srimathi**

**T**he queue outside the Primary Health Centre (PHC) in Perumbakkam, a neighbourhood on the southern outskirts of Chennai, begins forming early, before the sun climbs fully overhead and the concrete starts radiating heat. By 10.30 a.m., pregnant women occupy most of the verandah – clutching medical files and water bottles that are already warm.

Celling fans push thick air around the room but offer little relief. Outside the PHC, row after row of grey tenements built by the Tamil Nadu Urban Habitat Development Board stand packed tightly together, their numbered blocks stretching into the distance, a maze of concrete. There are few trees, barely any open ground, and little room for air to move. Twenty-four-year-old Priya has been here since morning. Five months pregnant with her second child, she sits uncomfortably in her seat while keeping one eye on her four-year-old son. She says the worst part of summer is not the daytime heat but the nights. "From midnight till almost 4 a.m., I don't sleep properly," she says. "Too stuffy inside our house."

In the single-room apartment she shares with her family, the heat settles into the walls and lingers long after sunset. Sweat leaves rashes and pale patches across her hands and face. Doctors at the PHC tell her she is anaemic and underweight, and repeatedly advise her to drink more water, eat iron-rich foods and rest. But rest is difficult to come by. Sleep comes in fragments between heat, work and household responsibilities.

Across Chennai's resettlement colonies such as Perumbakkam and Ezhil Nagar, families relocated from rural settlements into public housing now live in dense clusters of low-cost apartment blocks built by the State government.

**Trapped heat**

In many buildings, narrow staircases trap heat through the day, corridors remain dim even at noon, and windows open into walls of neighbouring blocks rather than open spaces. In some apartments, a weak cross breeze reaches the upper floors, but in many others the air feels stagnant. The absence of green cover is striking. Concrete dominates the landscape – concrete roads, terraces and courtyards absorbing and radiating heat through the day and into the night.

Thirty-one-year-old Anandhi, pregnant with her fourth child, has recently stopped working at a canteen in an IT company because of exhaustion and health complications. Diabetic and dependent on insulin injections during pregnancy, she spends most days trying to manage fatigue, childcare and the heat.

"The doctor tells me to drink enough water and eat foods with more water content," she says. But hydration is a challenge: most residents in the TNUHDB tenements rely on purchased drinking



**THE GIST**

▼ A 2024 study published in the journal *BJOG* by researchers from Sri Ramachandra Institute of Higher Education and Research, Chennai followed 800 pregnant women in Tamil Nadu between 2017 and 2022 and found that nearly half were exposed to unsafe heat levels

▼ The T.N. State Planning Commission, in its Heat Mitigation Strategy report, identifies pregnant women among the groups most vulnerable to extreme temperatures. The report notes that nearly 74% of the State's population is exposed to prolonged heat exposure can worsen cardiovascular and respiratory illnesses while posing serious risks to pregnant women, children and the elderly

▼ A 2025 advisory by the National Disaster Management Authority recommends identifying and mapping heat-vulnerable settlements and populations; improving access to shaded spaces, cooling centres, drinking water and emergency shelters; promoting affordable cooling solutions; increasing green cover through trees, urban forests and water-sensitive planning; strengthening heat action plans; and integrating heat resilience into housing schemes and urban planning

**Beating the heat:** A policy document from the Tamil Nadu Urban Habitat Development Board calls for climate-resilient and people-centric housing with better ventilation, social amenities, mixed-use planning and improved green cover. **B. VEJANANDAN RAJ**

water cans, and many say they struggle to afford additional cans during the summer months, even as rising temperatures increase household water consumption and strain already tight budgets.

Jainthre Gajraj, head of the department and senior consultant in obstetrics and gynaecology at Varam Women's Superspecialty Centre, MGM Healthcare Chennai, says pregnancy naturally increases the body's metabolic rate, which in turn raises sweating and the risk of dehydration during hot weather. "When we talk about dehydration, we often think only about water loss, but the body also loses electrolytes," she says, adding that fluids such as buttermilk, citrus fruits and traditional drinks with salt content can help replenish them.

The body usually regulates its core temperature despite external heat or cold, says Dr. Gajraj, but prolonged exposure to extreme temperatures can overwhelm this mechanism. "When the body is unable to maintain its normal core temperature, that is when problems arise," she says.

A 2024 study published in the journal *BJOG* by researchers from Sri Ramachandra Institute of Higher Education and Research, Chennai found that pregnant women exposed to high temperatures faced significantly higher risks of miscarriage, preterm birth, low birthweight and intrauterine growth restriction. The study followed 800 pregnant women in Tamil Nadu between 2017 and 2022 and found that nearly half were exposed to unsafe heat levels.

Vidhya Venugopal, who led the study, says the risks are particularly severe for women living in informal settlements and overcrowded housing. For women already vulnerable because of anaemia, undernutrition, poor housing and demanding work, extreme heat compounds existing risks. "These women cannot stop working when temperatures peak because losing even a day's wages is not an option," Prof. Venugopal says. "After spending hours in dangerous heat, they return to homes that trap warmth and allow no recovery. Their bodies never get the chance to recuperate."

For women without permanent housing, the realities are harsher still. Along the crowded stretch of Rattan Bazaar in north Chennai, 27-year-old Abirami sits beneath a tree with her three children beside her, arranging flowers for sale. The patch of shade beneath the branches is temporary, as the sun shifts, so does the family. She is waiting for allotment of a TNUHDB house. Until then, pavements and patches of shade are all she has.

**Centre's guidelines**

The Union Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs has directed States and Union Territories to ensure regular supply of drinking water, oral rehydration solutions and cooling facilities such as fans and ventilation systems in shelters under the Decadal Amrit Mahila National Urban Livelihoods Mission. However, there is limited awareness about these shelters and many people living on the streets remain reluctant to move into them because of concerns around safety, poor accessibility, and the fear of being separated from family members.

Tamil Nadu's own policy documents recognise heat as a public health threat. The State Planning Commission, in its Heat Mitigation Strategy report, identifies pregnant women among the groups most vulnerable to extreme temperatures. The report notes that nearly 74% of the State's population is exposed to temperatures exceeding 35 degrees Celsius and warns that prolonged heat exposure can worsen cardiovascular and respiratory illnesses

while posing serious risks to pregnant women, children and the elderly.

Urban planners and housing activists argue that the design of many resettlement colonies worsens heat stress. A policy document by the TNUHDB itself acknowledges that public housing in the State has historically prioritised cost and efficiency over residents' lived experiences. The document calls for climate-resilient and people-centric housing with better ventilation, social amenities, mixed-use planning and improved green cover.

Yet implementing such ideas remains difficult. Vinuesa Peter, founder of ICDUC, says public housing in Tamil Nadu has evolved after years of advocacy. But current housing projects continue to struggle with density and climate resilience.

Financial limitations shape many of these decisions. While the Union government contributes part of the funding for housing schemes, States must bear a substantial portion of the cost, which forces a compromise between affordability and livability, she adds.

A 2025 advisory by the National Disaster Management Authority recommends identifying and mapping heat-vulnerable settlements and populations; improving access to shaded spaces, cooling centres, drinking water and emergency shelters; promoting affordable cooling solutions such as cool roofs, ventilation, insulation and reflective materials; increasing green cover through trees, urban forests and water-sensitive planning; strengthening heat action plans and early warning systems; and integrating heat resilience into housing schemes and urban planning.

*(This story is part of the Asian College of Journalism's Climate Change Media Hub Mentorship Programme.)*  
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**Core Issues & Analytical Dimensions**

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**A. The Urban Heat Island (UHI) Effect and Structural Realities**

The resettlement tenements built by the Tamil Nadu Urban Habitat Development Board (TNUHDB) reflect a typical urban planning failure that traps heat through specific architectural and spatial vulnerabilities:

- **Materiality and Thermal Mass:** Dense concrete structures with uninsulated terraces and dark, narrow corridors absorb solar radiation throughout the day and radiate it back as heat during the night. This prevents structural cooling and disrupts sleep patterns.
- **Ecological Deficit:** The complete absence of urban green cover, trees, and unpaved, water-permeable grounds eliminates natural cooling via evapotranspiration.
- **Inadequate Micro-Ventilation:** Structural layout designs featuring windows opening directly into adjacent block walls severely limit cross-ventilation, leading to stagnant, humid indoor conditions.

**B. The Medical-Maternal Conundrum: Physiological Strain**

Extreme heat is no longer just an environmental discomfort; it is a critical physiological threat. A 2024 study by the Sri Ramachandra Institute reveals that nearly half of the pregnant women surveyed in Tamil Nadu face unsafe heat exposure.

- **Gestational Vulnerabilities:** Pregnancy naturally accelerates the body's metabolic rate and demand for core temperature regulation. Prolonged exposure to high heat overwhelms this baseline homeostasis.
- **Compounding Co-morbidities:** Social determinants such as maternal anemia, gestational diabetes, undernutrition, and the financial inability to purchase clean drinking water cans for basic hydration trap women in dangerous physiological stress loops.

• **Severe Obstetric Risks:**

Clinical Outcome	Structural/Physiological Driver
Preterm Birth / Miscarriage	Dehydration, loss of vital electrolytes, and systemic inflammatory responses triggered by heat stress.
Intrauterine Growth Restriction (IUGR)	Reduced placental blood flow as the maternal body diverts blood to the skin surface to dissipate heat.
Low Birthweight	Chronic maternal fatigue, lack of restorative sleep, and sustained high core body

# Daily News Analysis

Clinical Outcome	Structural/Physiological Driver
	temperatures.

### C. Socio-Economic and Policy Vulnerabilities

- **The Poverty Trap and Economic Compulsion:** Low-income daily-wage workers cannot afford to take breaks or forfeit a day's wages during peak heat hours.
- **The Inhabitant Disconnect in Policy:** While central policies like the Deendayal Antyodaya Yojana-National Urban Livelihoods Mission (DAY-NULM) mandate shelters with cooling systems and ORS facilities, deep-seated anxieties over safety, poor accessibility, and family separation deter local communities from using them.
- **The Fiscal-Liveability Compromise:** Housing policies often suffer because state governments bear a massive financial burden to execute central housing schemes. This forces a compromise between cost-efficiency and actual human liveability.

### Policy Interventions and Frameworks

To move away from historical frameworks that prioritize high-density building volume over residents' lived comfort, public infrastructure must adopt comprehensive architectural changes.

The **National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA) Guidelines** and the TNUHDB Heat Mitigation Strategy point toward a much-needed multi-pronged response:

- **Passive Cooling and Structural Retrofitting:** Incorporating mandatory cool roofs (reflective paints), cavity walls, cross-ventilation shafts, and appropriate sunshades (chajjas) into state housing guidelines to limit structural heat retention.
- **Urban Forestry and Nature-Based Solutions:** Integrating water-sensitive urban design (WSUD) and dedicating distinct spaces for community parks, tree avenues, and vertical gardens within tenement layouts to lower the ambient microclimate temperature.
- **Differentiated Heat Action Plans (HAPs):** Transforming generic city-wide HAPs into hyper-local, gender-sensitive frameworks that prioritize regular water supply, subsidized cooling centers, and direct targeted nutritional/electrolyte support for pregnant women via the Anganwadi and Primary Health Centre (PHC) networks.

### Conclusion

The lived realities of pregnant women in Chennai's tenements reveal that climate change is an immediate, daily threat that hits vulnerable populations first and hardest. Addressing this crisis requires moving past traditional silos; public housing cannot be treated merely as an exercise in civil engineering, nor can maternal health be looked at purely through a clinical lens.

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True social empowerment and urban resilience demand that the state bridge the gap between policy intent and field execution. Integrating climate resilience directly into the core design of affordable housing is an urgent necessity to ensure that the constitutional promise of a right to life and health remains true for every citizen.

### UPSC Prelims Exam Practice Question

**Ques:** With reference to the Urban Heat Island (UHI) effect, consider the following statements:

1. Urban Heat Island effect refers to urban areas recording significantly higher temperatures than surrounding rural areas.
2. Dense concrete structures and lack of vegetation contribute to the UHI effect.
3. Evapotranspiration from green cover helps reduce urban temperatures.

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

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

**Ans: d)**

### UPSC Mains Exam Practice Question

**Ques:** Urban Heat Island (UHI) effect has emerged as a major environmental justice issue in Indian cities. Discuss with special reference to vulnerable urban populations. **(150 Words)**

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## Page 08: GS II : Governane / Prelims Exam

The ongoing **Census 2027**—long delayed due to the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent logistical bottlenecks—marks a historic departure from post-independence demographic exercises. In a significant policy turnaround, the Union Government has included full-scale **caste enumeration** in the second phase of the census, moving beyond the traditional practice of counting only Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs).

While the Supreme Court upheld this exercise on the grounds that data-driven governance is crucial for targeted welfare, the development highlights a deep-seated paradox in Indian polity: the tension between using caste as an instrument for social justice versus the constitutional ultimate goal of establishing a casteless society.

### The Historical and Ideological Context

The debate over counting caste reflects a radical shift in India's political and administrative history:

- **The Post-1931 Shift:** The last exhaustive, published caste census in India was conducted under British rule in **1931**.
- **The Post-Independence Consensus:** Early architects of independent India deliberately chose not to enumerate individual castes. The dominant nationalist thinking feared that official categorization would permanently institutionalize and solidify (*ossify*) fragmentations that the modern state aimed to dismantle.
- **The Modern Consensus:** Today, major political entities across the spectrum have shifted toward supporting enumeration, viewing empirical caste data as an essential prerequisite for defensive social engineering, addressing judicial demands for quantifiable data, and refining affirmative action.

### Analytical Dimensions for UPSC

#### A. The Founding Paradox of the Indian State

The Indian Constitution embodies a fundamental dualism:

1. **Universalist Goal:** It seeks to eliminate caste discrimination and eventually build an egalitarian, casteless society (Article 15, Article 17).
2. **Particularist Mechanism:** Simultaneously, it acknowledges existing deep structural inequalities, mandating caste-conscious policies (positive discrimination/reservations) under Articles 15(4) and 16(4) to lift historical backwardness.

**The Core Paradox:** The state requires the continuous recognition and administrative tracking of caste identities in order to efficiently implement policies meant to eradicate the socio-economic disparities caused by those very identities.

### Caste away

People must have the option to state they are casteless in the Census

**T**he Supreme Court was not wrong to dismiss a petition that sought to stall the caste census, which is part of the ongoing Census 2027. The Chief Justice of India remarked, in support of the caste count, that “any government of the day must know how many people are backward and how many need welfare”. In April 2025, the Narendra Modi government had made a turnaround to announce caste enumeration alongside the fresh census, the first such exercise since 1931. Mr. Modi had earlier derided the idea as a sign of “urban Naxal” thinking, and the RSS had warned that such surveys were attempts to fracture Hindu society. The Congress, too, had made a dramatic turnaround in its historical position to demand a caste census. Early governments of independent India decided not to enumerate caste with the census. The dominant thinking then was that counting caste communities would only reinforce the institution of caste that the state wanted to dismantle. On the one hand, state policies sought to create a casteless society, while on the other, they also accounted for caste identities for positive discrimination in legislative representation and employment. This dual approach to caste that was baked into the nation's founding principles has created a paradox that continues to this day. The clamour for a caste census is the latest manifestation of it.

The Census itself has been long overdue. The decennial population survey was originally due in 2021 but was delayed by the COVID-19 pandemic and logistical hurdles. The caste enumeration will take place in the second phase and will involve asking every individual their caste, rather than merely recording whether they belong to a Scheduled Caste or Scheduled Tribe, as in previous Censuses. The delay in the Census has a bearing on planning of all sorts. In India, a considerable portion of state policy is directly or indirectly linked to the caste profile of the target group. The one attempt at a post-Independence national caste count came in 2011. The open-ended caste identification process of the Socio-Economic and Caste Census produced over 46 lakh distinct caste names and 8 crore data errors, rendering the dataset unusable. Most of its findings remain unpublished. The Modi government is still grappling with the challenge of finding the appropriate methodology for an accurate enumeration of caste communities. A caste census detracts from the effort to eradicate caste as it ossifies identities, but is helpful if viewed alongside other socioeconomic indices to better target welfare measures and ensure representation. The annihilation of caste must remain a goal, and people must be allowed to classify themselves as casteless if they so wish.

## B. Governance Utility vs. Social Risk

### Arguments in Favor of Caste Census

#### 1. Evidence-Based Policymaking

- Provides reliable empirical data on caste-wise socio-economic conditions.
- Helps the government design targeted welfare schemes and improve resource allocation.

#### 2. Rationalizing the Reservation System

- Supplies “quantifiable data” required by the judiciary for reservation-related decisions.
- Assists in reviewing the adequacy and effectiveness of existing reservation policies.

#### 3. Identification of Backward Sub-Groups

- Helps identify extremely marginalized and underrepresented sub-castes within larger categories.
- Supports sub-categorization to ensure equitable distribution of benefits among backward communities.

### Concerns and Risks of Caste Census

#### 1. Identity Ossification

- May reinforce and permanently institutionalize caste identities in society.
- Could weaken efforts toward creating a caste-neutral social order.

#### 2. Administrative and Data Challenges

- Large-scale caste enumeration is highly complex due to thousands of caste and sub-caste variations.
- The 2011 SECC faced issues such as nearly 46 lakh unique caste entries, creating classification difficulties.

#### 3. Political Fragmentation and Identity Politics

- May intensify competitive caste-based politics and social polarization.
- Political parties could use caste data primarily for electoral mobilization rather than social justice objectives.

## C. The Methodology Challenge: Lessons from SECC 2011

The only post-independence attempt at a national socio-economic and caste count occurred via the **Socio-Economic and Caste Census (SECC) 2011**. It failed administratively because it allowed open-ended, non-codified self-identification. This resulted in over **46 lakh unique caste and sub-caste names, phonetic spellings, and clan titles**, yielding a massive error rate that rendered the dataset structurally unusable.

For Census 2027 to succeed, the state must deploy a highly sophisticated, standardized, and pre-classified taxonomic methodology without suppressing actual ground-level diversity.

### The Imperative of the "Casteless" Option

If the annihilation of caste remains the foundational objective of the Indian republic, the census framework must protect individual liberty by offering a "Casteless" or "No Caste" category.

- **Upholding Right to Identity:** Forcing citizens who do not subscribe to caste hierarchies to choose a caste label violates their freedom of conscience.
- **A Measure of Social Progression:** Just as the "No Religion Specified" option exists in the religion column, an explicit "Casteless" option serves as a critical sociological metric. It allows the state to track the organic growth of a post-caste citizen base over generations.

### Conclusion

The Supreme Court's observation that the government must know who needs welfare captures the immediate administrative justification for the caste census. In a deeply unequal society, blank canvas colorblindness cannot substitute for substantive justice.

However, a caste census must be treated strictly as a diagnostic tool to map deprivation alongside other socio-economic indices, rather than an exercise that rigidifies identity. To ensure the process aligns with the ideals of B.R. Ambedkar and the framers of the Constitution, the administrative framework of Census 2027 must provide an accessible pathway for individuals to legally declare themselves casteless. Social justice should aim to empower citizens out of their historical vulnerabilities, with the ultimate goal of making caste labels redundant in public life.

### UPSC Prelims Exam Practice Question

**Ques: With reference to caste enumeration in India, consider the following statements:**

1. The last exhaustive caste census before Census 2027 was conducted in 1931 under British rule.
2. Independent India has always conducted a full caste-wise census for all communities.
3. The Socio-Economic and Caste Census (SECC) 2011 faced major data standardization challenges.

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

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

**Ans: a)**

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## UPSC Mains Exam Practice Question

**Ques:** Discuss the significance of caste census data in ensuring evidence-based policymaking and targeted welfare delivery in India. (150 Words)

## Page : 09 : GS II : Indian Polity / Prelims Exam

The publication of the **World Press Freedom Index 2026** by Reporters Without Borders (RSF)—ranking India at a historic low of **157th out of 180 nations**—has reignited a critical debate regarding the validity of global governance rankings.

This analysis examines the dual nature of international indices: while they serve as blunt instruments capable of detecting broad systemic stress, their structural methodology frequently suffers from eurocentric cognitive bias, data standardization errors, and an inability to process complex socio-political diversity. The core challenge for modern governance lies in separating actual domestic institutional vulnerabilities from flawed external quantifications.

### Key Highlights of the Discourse

- **The Paradoxical Standings:** The index places India below several non-democratic states or countries experiencing active civil collapse (e.g., Oman, Qatar, Kuwait, and Burkina Faso), creating an analytical anomaly where electoral democracies rank lower than absolute monarchies or military regimes.
- **The Homogeneity vs. Diversity Fallacy:** Top-ranked countries like Norway possess high linguistic, cultural, and political homogeneity (95% speaking Norwegian; 60% belonging to the state church). This reduces internal political contestation—a luxury unavailable to large, deeply pluralistic societies like India.
- **The "Selective Dismissal" Trap:** The domestic political response to global rankings is often marked by convenience; states readily dismiss critical social/political indices while celebrating favorable economic rankings (e.g., Ease of Doing Business) or international honors.

### Analytical Dimensions for UPSC

#### A. Methodological Flaws in Global Rankings

The structural mechanics of indices like the World Press Freedom Index fail the test of objective quantification on three main counts:

NOTEBOOK

## On measuring freedom of the press in India

International rankings are neither absolute nor worthless. They can be useful for gauging patterns but are unreliable as precise judgements

Varghese K. George

A patient complaining of pain can be asked to quantify it on a scale of 10 – a practice common in the West but still rare in India. There are experts who “aim to deeply investigate happiness measurement through biomedical signals, using psychophysiological methods to objectify the happiness experience.” Objective, universal facts are supposed to be the basis of management and governance.

The Norwegian journalist who wanted to ask Prime Minister Narendra Modi a question prefaced it by saying that her country had the freest press in the world, citing the World Press Freedom Index prepared annually by Reporters Without Borders. Press freedom, and even democracy, can apparently be ranked. India is ranked 157 in the World Press Freedom Index. Ukraine is at 55, Qatar at 75, Burkina Faso at 110, Oman at 127, Kuwait at 136 – countries some of which do not even hold a pro forma election rank higher on press freedom than India, according to this report.

Norway is number one. But what the ranking does not take into account is the unfiltered racism of an apparently free press – such as a Norwegian mainstream newspaper that portrayed Mr. Modi as a snake charmer, an age-old trope to depict India. The rankers have themselves clarified that the quality of journalism is not a criterion. The racism of the freest press does not affect its standing.

Mr. Modi has not addressed a press conference as Prime Minister. After a joint appearance with U.S. President Donald J. Trump, he took a couple of questions in February 2025. Mr. Trump, for his part, routinely seeks out confrontational interviews to make his point, while simultaneously seeking to delegitimise the media. Press conferences and probing interviews have become rare across India's leadership. No leader wants to take questions – whether in the legislature or the media. Political communication has become a one-way street in which the principal actor broadcasts without the inconvenience of

being contested – that applies as much to several Opposition leaders as well.

The contestations within the media space are often a reflection of society, and state control of the media is an extension of the control the state seeks to enforce across other domains of people's lives – movement, thinking, learning, and the mingling of populations. In Norway, the media, the society and the state share broadly the same consensus. Of its 55 lakh people, 95 per cent speak Norwegian and 60 per cent are affiliated to the Church of Norway. A largely homogenous country where the media does not require to contest the state is not comparable to a large, diverse country riven by conflicting viewpoints about everything, and where the state is simultaneously trying to control the thinking of its people. Political contestation in such a society produces a multitude of media narratives – and a multitude of pressures.

That said, those who seek to dismiss Western standards as irrelevant are curiously selective in their approach. They would dismiss the Press Freedom Index but in the same breath celebrate some random ranking on Ease of Doing Business, or a foreign country's national honour conferred on their leader. The convenience of the dismissal gives it away. Rankings exist. They are often methodologically dubious, frequently corrupted by subjective factors and sometimes by outright prejudice. No global ranking is required to establish that the Indian media is under severe stress – from market forces and from state measures alike. Equally, no amount of fine print can sustain the argument that Kuwait belongs far above India on any honest measure of press freedom. The index's own methodology undermines its own conclusions at the extremes.

The better argument is not that rankings are worthless but that they are blunt instruments – useful for identifying broad patterns, unreliable as precise judgements.

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## Daily News Analysis

1. **De-linking Quality from Freedom:** By RSF's own admission, the quality of journalism is not evaluated. Consequently, structural biases, historical stereotypes, or explicit racism within a "free" press (e.g., Western mainstream media depicting India via regressive tropes) do not negatively impact a nation's score.
2. **The Flaw of Subjective Expert Surveys:** Most of these indices rely heavily on qualitative questionnaires distributed to a small pool of local and international respondents. This introduces high levels of perception-based subjectivity and confirmation bias, turning an objective exercise into an ideological one.
3. **Algorithmic Flattening:** Applying identical mathematical indicators (political, legal, economic, sociocultural, and safety) to a tiny, socio-economically stable European state and a highly fragmented, developing mega-nation creates a false equivalency.

### The Dual Pressure on Indian Journalism

#### State-Led Pressures

1. **Shift Toward One-Way Communication**

- Increasing preference for controlled broadcasts and official messaging without open media questioning.
- Reduces space for critical interrogation and accountability in democratic governance.

2. **Use of National Security and Financial Laws**

- Investigative agencies and legal provisions are sometimes perceived as tools to pressure journalists and media organizations.
- Creates a climate of fear, self-censorship, and reduced editorial freedom.

#### Market-Led Pressures

1. **Corporate Consolidation of Media Ownership**

- Large corporate groups increasingly dominate media ownership structures.
- May compromise editorial independence due to business and political interests.

2. **Sensationalism Driven by Revenue Models**

- Digital platforms and TRP-driven competition encourage sensational and polarizing content.
- Algorithms prioritize engagement over public-interest journalism, weakening factual and ethical reporting.

### B. The Reality of the Indian Media Landscape

Rejecting a ranking's flawed methodology does not mean ignoring the genuine domestic structural challenges facing the Indian press:

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## Daily News Analysis

- **Erosion of Interrogative Journalism:** Across the political spectrum, traditional press conferences and adversarial interviews are being replaced by tightly managed, one-way digital broadcasts.
- **Legal & Administrative Overreach:** The increasing use of sweeping security legislation and tax/financial enforcement mechanisms against media professionals contributes to a distinct chilling effect and rising self-censorship.

### Way Forward

- **Developing Indigenous Evaluation Frameworks:** India should spearhead the creation of alternative, objective democratic indices through institutions like the Quality Council of India (QCI) or independent global-south think tanks to challenge Western algorithmic monopolies.
- **Strengthening Institutional Autonomy:** Structural protection must be afforded to public broadcasters and independent media bodies (like the Press Council of India) to shield them from both political interference and corporate capture.
- **Adopting the "Blunt Instrument" Approach:** Rather than reacting with outright rejection or defensive diplomatic posturing, the Indian state should treat international indices as trend indicators—useful for mapping broad domestic vulnerabilities while correcting clear external prejudices.

### Conclusion

International rankings are neither absolute truths nor completely worthless data points; they are blunt analytical instruments. India's drop to the 157th position in 2026 highlights the clear limitations of an index that rates an active, loud, and complex democracy below autocratic regimes.

However, the path to global prestige and sovereign resilience does not lie in a policy of convenient rejection. True democratic consolidation requires India to look past the fine print of external scorecards and proactively address the domestic fractures within its media landscape. Ensuring a transparent, safe, and robust press remains essential to upholding the constitutional check-and-balance system vital to the health of the republic.

### UPSC Prelims Exam Practice Question

**Ques:** Which of the following is considered an essential pillar of democracy that enables accountability and informed citizen participation?

- (a) Judicial Review
- (b) Free Press
- (c) Bureaucratic Neutrality
- (d) Centralized Governance

**Ans: b)**

### UPSC Mains Exam Practice Question

**Ques:** Examine the impact of corporate consolidation and digital algorithms on the quality of journalism in India. (150 Words)

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**Page 10:GS III : Indian Economy / Prelims Exam**

Amidst an exogenous energy shock triggered by geopolitical tensions in West Asia, the Indian Rupee (INR) has recently experienced a sharp, multi-session slide, touching an all-time intraday low near ₹97 to the US Dollar. This dramatic drop has brought back a classic macroeconomic debate: should the central bank let the currency freely depreciate to establish its market-determined equilibrium, or should it actively step in to stabilize it?

While standard market economic models favor a non-interventionist approach to naturally correct current account imbalances, the unique structural realities of the Indian economy—such as an inelastic demand for fuel imports and highly volatile speculative capital flows—make unchecked depreciation a major risk to overall macroeconomic stability.

**Core Theoretical Models vs. Structural Realities**

**A. The Mainstream Non-Interventionist Model**

Prominent economists argue that the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) should allow the rupee to find its natural market value. This viewpoint is grounded in standard automatic adjustment theory:

- **The Adjustment Process:** A weaker domestic currency makes imports more expensive and exports more competitive. Over time, this natural shift is expected to shrink the trade deficit and rebalance the current account.
- **The Risk of Intervention:** Propping up the currency artificially can mask underlying structural imbalances, exhaust foreign exchange reserves, and keep import demand unsustainably high by delaying necessary economic corrections.

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# Should the rupee be left to depreciate?

Following days of sustained losses, the rupee has closed at nearly ₹97 to the dollar, while some advocate letting it find its own level, there is a risk in allowing depreciation to continue unchecked, especially as rising import costs of essential goods could fuel inflation

## EXPLAINER

Rahul Menon

Continuous days of sustained losses has seen the rupee close at almost ₹97 to the dollar, with no indication that the slide has been arrested. Rising oil prices and the threat of external inflation will put further pressure on the rupee in the days to come. This has prompted calls for intervention to prevent further falls.

Some writers, like Harvard professor Gita Gopinath, have resisted calls for intervention by the RBI, advocating for letting the rupee find its own level. A weaker rupee would automatically curtail imports and boost exports. Intervention would only obstruct the free flow of market forces.

While intervention does have its challenges, there is danger in letting the process of depreciation continue unabated, especially when much of it is being driven by speculative finance. With foreign interest rates bound to rise, capital will flow out faster, leading to stronger negative pressures on the rupee. In such a scenario, it might take inordinately long for the rupee to 'find its level', and the inflationary dangers of a weak rupee will exert even more stresses on a populace already exposed to hardship as a result of worldwide spikes in energy prices.

### Can intervention deepen volatility?

A current account deficit implies more imports than exports, and hence a greater need for foreign currency. If this is adequately met by foreign capital inflow to purchase assets like stocks, the rupee's value relative to the dollar will not change.

If the economy experiences a deficit without sufficient inflow of foreign capital, it faces a problem, with demand for foreign exchange exceeding available supply. Mainstream models dictate that in such a situation, the rupee must depreciate. The weaker rupee makes



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exports more affordable and imports more expensive, leading to an automatic adjustment of the current account deficit relative to the available inflow of foreign capital.

In such a scenario, intervening to artificially prop up the value of the rupee only delays the inevitable. It inhibits adjustment by ensuring import demand does not fall, because the rupee has not depreciated enough to naturally shut off higher import demand, the cause of the widening deficit in the first place.

### What is the difference between a weak rupee and a falling rupee?

Arguments for non-intervention, however, conflate a falling rupee with a weak rupee. A fall in the rupee value would not automatically increase export demand if the market expects a further fall. Exports might be higher when the rupee is weak, but may not rise when the rupee is falling if foreign buyers expect the price to fall even further and for goods to become cheaper at a later date.

At the same time, if the economy imports essential goods like oil, demand may not automatically reduce sufficiently

as the rupee falls. If people expect the rupee to fall further, and for the prices to rise even more tomorrow, they may front-load purchases today and increase import demand in the short run. This can be seen in the rush to buy petrol when prices were raised, as consumers expected further increases in the future.

A falling rupee would see higher import values, but no necessary increase in exports, ensuring that the deficit is not curtailed. The very problem that required a depreciation might just perpetuate itself. One might argue that exports would pick up and imports reduce when the process eventually works itself out. But the adjustment process is rarely painless. Rising import values of essential goods will lead to rising inflation in the domestic economy that has already experienced reverse migration and real wage squeezes.

### What is the role of capital flows?

For the sake of argument, one can posit an equilibrium value of the rupee driven by fundamental values, such as export and import demands that exhibits uniform and predictable behaviour as the rupee changes value. The process may be

long, but the economy might eventually settle at this value, driven by fundamental changes in the current account. However, this assumption neglects the role of speculative foreign capital.

Much of the fall in the rupee has been driven by speculative outflows of foreign institutional investment that, for whatever reason, does not see Indian assets as being sufficiently remunerative. Perhaps investors think returns on Indian stocks will not be high in the future, that growth is not sustainable, or that interest rates will rise in developed country markets. Whatever the reason, these speculative expectations of foreign investors can lead to capital outflow and depreciation, necessitating current account adjustments based on the sentiments of foreign investors.

In such a situation, the 'actual' value of the rupee is determined not by consumption demand but by speculation. There are no fundamentals or technical values underpinning the pure speculation of financial markets. With indications that foreign Central Banks may soon raise interest rates, the rupee could come under further pressure.

Intervention is one amongst many policies that must be considered, and one that even developed economies have resorted to. As the yen slid against the dollar in April this year, Japanese Finance Minister Satsuki Katayama signalled that the government would take 'decisive action' in financial markets to maintain the yen.

Intervention to stem speculative capital flows is extremely hard to manage, and can lead to negative outcomes if the force of speculation is too great, or if governments do not - or cannot - show enough commitment in markets. However, we must not assume that the rupee can find an equilibrium value soon, for its fall is being driven by speculation rather than any fundamental economic behaviour. It is time to have a serious conversation regarding the role and place of foreign capital in India's growth story. (Rahul Menon is associate professor at O.P. Jindal Global University.)

## THE GIST

▼ If the economy experiences a current account deficit without sufficient inflow of foreign capital, it faces a problem, with demand for foreign exchange exceeding available supply.

▼ Much of the rupee's decline has been driven by speculative outflows of foreign institutional investment. These speculative expectations can lead to capital outflow and depreciation, necessitating current account adjustments driven by market sentiment.

## B. The Structural Reality: The "Falling" vs. "Weak" Rupee Distinction

The core argument for intervention highlights a critical flaw in standard economic models: they often conflate a statically weak currency with a dynamically falling currency.

- **The Export Disconnect:** A depreciating currency does not automatically boost export volumes if international buyers expect it to fall even further. Buyers frequently defer orders to capitalize on anticipated cheaper rates later on.
- **The Import Trap (Inelastic Demand):** Because a vast portion of India's import basket consists of critical, price-inelastic items—primarily crude oil and electronic components—higher costs do not easily trigger a drop in consumption. Instead, expectations of continuing depreciation can cause importers to front-load their purchases, inadvertently worsening short-term dollar demand.

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## Analytical Dimensions for UPSC

### A. The Role of Speculative Capital Flows (Hot Money)

A primary driver of the rupee's drop past the ₹97 mark is not a sudden collapse in domestic economic fundamentals, but rather a wave of speculative outflows by Foreign Portfolio Investors (FPIs).

- **Sentimental Volatility:** Driven by shifting global interest rates and risk-off sentiment tied to international conflicts, speculative capital can leave the country rapidly.
- **Market Distortions:** When exchange rates are driven more by speculative capital flight than actual trade demand, the currency's value detaches from real economic fundamentals. Leaving the rupee to completely free-float under these conditions risks letting speculative sentiment dictate domestic macroeconomic health.

### B. The Inflationary Threat and Domestic Hardship

Unchecked currency depreciation acts as a direct conveyor belt for imported inflation, causing widespread economic ripples:

#### Imported Inflation

##### 1. Rise in Cost of Imports

- Depreciation of the domestic currency increases the landed cost of essential imports such as crude oil, fertilizers, and electronic goods.
- Higher crude oil prices directly raise domestic fuel and transportation costs.

##### 2. Transmission of Inflation Across the Economy

- Increased input and production costs are passed on to consumers through higher prices.
- This reduces real wages and weakens household purchasing power.

#### Fiscal and Financial Pressure

##### 1. Widening Current Account Deficit (CAD)

- Costlier imports increase the import bill, worsening the Current Account Deficit.
- External debt repayment also becomes more expensive in domestic currency terms.

##### 2. Pressure on Monetary Policy and Growth

- Persistent currency depreciation may force the central bank to raise interest rates to stabilize inflation and capital flows.

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- Higher interest rates can reduce investment, consumption, and overall economic growth.

## Global Precedents: The Case for Decisive Action

The strategy of intervening to curb currency volatility driven by speculation is well-established internationally, even among advanced economies. For example, during deep exchange rate fluctuations in early 2026, Japanese Finance Minister Satsuki Katayama explicitly committed to taking "bold action" to protect the Yen against speculative attacks and energy-driven shocks. This underscores that central bank intervention is a widely accepted defensive tool used globally to safeguard domestic economic stability from external market disruptions.

## Way Forward for India

- **Calibrated Managed Float:** The RBI must sustain its policy of "managed flexibility"—stepping in dynamically to curb sharp, speculative intraday volatility while avoiding the defense of an artificial, unviable peg.
- **Deploying Alternative Defense Mechanisms:** To relieve direct pressure on foreign exchange reserves, the central bank should utilize structured dollar-rupee swap auctions and design special high-yield investment avenues tailored to attract non-resident Indian (NRI) capital inflows.
- **Structural Import Substitution:** Over the long term, India can insulate its currency from external energy shocks by accelerating its transition to green energy, expanding ethanol blending, and fostering deeper domestic manufacturing ecosystems to systematically cut down on imported components.

## Conclusion

Allowing the rupee to freely depreciate based on the assumption that it will automatically self-correct overlooks the complex realities of speculative global finance and India's dependency on key imports. While the long-term exchange rate must inevitably mirror fundamental economic realities, letting the currency drop rapidly during global disruptions risks fueling domestic inflation and undermining economic stability.

A measured, proactive intervention strategy by the RBI—aimed at dampening speculative spikes rather than resisting long-term structural realignments—remains essential. Ultimately, managing the currency is not about halting natural economic transitions, but ensuring they happen smoothly enough to shield the broader economy and the public from excessive, volatile shocks.

### UPSC Prelims Exam Practice Question

**Ques: The term "managed float" exchange rate regime refers to:**

- (a) A completely fixed exchange rate determined by the government
- (b) A gold-backed currency system
- (c) A market-determined exchange rate with periodic central bank intervention
- (d) A dual exchange rate system with separate commercial and official rates

**Ans: c)**

### UPSC Mains Exam Practice Question

**Ques: "The distinction between a 'weak' currency and a 'falling' currency is crucial for macroeconomic management." Explain. (250 Words)**

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## Ladakh seeks belonging through representation

It is both sad and ironic that the Union Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India argues that Ladakh needs more districts rather than a legislature or stronger constitutional safeguards under the Sixth Schedule. It contends that Ladakh's sparse population, strategic sensitivity and financial dependence on the Centre make a legislature unnecessary, and instead offers administrative decentralisation through additional districts as a practical alternative.

This argument is fundamentally flawed and reflects an impoverished understanding of democracy. Not long ago, the British Empire claimed that Indians lacked the maturity and institutional capacity for self-rule – that Indians were too poor, illiterate and divided to govern themselves. It was against such paternalism that Sri Aurobindo championed the idea of Purna Swaraj, or absolute self-governance, as a matter of dignity and national selfhood. History proved the British wrong.

Yet, close to 80 years after Independence, the argument that Ladakh should be content with districts instead of a legislature echoes the same colonial logic in the language of nationalism. Must Ladakhis still prove they are sufficiently populous, profitable and capable enough to deserve political representation? Does being geographically vast, sparsely populated and strategically sensitive disqualify a region from having a legislature?

The recent announcement of five additional districts in Ladakh – Nubra, Changthang, Sham, Zaskar and Drass – has been celebrated as a major governance reform. Certainly, administrative accessibility matters in a region spread across nearly 59,000 square kilometres of high-altitude terrain. Villages separated by mountain passes and harsh winters do require local administrative presence.

But handing out districts is not democracy. Districts cannot legislate on land protection, demographic safeguards, ecological preservation, employment priorities, cultural autonomy, renewable energy negotiations, education policy or the long-term developmental vision of the region. Districts are instruments of administration. Legislatures are instruments of representation. A district magistrate implements policy. A legislature shapes the future of a people. A district reports upward to the bureaucracy. A legislature answers downward to citizens. No amount of administrative decentralisation and convenience can substitute for political agency.

### Expendable electoral promises

The most troubling aspect of the present discourse is that the Government of India itself repeatedly promised constitutional safeguards to Ladakh. After the abrogation of Article 370 and the creation of the Union Territory in 2019,



**Gitanjali J. Angmo**

Founder of the Himalayan Institute of Alternatives, Ladakh, and an education reformer and public intellectual working to reimagine education, democracy, ecology and Himalayan futures through grassroots leadership and innovation

Ladakh's democratic aspirations cannot be reduced to the administrative convenience of districts

assurances regarding Sixth Schedule protections were publicly articulated by leaders of the Bharatiya Janata Party and reflected in their election manifestoes for the MP and Hill Council elections in 2019 and 2020, respectively.

Yet, once the elections were over, and the party won based on these very manifestos, it went back on its commitments, raising ethical questions: Can promises made to frontier populations become expendable after elections?

### The case of the northeast

What of the objections themselves? Take the first one – that Ladakh is too strategic a border to be trusted with self-government. Arunachal Pradesh shares one of India's most sensitive borders with China. It is geographically vast, sparsely populated, strategically critical and financially dependent on the Centre. Yet, when it was granted full statehood in 1987, its strategic location was not viewed as a security risk, but as a strategic necessity. India understood that border populations cannot be held merely through bureaucratic administration or military presence. The people who feel politically enfranchised and constitutionally respected defend a nation more fiercely than people who merely live inside its lines. If strategic sensitivity was an argument for empowerment in one Himalayan frontier, by what logic does it become an argument against it in another?

The same applies to much of the Northeast. When Nagaland was granted statehood in 1963, its population was barely around 3.5 lakh. Mizoram became a State in 1987 with a population of roughly five lakh. Sikkim entered the Indian Union as a state in 1975 with a population of barely two lakh. Arunachal Pradesh itself had roughly six lakh people at the time of statehood. None of these States was financially self-sufficient. Many remain substantially dependent on central transfers even today. India did not tell them that they were too small, or too poor, or too remote for a legislature. It understood that you do not integrate a frontier through subsidy and garrison alone. You integrate it through belonging.

Which brings us to the fiscal objection – the weakest of the three. Ladakh, we are told, cannot generate enough revenue to sustain itself. But since when has fiscal solvency become the price of admission to Indian democracy? India's federal structure is built on redistribution; the Finance Commission exists precisely because some States earn more than others and the Union shares it out. Even large States depend heavily on central devolution.

Uttar Pradesh, the most populous State, draws enormous sums from the Centre through tax devolution, central schemes and grants-in-aid. Bihar, Assam and several Northeastern States also rely heavily on central transfers (between 70%

and 90% of their expenditure) to bridge developmental gaps.

In many of these States, mountainous terrain, sparse populations and strategic constraints limit conventional revenue generation. Yet, no one would argue that Uttar Pradesh should surrender its legislature because it depends on central funds. The suggestion would be absurd. Democracy in India has never been a reward for profitability – and if it were, much of the country would fail the test.

### Ladakh needs its own voice

And Ladakhis are worth hearing – especially when the same establishment that calls Ladakh economically negligible is planning some of India's largest energy infrastructure projects on its land. The renewable energy project in the Pang region of Changthang is expected to generate nearly 13 gigawatts of power, spread across acres of high-altitude pastureland. With investments of around ₹50,000 crore and a potential of ₹7,000 crore of annual income, this is hardly the arithmetic of an insignificant region. It is the arithmetic of a region that is central to India's energy future.

Ladakhis are increasingly watching decisions being made on solar parks, transmission corridors, mining, tourism expansion and land use. The real question, then, is who negotiates the terms of this transformation. Who decides land rights, grazing rights for Changpa herders, ecological limits, local jobs, royalties and inter-generational sustainability? A district officer cannot answer these questions. Nor was he ever meant to. That is the role of a legislature – made up of representatives accountable to the people whose lives are being shaped by these decisions.

This is what the argument ultimately comes down to. India's greatness was never administrative tidiness, but the constitutional imagination to hold staggering difference within one Union without flattening it. That same imagination produced the Sixth Schedule, recognising that fragile and distinct frontier regions need protections the plains do not. Uniformity is not equity. And Ladakh is not asking to belong to India less; it is asking to belong more fully – not as a territory administered from afar, but as a people shaping their own future. That distinction matters.

Sri Aurobindo wrote that freedom is the necessary atmosphere for a nation's soul to grow. India's spirit has often been strongest at its edges – in places that chose Bharat and defended it through hardship and sacrifice without asking what it cost. The strength of a republic is not measured by how tightly it controls its frontiers, but by how deeply even its farthest regions feel they belong. The voice rising from Ladakh today is not a demand for privilege, but a quiet appeal to be trusted with its own future.

**GS Paper II: Polity & Governance**

**UPSC Mains Exam Practice Question:** Critically analyze the demand for Sixth Schedule protections in Ladakh. How can such safeguards balance tribal rights, ecological concerns, and national security?(250 Words)

**Context:**

- Following the notification of **five new districts** (Nubra, Changthang, Sham, Zaskar, and Drass) by the Ladakh Union Territory Administration, a critical constitutional debate has re-emerged regarding the democratic status of India's frontier populations.
- While the creation of these districts satisfies a long-standing demand for basic administrative accessibility across nearly 59,000 square kilometers of rugged terrain, it highlights a deep structural tension between **administrative decentralization** (governance managed via bureaucratic channels from above) and **genuine political representation** (legislative power held by locally elected assemblies).

**2. The Core Conflict: Administrative Convenience vs. Democratic Agency**

- The Union Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) has consistently maintained that a formal legislature is unviable for Ladakh due to its sparse population, strategic border sensitivity, and heavy fiscal reliance on central funds. However, civil society groups argue that substituting a legislative body with administrative districts misinterprets the foundational principles of Indian democracy.

**The Front-Line Dilemma of Land Management**

**The Bureaucratic Channel**

**1. Administration Through Bureaucratic Hierarchy**

- A District Magistrate (DM) primarily functions as an implementing authority for policies framed by higher levels of government.
- Decision-making often reflects centralized administrative priorities rather than local socio-ecological realities.

**2. Upward Accountability Structure**

- Bureaucratic accountability is directed upward toward the state administration and executive hierarchy.
- This may reduce direct responsiveness to local communities affected by land-use decisions.

**The Legislative Need**

**1. Need for Context-Specific Lawmaking**

- Elected legislatures can frame laws suited to local ecological conditions, livelihood patterns, and community requirements.
- Democratic deliberation allows incorporation of diverse stakeholder interests.

**2. Downward Democratic Accountability**

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- Legislators remain directly accountable to the electorate through periodic elections.
- This strengthens public participation, transparency, and responsiveness in land governance decisions.

### Analytical Dimensions for UPSC

#### A. The Fallacy of Pre-conditions for Democracy

The state's reluctance to grant a legislative assembly to Ladakh is built upon three primary arguments, all of which stand in sharp contrast to historical Indian federal precedents:

1. **The Strategic Vulnerability Argument:** The premise that sensitive border zones are too fragile to be trusted with local self-governance contradicts India's own history in the Northeast. When states like **Arunachal Pradesh (1987)**, **Nagaland (1963)**, and **Mizoram (1987)** were granted full statehood and legislatures, their highly sensitive international borders were treated as reasons for democratic integration, not bureaucratic containment.
2. **The Demographic Threshold Argument:** Opponents point to Ladakh's tiny population (~2.74 lakh as per the 2011 census). Yet, historical precedents show that Sikkim entered the Union with fewer than 2 lakh people, and Nagaland gained statehood with a population of barely 3.5 lakh. Indian federalism has traditionally valued cultural distinctiveness and territorial integration over raw numbers.
3. **The Fiscal Solvency Argument:** Arguing that a territory must be financially self-sufficient before earning a legislature runs counter to the redistributive mechanics of Indian fiscal federalism. Major states like Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, alongside nearly all Himalayan states, receive massive central resource transfers via the Finance Commission to cover structural deficits.

#### B. The Resource-Governance Paradox

- Ladakh has become a central hub for India's clean energy transition. The region hosts major infrastructure initiatives, including the massive **13-Gigawatt renewable energy project** in the Pang region of Changthang.
- This presents a stark governance paradox: a frontier territory can be economically significant enough to absorb close to ₹50,000 crore in clean-tech investments, yet administratively framed as too small or isolated to manage its own legislative safeguards. This gap strips locals of their negotiating power regarding land acquisition, grazing rights for pastoral communities (like the Changpa herders), and long-term ecological protection.

#### Structural Demands: The Four-Point Agenda

As formal dialogue between the MHA and Ladakhi civil society groups (the Leh Apex Body and Kargil Democratic Alliance) continues, local consensus remains anchored to a specific **Four-Point Agenda**:

- **Full Statehood:** Transitioning out of a bureaucratically run Union Territory structure into a full state with an elected legislative assembly.
- **Sixth Schedule Inclusion:** Applying Article 244 protections to establish Autonomous District Councils (ADCs) with clear legislative, judicial, and land-use powers to safeguard a population that is over 90% tribal.
- **Dedicated Public Service Commission (PSC):** Securing job protections and fast-tracking local recruitment for thousands of vacant gazetted posts.
- **Expanded Parliamentary Footprint:** Increasing Lok Sabha representation to two seats to give Leh and Kargil distinct voices in Parliament.

#### Way Forward

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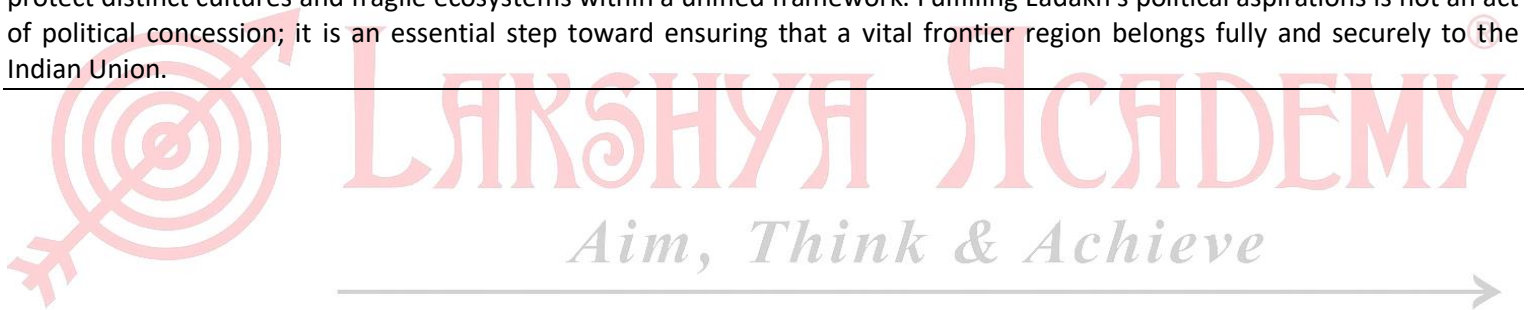
## Daily News Analysis

- **Asymmetrical Federalism:** The Union should utilize India's flexible constitutional architecture (such as Articles 371A through 371J) to co-create a tailored governance model for Ladakh that blends robust central security management with local legislative oversight.
- **Empowering Existing Hill Councils:** Until full statehood can be negotiated, the Leh and Kargil Autonomous Hill Development Councils (LAHDC) should be granted interim legislative powers over critical local domains like land use, environment, and employment.
- **Fostering Border Enfranchisement:** True national security along sensitive frontiers relies on the active allegiance of its residents. Enfranchising border populations democratically strengthens territorial integrity far more effectively than relying solely on bureaucratic administration.

### Conclusion

The creation of five new districts in Ladakh marks a helpful step toward administrative efficiency, but it cannot replace the fundamental need for political representation. As Sri Aurobindo noted, self-governance is an indispensable condition for a people's growth.

India's democratic success has never been rooted in rigid administrative uniformity, but in its unique constitutional capacity to protect distinct cultures and fragile ecosystems within a unified framework. Fulfilling Ladakh's political aspirations is not an act of political concession; it is an essential step toward ensuring that a vital frontier region belongs fully and securely to the Indian Union.



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