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THE HINDU

Daily News Analysis

The Hindu Important News Articles For UPSC CSE

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Page06: GS II : Social Justice

Recently, the Supreme Court has directed all States and Union Territories (UTs) to formulate a uniform and humane policy within three months for the premature release of elderly inmates and those suffering from terminal illness/end-stage diseases. This order was passed by a bench of Justice Vikram Nath and Justice Sandeep Mehta on a petition filed by the National Legal Services Authority (NALSA), exercising its extraordinary powers under Article 142 of the Constitution. Its main objective is to protect the right to a dignified life (Article 21) of seriously ill and elderly prisoners languishing in jails and to reduce the problem of overcrowded prisons.

Key Highlights and Major Directions of the Court

- **Timeframe and Coordination with State Legal Services Authorities (SLSAs):** All States and UTs will have to notify the policy within 3 months, involving SLSAs for institutional coordination and identification of eligible prisoners.
- **Clear Definition of 'Terminal Illness':** The policy will include a standard definition of terminal illness. For this, reference can be drawn from the UNODC (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime) 'Handbook on Prisoners with Special Needs'.
- **Independent Medical Boards:** Directions have been issued to constitute independent Medical Boards at the divisional and state levels to conduct an impartial evaluation of the physical condition and level of illness of the prisoners.
- **Digital Integration (e-Prisons Portal):** To bring transparency and ensure time-bound disposal, the entire process will be linked to e-Prisons portals. This system will generate automated alerts to prevent delays in processing applications.
- **Role of Undertrial Review Committees (UTRCs):** UTRCs have been entrusted with the responsibility to periodically review the cases of elderly and seriously ill prisoners and to recommend bail, parole, or premature release.
- **Sympathetic Rehabilitation and Healthcare:** Coordination with community health services and social welfare departments has been made mandatory to provide continuous medical care and social support to inmates even after their release.
- **Compliance Affidavits:** States, UTs, and the Central Government have been ordered to submit compliance affidavits within 6 months.

'Frame policy for release of aged, terminally ill inmates'

The Supreme Court orders States and U.T.s to draft uniform policy for premature release of such prisoners within three months in coordination with the respective State Legal Services Authorities

Aaratrika Bhaumik
NEW DELHI

The Supreme Court on Thursday directed all States and Union Territories to put in place, within three months, a uniform policy governing the premature release of elderly and terminally ill prisoners, observing that such inmates are entitled to a humane and time-bound mechanism for remission or early release on compassionate grounds.

A Bench comprising Justices Vikram Nath and Sandeep Mehta directed that every State policy must clearly lay down the eligibility criteria and procedural framework governing such releases.

"All States and Union Territories shall, within a period of three months from the date of this judgment, formulate and notify a comprehensive policy for early or premature release of prisoners who are of advanced age and/or are terminally ill. Such policy shall be framed in consultation with the respective State Legal Services Authorities so as to ensure institutional coordination and effective identification of eligible prisoners," the Bench said.

Joint approach: The policy must ensure institutional coordination to identify eligible prisoners, the court said. ISTOCK

NALSA petition

The directions were issued while hearing a petition filed by the National Legal Services Authority (NALSA), which, based on inspections conducted in prisons across the country, pointed to the lack of a common framework for the premature release of aged and terminally ill prisoners. The petition contended that facilitating the release of such inmates would not only address a humanitarian concern but also help reduce overcrowding in prisons.

The court directed that every policy must incorporate a clear and uniform definition of "terminal illness". It permitted the authorities to draw upon the definition contained in the *Handbook on Prisoners with Special Needs* published by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), which describes terminal illness as "a condition where there is no reasonable medical possibility that the patient's condition will not continue to degenerate and result in death".

It also directed the States and Union Territories to constitute independent medical boards to assess and certify cases of terminal illness or advanced medical vulnerability in accordance with uniform eligibility criteria while considering applications for remission of prison sentences.

To facilitate the implementation of its directions, the Bench directed the Union government, in coordination with the National Informatics Centre (NIC), to provide the States and Union Territories with technical assistance, digital infrastructure, software support and training.

Compliance affidavits

The Bench directed the Centre, States and Union Territories to file compliance affidavits within six months, detailing the number of prisoners identified under the policy, those granted premature release, and those whose cases remain under consideration. The matter has been listed on January 19, 2027.

The petition had pointed out that India's prisons had an occupancy rate of 131% as of December 31, 2022, and that terminally ill and elderly inmates often require specialised care that prison authorities are ill-equipped to provide.

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Related Static Dimensions

(A) Constitutional Provisions

- **Article 21 (Right to Life and Personal Liberty):** According to the Supreme Court, living with human dignity and receiving appropriate medical care/attention in the last days of life is a part of Article 21 of the Constitution.
- **Article 14 (Right to Equality):** The absence of uniform criteria for release across the country leads to unequal treatment of prisoners, which has been directed to be removed.
- **Articles 72 and 161 (Pardoning Powers):**
  - Under Article 72, the President, and under Article 161, the Governor possess the power to grant reprieves, remissions, or commutations of sentences.
- **Article 142:** Extraordinary power of the Supreme Court to pass necessary orders for doing "complete justice" in any cause or matter pending before it.

(B) Statutory Framework

- **Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha Sanhita (BNSS), 2023 / CrPC:**
  - Provisions relating to the remission and commutation of sentences (corresponding to Sections 432 and 433 of the former CrPC).
  - Under Section 433A (equivalent provision in BNSS), the condition of a minimum of 14 years of actual sentence applies in certain cases, but the constitutional powers of the Governor/President on humanitarian grounds override this.
- **Legal Services Authorities Act, 1987:** Mandates NALSA and SLSAs to provide free legal aid in prisons and protect the rights of prisoners.

(C) Prison Reforms & International Standards

- **Overcrowded Prisons:** The average occupancy rate in Indian prisons is 131% (data as of December 2022), putting extreme pressure on infrastructure and medical facilities.
- **Model Prisons Act, 2023:** A reformative framework issued by the Ministry of Home Affairs for states, which includes provisions for the reform, rehabilitation, and special needs of prisoners.
- **Justice Mulla Committee (1983) and Krishna Iyer Committee (1987):** Recommended a humane approach in prison administration, reduction of overcrowding, and reformative measures for elderly and sick prisoners.
- **Nelson Mandela Rules:** United Nations standard minimum rules for the treatment of prisoners, emphasizing humane treatment and health protection of detainees.

Conclusion

This judgment of the Supreme Court reflects a significant shift in India's Criminal Justice System from a retributive approach to a reformative and humane approach. Granting elderly and terminally ill inmates the right to stay with their families and receive dignified care in the final phase of their lives is not just a constitutional obligation, but a moral necessity.

The use of technology through the e-Prisons portal and coordination with SLSAs will eliminate procedural delays. If states implement this directive in a time-bound manner, it will not only help reduce prison overcrowding but also strengthen India's international commitment toward the protection of human rights.

UPSC Mains Practice Questions

Question:"The evolving judicial interpretation of Article 21 has steered the Indian prison administration from a punitive system towards a human rights-based system." Discuss.(**10Marks, 150Words)**

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Page 06:GS III : Science and Tech / Preliminary Examination

NITI Aayog has released a report titled **"Roadmap for building India as a leading bioeconomy powerhouse by 2035"**. Its primary objective is to position India among the top 3 biotechnology powerhouses in the world by the year 2035. Going beyond the BioE3 policy (Biotechnology for Economy, Environment and Employment), this roadmap emphasizes mission-mode execution, financial incentives, and regulatory reforms.

Key Targets & Highlights

- **Expansion of Economic Size:** The target is to scale India's bioeconomy from \$195.3 billion in 2025 to \$691 billion by the year 2035 and to \$2.6 trillion by the year 2047 (Amrit Kaal).
- **Job Creation:** Creating more than 3 crore (30 million) high-value jobs in the biotechnology sector.
- **Global Competitiveness:** Moving beyond research to build globally competitive biotechnology companies.

Key Recommendations of NITI Aayog

1. ₹50,000 Crore Bioeconomy Growth Fund (2026-35)

- **Objective:** To eliminate the "Valley of Death"—the gap between research and commercial production.
- **Financial Mechanism:** Providing Blended Finance, equity-risk instruments, Viability Gap Funding (VGF), and biomanufacturing infrastructure support.

2. PLI Scheme for Biomanufacturing

- Recommendation to launch a dedicated Production-Linked Incentive (PLI) scheme to boost domestic production and reduce import dependency.

3. Six National BioMissions

- **GeneIndia:** To develop affordable gene and cell therapies.
- **AgriBio 2.0:** For climate-resilient gene-edited crops and biological agricultural inputs.
- **BioX Foundry:** For the commercialization of synthetic biology innovations.
- **One Health Grid:** For integrated surveillance of infectious diseases and antimicrobial resistance (AMR).

NITI Aayog suggests ₹50,000-crore fund for biotech growth

Jacob Koshy
NEW DELHI

A NITI Aayog road map has proposed creating a ₹50,000-crore BioEconomy Growth Fund, a dedicated production-linked incentive (PLI) scheme for biomanufacturing and six national biotechnology missions as part of an ambitious strategy to transform India into one of the world's top three biotechnology powers by 2035.

The report, "Roadmap for building India as a leading bioeconomy powerhouse by 2035", released on Thursday, says India should move beyond the broad framework laid out under the Biotechnology for Economy, Environment and Employment (BioE3) policy and adopt a mission-mode execution strategy backed by new financing, regulatory reforms and cross-ministerial governance. It targets expanding India's bioeconomy from \$195.3 billion in 2025 to \$691 billion by 2035 and \$2.6 trillion by 2047, while creating over 30 million high-value jobs.

"The goal is not to just research but to build globally competitive biotechnology companies," said Debjani Ghosh, Distinguished Fellow, NITI Aayog, at the launch.

The centrepiece of the recommendation is a proposed ₹50,000-crore fund for 2026-35 to bridge the biotechnology sector's "valley of death" – the gap between proof-of-concept research and commercial-scale manufacturing. The fund would provide blended finance, equity-risk instruments, viability-gap funding and infrastructure support for biomanufacturing, advanced therapeutics, synthetic biology, fermentation technologies and diagnostics.

The roadmap also recommends launching six National BioMissions with clearly identified lead Ministries and measurable outcomes by 2035. These include GeneIndia for affordable gene and cell therapies, AgriBio 2.0 for climate-resilient gene-edited crops and biological farm inputs, BioX Foundry to commercialise synthetic biology innovations, One Health Grid for integrated surveillance of infectious diseases and antimicrobial resistance, Marine Biotechnology to expand seaweed cultivation and marine bioproducts, and BioPharma-Next to establish India as a global hub for biologics, biosimilars and AI-enabled drug discovery.

- **Marine Biotechnology:** For the expansion of seaweed cultivation and marine bio-products.
- **BioPharmaNext:** Making India a global hub for biologics, biosimilars, and AI-driven drug discovery.

4. Institutional and Regulatory Framework

- Constitution of the National BioData Council and an Empowered Committee.
- Modernization of the Central Drugs Standard Control Organisation (CDSCO) and a fast-track approval mechanism.
- Establishment of 5 integrated Bio-Innovation Clusters for AI-driven bioinformatics under the National Supercomputing Mission.

Related Static Dimensions

1. What is Bioeconomy?

- **Definition:** Bioeconomy refers to an economic model that utilizes renewable biological resources (such as plants, microorganisms, crop residues, and marine organisms) to produce food, energy, medicines, and industrial products.

2. "Valley of Death"

- **Concept:** The risky phase between a successful laboratory research (Proof-of-Concept) and its large-scale commercial production in the market, where most startups/research fail due to a lack of funds and infrastructure.
- **Solution:** The ₹50,000 crore fund is designed precisely to mitigate this risk.

3. BioE3 Policy (Biotechnology for Economy, Environment and Employment)

- A policy launched by the Central Government aimed at promoting environment-friendly biomanufacturing, contributing to Net-Zero carbon targets, and generating green jobs.

Significance & Opportunities

- **Reduction in Import Dependency:** Imports of biopharmaceuticals, Active Pharmaceutical Ingredients (APIs), and advanced fertilizers will decrease.
- **Sustainable Growth:** Replacing fossil fuel-based industries with bio-based alternatives (Biomanufacturing) will help combat climate change.
- **Health Security:** Affordable gene therapy and indigenous medicines will strengthen the public healthcare infrastructure.

Challenges

- **Regulatory Delays:** Complex and slow approval processes in the testing of Genetically Modified (GM/Gene-edited) organisms and bio-drugs.

- **Intellectual Property (IPR) Issues:** Indian startups face legal and financial challenges globally in patent filing and commercialization.
- **Lack of Private Sector Investment:** India spends only 0.6–0.7% of its GDP on R&D, with a significantly low share from the private sector.

Way Forward

- **Single-Window Regulatory Clearance:** Establishing a time-bound and transparent regulatory mechanism for new biological technologies and bio-pharma.
- **Industry-Academia Interface:** Directly connecting research taking place in universities with bio-clusters and industries.
- **International Cooperation:** Strengthening technology transfer and data-sharing mechanisms with global research institutions.

Conclusion

This roadmap by NITI Aayog presents an ambitious blueprint to transform India from an agrarian and generic drug-manufacturing economy into a high-tech bioeconomy. The ₹50,000 crore growth fund and 6 dedicated BioMissions will prove to be crucial milestones in achieving India's goal of 'Viksit Bharat @2047' and building a sustainable, green, and knowledge-based economy.

UPSC Prelims Exam Study Questions

Question:In what context is the term 'Valley of Death' used?

(a) Areas related to the degradation of biodiversity hotspots

(b) Financial and technical hurdles encountered between research/innovation and commercialization

(c) Marine ecosystems affected by climate change

(d) Ethical challenges arising from gene editing

Ans:b)

UPSC Mains Practice Questions

Question: The 'Valley of Death' is one of the biggest hurdles in the growth of biotechnology-based startups in India. Examine this statement.**(10 Marks, 150 Words)**

Page 08 : GS III: Indian Economy / Preliminary Examination

According to recent data, India's retail inflation (CPI) rose to 4.38% in June, up from 3.93% in May. This is the first time since the implementation of the new CPI series that inflation has crossed the Reserve Bank of India's (RBI) primary target of 4%. A surge in crude oil prices driven by global geopolitical tensions (such as the US-Iran conflict), depreciation of the rupee, and increased transportation costs have fueled this inflation. Consequently, the possibility of a rate cut in the Monetary Policy Committee (MPC) meeting proposed for August has become almost negligible.

Key Analysis Points

- **Rise in Retail and Wholesale Inflation:**
  - **CPI (Retail Inflation):** Recorded at 4.38% in June (up from 3.93% in May and 2.7% a year ago).
  - **WPI (Wholesale Inflation):** Based on the base year 2022-23, WPI remains at a high level of 9.87%.
  - **Fuel & Power Component:** Fuel and power inflation in WPI stood at 27.41%, maintaining cost pressure at the producer level.
- **Imported Inflation and Crude Oil Pressure:**
  - India imports nearly 90% of its crude oil requirements.
  - As crude oil prices crossed $110 per barrel in the international market, India's merchandise import bill in June rose to $70.8 billion (compared to $54.1 billion last year).
- **Rupee Depreciation and RBI Intervention:**
  - The Indian Rupee witnessed a sharp depreciation due to global uncertainty, making imported goods even more expensive. RBI's intervention in the foreign exchange market helped control the rupee's decline.
- **Impact on Transport and Service Sector (Supply Chain Cost):**
  - **Transport Inflation:** Rose to 4.31% in June (up from 1.75% in May). Inflation in freight transport services stood at 7.70%.
  - **Commercial LPG Prices:** Commercial 19.2 kg cylinder prices reaching ₹2,930 in Delhi increased costs for restaurants, hotels, and food services.
- **Food Inflation and Monsoon Risk:**
  - The Consumer Food Price Index (CFPI) rose from 4.78% in May to 5.32% in June.
  - Forecasts of a weak or uneven southwest monsoon pose risks to agricultural production and food prices.

Breaching the target

Rising inflation leaves no room for a cut in interest rates

India's retail inflation breached the RBI's 4% target for the first time under the new CPI series, rising to 4.38% in June from 3.93% in May and about 2.7% a year earlier. The latest print reflects a broader pass-through of price pressures that had, until recently, remained concentrated at the producer level, largely driven by spiralling transport and fuel costs since the U.S.-Iran conflict in late February. Consequently, the gap between wholesale and retail inflation has only marginally narrowed. Wholesale inflation (WPI), now based on 2022-23, remained elevated at 9.87% in June, up from 9.68% in May. Fuel and power continued to exert the greatest pressure on producers, recording inflation of 27.41%, only marginally lower than May's 28.18%. As India imports nearly 90% of its crude oil requirements, the value of merchandise imports surged to $70.8 billion in June from about $54.1 billion a year earlier, even though import volumes did not rise proportionately. This underscores how imported inflation, amplified by crude prices that briefly crossed $110 a barrel, has driven systemic price pressures across the economy. The rupee's sharp depreciation during the conflict added to these pressures, although RBI intervention in the foreign exchange market helped cushion the fall.

The transport category merits closer examination. Transport inflation more than doubled to 4.31% in June from 1.75% in May, while the sub-group, "transport services for goods", remained elevated, rising to 7.70% from 7.63%. Another notable pressure point has been restaurants and hotels. Although the government announced a modest reduction in commercial LPG prices earlier this month, it has done little to offset the steep increases through May and June, when the price of a 19.2 kg commercial cylinder in Delhi climbed to around ₹2,930 before easing marginally. The system-wide impact is also evident in food prices, with the Consumer Food Price Index (CFPI) rising to 5.32% from 4.78% in May. Another significant price pressure on the CFPI that must be factored in is the projection of a deficient southwest monsoon and its impact on agriculture, though the extent will become clearer in the weeks ahead. Meanwhile, despite the Centre more than doubling import duties on gold and silver from 6% to 15% in May, Commerce Ministry data suggest that bullion imports have remained robust amid global uncertainty, contributing to higher jewellery prices and household inflation. Although the ceasefire announced in late June briefly eased crude prices, they have begun rising again. Given continuing geopolitical uncertainty and persistent upstream price pressures, inflation is unlikely to return to the RBI's 4% target soon, leaving no room for a rate cut at the Monetary Policy Committee's August meeting.

- **Gold and Silver Import Duty Impact:**
    - Despite the government raising import duty on gold and silver from 6% to 15%, bullion imports remained strong, contributing to domestic jewelry and household inflation.

Related Static Dimensions

(A) Flexible Inflation Targeting Framework (FIT)

- **Statutory Basis:** RBI Act, 1934 (amended in 2016).
- **Target:** 4% based on Consumer Price Index (CPI-Combined) (Tolerance band: ±2%, i.e., 2% to 6%).
- **Monetary Policy Committee (MPC):** A 6-member body (3 from RBI, 3 nominated by the Central Government) that decides policy rates at least 4 times a year.

(B) CPI vs. WPI

- **CPI (Consumer Price Index):** Measures changes in retail prices of both goods and services purchased by consumers. Published by NSO (Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation).
- **WPI (Wholesale Price Index):** Measures prices only in the wholesale market (producer level) for goods (services not included). Published by DPIIT (Department for Promotion of Industry and Internal Trade).

(C) Types of Inflation

- **Cost-Push Inflation:** When the final prices of goods/services increase due to rising costs of raw materials, fuel, or transportation (current situation).
- **Imported Inflation:** When inflation spreads into the domestic economy due to rising international prices of imported goods (such as crude oil).

Conclusion

Due to volatile crude oil prices, high commodity costs, and supply chain disruptions, inflation is unlikely to return to the RBI's medium-term target of 4% in the short term. Until supply-side costs soften and food prices stabilize, the Monetary Policy Committee has no scope for rate cuts. Tackling this situation will require fiscal measures such as fuel tax adjustments and food supply management alongside monetary control.

UPSC Prelims Practice Questions

Question: Consider the following statements regarding CPI and WPI:

1. CPI includes both goods and services.

2. WPI does not include services.

3. CPI is published by DPIIT.

Select the correct answer:

(a) Only 1 and 2

(b) Only 2 and 3

(c) Only 1 and 3

(d) 1, 2 and 3

Ans: a)

UPSC Mains Exam Study Questions

Question: What is imported inflation? Discuss its impact on an import-dependent economy like India.**(10 Marks, 150 Words)**

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Page 10 : GSIII :Internal Security

According to recent data, India's retail inflation (CPI) rose to 4.38% in June, up from 3.93% in May. This is the first time since the implementation of the new CPI series that inflation has crossed the Reserve Bank of India's (RBI) primary target of 4%. A surge in crude oil prices driven by global geopolitical tensions (such as the US-Iran conflict), depreciation of the rupee, and increased transportation costs have fueled this inflation. Consequently, the possibility of a rate cut in the Monetary Policy Committee (MPC) meeting proposed for August has become almost negligible.

How serious is Kudankulam data leak?

What exactly was leaked in the data breach? How did it occur? Did the breach affect any nuclear or reactor-related systems? Who was responsible for protecting the data? Why is the leak significant?

EXPLAINER

Aroon Deep

The story so far:

On Wednesday, reports broke out that multiple gigabytes of data pertaining to operations at the Kudankulam Nuclear Power Plant in Tirunelveli district of Tamil Nadu had been copied and subsequently leaked as part of a ransomware attack. *Reuters* reported that the breach was part of an infiltration into Reliance Anil Dhirubhai Ambani Group's Reliance Infrastructure Ltd, and contained 14.3 GB of data on the power plant's operations. The data has been hosted on World Leaks, which is a Dark Web site hosted by cybercriminals who infect vulnerable firms with ransomware, threatening to leak the data if the ransom is not paid. The site claimed that the ransom was indeed not paid, and so it leaked the data. *The Hindu* opened the site and reviewed the index of files, which amount overall to 1.2TB, a slice of which pertained to the Kudankulam plant.

A view of the Kudankulam Nuclear Power Plant in Tirunelveli district of Tamil Nadu. N. RAJESH

Was the reactor affected by the data leak?

"The files do not pertain to the core reactor's operations, which are the most sensitive in a nuclear setup," Nuclear Power Corporation of India Limited (NPCIL) said in a statement. "NPCIL reiterates that the information claimed to be available in the public domain pertains only to conventional Balance of Plant (BOP) common service facilities and does not relate to any nuclear safety, or nuclear security-related systems or information," it said in a statement.

A spokesperson for the Reliance Group told *The Hindu* that it "was informed by Yotta Data Services Private Limited (Yotta), its third-party data centre service provider, of a cybersecurity incident involving an attempted ransomware attack that resulted in a partial breach of data hosted on one of Yotta's servers," and that "Yotta has confirmed that enhanced security monitoring and preventive controls are now in place. The Company has directed Yotta to conduct a detailed investigation and submit a report."

"No ransomware execution, data loss or lateral movement occurred," Reliance said in a stock exchange filing. The files reportedly include multiple drawings of "blueprints and supplier details, meeting and inspection records, equipment reviews," and a $112 million insurance policy against terrorist attacks, though it is unclear what the premium amount for this insured sum is.

What did Yotta say about the cyber incident?

Yotta, which runs data centres across the country, characterised Reliance as its "customer's private cloud environment," but said it took steps to address the infiltration as it was detected on May 29.

"Yotta's managed endpoint security controls detected suspicious activity on a file server of our customer, Reliance Infrastructure," the company told *The Hindu*. "We acted immediately: the suspicious process was terminated, and the affected server was isolated, preventing the suspected ransomware from executing. Our technical assessment confirmed no evidence of ransomware encryption and no lateral movement to any other server or system within the customer's private cloud environment. The incident was limited to this single customer-managed server, with no impact on any other Yotta customer or on Yotta's shared cloud platforms, AI cloud infrastructure, datacentre infrastructure or other services."

Why does the data leak matter?

The revelations have sparked "absolute commotion" among top officials at the power plant, even as they downplay the impact of the findings.

The plant has commissioned two 1,000 Mwe VVER reactors, allowing for a power supply of up to two gigawatts. The reactors are built in partnership with the Russian firm Rosatom, and the government is planning four more such units, which would triple the installed power production capacity at the facility.

THE GIST

The data has been hosted on World Leaks, which is a Dark Web site hosted by cybercriminals who infect vulnerable firms with ransomware, threatening to leak the data if the ransom is not paid.

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Due to volatile crude oil prices, high commodity costs, and supply chain disruptions, inflation is unlikely to return to the RBI's medium-term target of 4% in the short term. Until supply-side costs soften and food prices stabilize, the Monetary Policy Committee has no scope for rate cuts. Tackling this situation will require fiscal measures such as fuel tax adjustments and food supply management alongside monetary control.

UPSC Mains Exam Study Questions

Ques: What do you understand by Critical Information Infrastructure? Describe the institutional mechanism available in India for its protection.**(10 Marks, 150 Words)**

Page 10 : Preliminary Examination

Maharashtra government's 'Mukhyamantri Majhi Ladki Bahin Yojana' is a flagship Direct Benefit Transfer (DBT) welfare scheme for the women of the state. Its main objective is to provide financial assistance of ₹1,500 per month to eligible women in the age group of 21 to 65 years to make them financially self-reliant, improve their nutritional levels, and strengthen their role in family decisions.

Recently, the scheme has come under criticism and scrutiny due to revelations of financial irregularities in the CAG report and a large-scale reduction in the number of beneficiaries (reduced from 2.43 crore to nearly 1.66 crore).

Why is Maharashtra's Ladki Bahin scheme under scrutiny?

What do beneficiary cuts and CAG findings reveal about its implementation?

Vinaya Deshpande Pandit

The story so far:

Ahead of the 2024 Assembly elections, the Maharashtra government launched the Mukhyamantri Majhi Ladki Bahin Yojana. Under this scheme, eligible women in the State receive ₹1,500 every month through Direct Benefit Transfer (DBT). At its peak, the scheme covered 2.43 crore beneficiaries. However, successive rounds of verification over the past two years have led to the removal of lakhs of beneficiaries, bringing the total down to about 1.66 crore women.

The recent information about the removal of lakhs of women from the beneficiaries' list has sparked criticism, and the Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) has raised concerns about the scheme.

Who is eligible to receive funds under the scheme?

Women who are residents of Maharashtra, aged between 21 and 65 years, with an Aadhaar-linked bank account, and belonging to a family with an annual income of less than ₹2.5 lakh are eligible to receive benefits under the scheme. Women of any marital status are eligible. However, only one woman per family can avail of the benefit.

The State government has said the scheme is aimed at promoting the economic independence of women. It also seeks to improve their health and nutritional status, and strengthen their role in family decision-making, according to the government. The scheme is implemented by the State's Women and Child Development Department.

What are the red flags raised by the CAG in the latest report?

The CAG said the implementation of the Mukhyamantri Majhi Ladki Bahin Yojana during 2024-25 was marked by "significant deficiencies in Budget estimation, expenditure control, and financial management." While the scheme was allocated ₹29,693.09 crore for the fiscal year, the government incurred an expenditure of ₹33,237.24 crore, resulting in an excess expenditure of ₹3,541.16 crore. The CAG described the excess expenditure as "unjustified" and said the Women and Child Development Department failed to provide any specific justification for the overspending. It also observed that funds for the scheme were mobilised by reappropriating allocations from other schemes. For instance, ₹3,490.75 crore was reappropriated from the Lek Ladki Yojana. The State's supplementary Budget also allocated ₹26,200 crore for the scheme.

The CAG said that the scheme undermined the principles of budgetary discipline, financial propriety and legislative control over public finances. It said that "significant excess expenditure remained unexplained" and that large sums were drawn and parked in the Disbursing Officer's Virtual Personal Deposit Account (VPDA). "This indicates that the funds were not required for immediate utilisation and were drawn without actual expenditure needs, contrary to the principles of budgetary discipline and financial propriety," the CAG observed.

"A test check of vouchers exceeding ₹1,000 crore relating to the scheme, aggregating ₹29,732.01 crore, showed that ₹15,586 crore drawn between January and March 2025 was transferred to the Drawing and Disbursing Officer's VPDA," the report said.

Why have so many names been removed from the beneficiaries' list?

At its peak, the scheme had 2.43 crore beneficiaries. According to the Maharashtra government, the number of beneficiaries has fallen from 2.43 crore to 1.66 crore. The government said the names were removed after multiple rounds of verification found that some beneficiaries were no longer eligible. It maintained that there has been no change in the eligibility norms and attributed the reduction to the verification process.

The government also cited that the mandatory e-KYC requirement as a key reason for the drop in the number of beneficiaries, saying many women failed to complete the process. A Shiv Sena leader has now urged the State to extend the deadline for completing the e-KYC process. Meanwhile, the Opposition has accused the government of using the scheme to secure electoral gains. The Congress has demanded the immediate restoration of benefits for lakhs of women who were excluded over e-KYC-related issues, and called for an inquiry into the implementation of the scheme.

The Opposition has also criticised the government for failing to fulfil its promise of increasing the monthly assistance from ₹1,500 to ₹2,100 ahead of the State Assembly elections.

THE GIST

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1. Key Findings and Objections of the CAG

The Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) report for the financial year 2024-25 highlighted the following serious lapses regarding the implementation and financial management of the scheme:

- **Violation of Budgetary Discipline:**
  - ₹29,693.09 crore was allocated for the scheme for the financial year, whereas the actual expenditure incurred was ₹33,237.24 crore.
  - Thus, an unauthorized excess expenditure of ₹3,541.16 crore was recorded, for which no clear explanation was provided by the Department of Women and Child Development.

- **Reappropriation and Diversion of Funds:**
  - Budget cuts were made from other public welfare schemes to arrange for additional funds.
  - For instance, an amount of ₹3,490.75 crore was reappropriated to this scheme from the 'Lek Ladki Yojana', affecting the balance of budgetary priorities.
- **Parking Funds in Virtual Personal Deposit Accounts (VPDA):**
  - A large sum of approximately ₹15,586 crore drawn between January and March 2025 was parked by transferring it into the VPDA accounts of the 'Drawing and Disbursing Officer' (DDO).
  - According to the CAG, this indicates that money was withdrawn despite the absence of an immediate requirement, which is a direct violation of financial propriety and budgetary rules.
- **Weakening of Legislative Control:**
  - As per the CAG, such unexplained excess expenditure and improper transfer of funds from other schemes have weakened the State Legislature's control over public finance.

2. Reduction in Beneficiaries and Associated Issues

The number of registered beneficiaries under the scheme has dropped from 2.43 crore to approximately 1.66 crore (over 77 lakh names have been removed):

- **Main Reasons for Reduction (Government's Perspective):**
  - **Mandatory e-KYC Verification:** Many women could not complete the digital e-KYC process within the prescribed timeframe.
  - **Re-examination of Eligibility Criteria:** The multi-tiered verification process revealed that many applications did not meet the conditions regarding the annual income limit (less than ₹2.5 lakh) or the rule restricting benefits to only one woman per family.
- **Administrative and Political Challenges:**
  - **Digital Divide:** Women in rural and remote areas are facing technical and infrastructural issues in completing e-KYC.
  - **Opposition's Protest:** The opposition has alleged that names of genuinely needy women are being removed from the list under the pretext of e-KYC after the elections, and they have demanded an inquiry into this entire process along with the re-inclusion of the excluded women into the scheme.

3. Relevant Static Dimensions

- **Comptroller and Auditor General - CAG (Articles 148-151):**
  - Guardian of India's public purse. The CAG's audit report ensures the financial accountability of the government and the executive's responsibility toward the legislature.
- **Public Accounts Committee - PAC:**
  - CAG reports are examined in the House by the Public Accounts Committee of the Parliament/Legislature to fix accountability for financial irregularities.
- **Welfare Policies and Targeted Delivery:**
  - Achieving the goals of Article 39(a) (adequate means of livelihood) and Article 47 (improving nutrition and standard of living) of the Directive Principles of State Policy (DPSP).
- **Budgetary Management and Financial Discipline:**
  - **FRBM (Fiscal Responsibility and Budget Management) Principle:** Excess expenditure without budgetary approval and reappropriation of funds from other schemes increase the state's fiscal deficit.
- **Direct Benefit Transfer (DBT) and e-Governance:**
  - Preventing leakages through the JAM (Jan Dhan, Aadhaar, Mobile) Trinity; however, exclusion error due to the lack of digital literacy remains a major challenge for genuine beneficiaries.
- **Gender Budgeting:**
  - Prioritizing women's economic empowerment in budget allocations; however, funding it by cutting funds from other child/women schemes impacts the core objective of Gender Budgeting.

Conclusion

Direct cash transfer schemes like the 'Mukhyamantri Majhi Ladki Bahin Yojana' are helpful in providing immediate financial relief and social security to women. However, the CAG's objections clarify that the success of public welfare initiatives depends not merely on massive budget allocations, but on strict budgetary discipline, transparent financial management, and precise targeting.

In the future, while maintaining fiscal prudence, the state must make the e-KYC process simpler and more accessible so that no eligible and needy woman is deprived of social security benefits due to administrative errors.

UPSC Prelims Practice Questions

Question: Consider the following statements regarding the Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) of India:

1. The provision for the CAG is made under Articles 148 to 151 of the Constitution.

2. The CAG audits the expenditure of public funds.

3. The reports of the CAG are examined by the Public Accounts Committee (PAC) of the Parliament/Legislature.

Which of the above statements is/are correct?

(a) 1 and 2 only

(b) 2 and 3 only

(c) 1 and 3 only

(d) 1, 2 and 3

Ans: d)

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Page : 08 : Editorial Analysis

Beyond political reshuffles, renew education in India

When Parliament assembles next week, there will be debates, disruptions and legislation. Television studios will reduce complex issues to political arithmetic, and headlines will declare winners and losers. Yet, I cannot help asking whether the true measure of Parliament is not by the number of Bills it passes, but by the questions it chooses to confront and resolve. For the past several days, one such question has been waiting outside its doors. My husband, Sonam Wangchuk, scientist, engineer, educator and social reformer, has been on an indefinite fast. Every morning I watch with growing anxiety as his body weakens. His body is paying the price for a conviction that education deserves the nation's urgent attention. Every day begins with the same silent question: how much longer can his body endure?

This is not merely a family's private concern. It has become a test of our national conscience. Those who choose the path of non-violent sacrifice hope their suffering will awaken society's conscience to a greater purpose. If this fast culminates only in the resignation or reshuffling of the Union Education Minister, India would have reduced an extraordinary act of conviction and personal sacrifice to an ordinary political outcome. Public accountability is the cornerstone of democracy. Ministers must have the moral courage to own their failures and step aside when necessary. But individuals are transient; institutions endure. More important than replacing a Minister is defining an educational future for which every Minister, regardless of party, is held accountable.

Fifteen years ago, around half of India's population was under 25. Economists celebrated this as India's demographic dividend, perhaps the greatest developmental opportunity available to any nation in the 21st century. In one of my articles, I had argued that while India has invested significantly in access to education, it has missed out on excellence. Enrolment has grown, but learning has not been transformed. If India aspires to become a Vishwa Guru, it must educate this generation differently. But India seems to have missed the opportunity.

What demographic dividend is

A demographic dividend is realised by producing better thinkers, wiser leaders, confident innovators, skilled researchers and teachers, ethical entrepreneurs, honest public servants and compassionate citizens. This, therefore, is the moment to rise above personalities, parties and politics. Sonam Wangchuk's fast should become the catalyst for a national awakening on the future of education. The question is larger than whether one Minister should resign. It is whether India will dare rebuild the education system that will shape the next century. We need more than a reshuffle – we need reform, renewal, and a renaissance. In my view, that renaissance rests on 10 urgent reforms. First, reform the system of examination. Assessment determines learning. As long as examinations reward memory, schools will teach memory. If examinations reward thinking, schools will cultivate thinkers. Within three years, every examination, from school boards to JEE, NEET, CUET and the UPSC, should progressively evaluate conceptual understanding, application, creativity, analytical reasoning, ethical judgement and real world problem-solving rather than recall. Competency-based assessment should become the national norm.

Second, India must dismantle the coaching culture that it has inadvertently created as a parallel education system. Families spend fortunes on coaching because India's entrance examinations reward repetition more than reflection. Multiple examination windows, greater weightage to school performance and portfolios, and redesigned entrance tests can gradually restore learning to schools and childhood to children.

Respect for teaching

Third, build the world's best teachers: No education system can rise above the quality of its teachers as is seen in Finland, Singapore, South Korea and Japan. India needs a National Teacher Excellence Mission that treats teaching as one of the most respected professions through rigorous preparation, continuous professional development, mentoring, research opportunities and leadership training.

Fourth, every vacant teaching position represents thousands of lost learning opportunities. Vacancies from Anganwadis and primary schools to central universities, IITs, IIMs, NITs and AIIMS should be filled through transparent, merit-based recruitment within three months.

Fifth, reconnect education with society. Education must prepare young people not just for employment but also for citizenship. Every undergraduate should complete a semester of apprenticeship, research, entrepreneurship, rural immersion, community service or industry experience before graduation. Knowledge acquires meaning when tested against reality.

Sixth, India must restore faith in its government schools. Every child deserves an equal education until the age of 13, regardless of income or geography. Laboratories, libraries, sports facilities, digital infrastructure, sanitation and qualified teachers should become guaranteed minimum national standards. This can only happen when policymakers have a personal stake in public education and those responsible for governing public institutions also trust them with their own families.

Seventh, trust educational institutions with greater academic freedom that they deserve. Governments should define learning outcomes and ensure accountability. They should not micromanage pedagogy, curriculum innovation or research. The world's finest institutions flourish because they are trusted to innovate, collaborate and respond to local contexts. Academic freedom produces excellence.

Eight, what is measured improves. Transparency is one of the most powerful drivers of reform. A real-time national public education dashboard should be set up, on which every stakeholder can compare schools and universities using verified measures of learning outcomes, teacher vacancies, infrastructure, research output, accreditation, employability, and student well-being.

Ninth, public investment in education should rise to at least six per cent of GDP, accompanied by an increase in research funding to at least two per cent of GDP. Nations become knowledge economies not through aspiration alone, but through sustained investment in schools, universities, laboratories and ideas.

Tenth, educational reform must outlive electoral cycles and not begin afresh every time governments change. India needs an independent statutory national education reform commission that establishes measurable national benchmarks, audits implementation, publishes annual progress reports to Parliament, tracks outcomes across every State/Union Territory and holds governments accountable to measurable outcomes rather than political rhetoric.

Education beyond political divides

None of these reforms belongs to one political party or to one ideology. Every government has contributed something valuable, yet every government has also inherited unresolved structural weaknesses. Education must become India's first genuinely bipartisan national mission. History offers nations only a few defining moments when public attention, moral conviction and political urgency converge. This may be one of them. Parliament will eventually adjourn. But whether the child entering class one this year will grow into an innovator or an imitator, a responsible citizen or a passive spectator depends on the education we choose to build today.

The question before India is no longer who will lead the Ministry of Education. It is whether we, as a nation, have the vision and the resolve to build an education system worthy of our children. That responsibility belongs not to one government or one political party, but to every citizen who believes that education is the foundation upon which every other national aspiration rests.

If Sonam Wangchuk's fast helps us begin that journey, then his sacrifice will not merely have drawn attention to a crisis. It will have helped awaken a nation. History will remember whether we dared to transform a personal sacrifice into a national renaissance. That responsibility belongs to all of us.

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

A personal sacrifice must inspire India's education renaissance movement

GS Paper II: Social Justice

UPSC Mains Exam Practice Questions: Explain the role of quality education in converting India's demographic dividend into real economic power.(**10Marks, 150 Words)**

Context : India stands at a critical juncture of its demographic dividend with a massive portion of its population. Although the country has made remarkable progress in 'Access to Education' at the primary and secondary levels, the goal of 'Excellence in Education' remains far off. Recent demands for educational reforms indicate that beyond political shifts or administrative changes, India requires a fundamental restructuring (Renaissance) of its education system so that the youth can be developed into skilled, ethical, and innovative citizens rather than mere degree holders.

Core Analysis: 10 Pillars of Educational Renaissance

The article proposes 10 immediate reforms to transform India's education system:

(I) Exam Reforms

- **Problem:** The current examination system tests only the capacity for rote learning.
- **Solution:** Exams like JEE, NEET, CUET, and UPSC should be made competency-based within 3 years, testing conceptual understanding, analytical ability, creativity, and ethical decision-making capacity.

(II) Dismantling Coaching Culture

- **Problem:** A parallel education system (Coaching Institutions) is imposing a financial burden on families and robbing children of their childhood.
- **Solution:** Multiple exam windows, giving greater weightage to school performance/portfolios, and altering the format of entrance examinations.

(III) National Teacher Excellence Mission

- **Problem:** Lack of quality in teacher instruction and training.
- **Solution:** Providing rigorous training, continuous professional development, mentorship, and research opportunities for teachers on the lines of Finland, Singapore, and South Korea.

(IV) Filling Teacher Vacancies

- **Problem:** Lakhs of positions lie vacant from Anganwadis to IITs, IIMs, AIIMS, and Central Universities.
- **Solution:** Filling all vacancies within 3 months through a transparent and merit-based process.

(V) Connecting Education with Society and Reality

- **Problem:** A wide gap between textbook knowledge and the practical world.
- **Solution:** Making a one-semester apprenticeship, rural immersion, community service, or industry experience mandatory for every undergraduate student.

(VI) Restoring Faith in Public Schools

- **Problem:** Inequality and lack of infrastructure in the public education system.
- **Solution:** Guaranteeing equal and quality education for all children up to the age of 13. Policymakers and administrators must mandatorily have a personal stake in government schools.

(VII) Academic Freedom and Autonomy

- **Problem:** Excessive government interference and micromanagement in educational institutions.
- **Solution:** Governments should only determine learning outcomes and accountability; institutions should get the freedom to choose curricula, research, and teaching methodologies.

(VIII) Real-Time National Education Dashboard

- **Problem:** Lack of transparency and absence of data.
- **Solution:** Creation of a national dashboard where data regarding learning outcomes, vacancies, infrastructure, research output, and student welfare can be publicly compared.

(IX) Higher Public Investment

- **Problem:** Inadequate budget allocation to education and research.
- **Solution:** Increasing public spending on education to at least 6% of GDP and on research and development (R&D) to at least 2%.

(X) Independent Statutory Body for Education Reform

- **Problem:** Education policies that change alongside electoral cycles and political shifts.
- **Solution:** Establishment of a statutory and independent commission that sets national benchmarks, presents an annual progress report in Parliament, and holds governments accountable.

Related Static Dimensions

(A) Constitutional Provisions

- **Article 21A:** Right to free and compulsory education for children aged 6 to 14 years (86th Constitutional Amendment Act, 2002).
- **Concurrent List:** Education was shifted from the State List to the Concurrent List by the 42nd Constitutional Amendment Act (1976), enabling both the Centre and the States to legislate on it.

- **Articles 45 and 39(f):** Directive Principles of State Policy (DPSP) that ensure early childhood care and opportunities for children's development.

(B) Major Committees & Policies

- **Kothari Commission (1964-66):** First recommended spending 6% of GDP on education.

- **T.S.R. Subramanian & Kasturirangan Committees:** Formed the basis on which the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 was drafted.

- **Key Targets of NEP 2020:** 100% Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) in pre-primary to secondary education by 2030 and raising GER in higher education to 50%.

(C) Demographic Dividend & Economic Dimensions

- **Economic Survey Reports:** Increasing enrollment alone in education is not sufficient; ASER (Pratham) reports consistently highlight that foundational literacy and numeracy (FLN) levels remain alarming.

- **Without Human Capital Formation,** India's demographic dividend could turn into a "demographic disaster."

Conclusion

Education is the most fundamental foundation determining any nation's destiny. It must be elevated above political debates and electoral cycles to become a bipartisan national mission. If India wishes to truly become a 'Vishwa Guru' and a knowledge-based economy in the 21st century, it must move away from 'memory-based' education towards 'thought-based' and 'value-based' education. Moving beyond immediate political fixes to embrace institutional revival is the true accountability owed to the country's youth.