

EDITORIAL HIGHLIGHTS

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GS 2: GOVERNANCE THE HINDU PAGE: 6

'Census Town' definition is outdated: Ministry to panel

Housing and Urban Affairs Ministry says the four-decade-old definition ignores economic change, regional diversity, and peri-urban growth; RGI has decided to continue with it despite objections

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The four-decade-old criteria used to classify Census Towns will not be able to capture the actual scale of urbanisation in India, the Housing and Urban Affairs Ministry told a parliamentary committee, arguing that the present rigid definition, which the Registrar-General of India (RGI) has decided to continue with despite the Ministry's objections, does not account for economic and spatial transformations.

A draft report, "Census Criteria for Defining Urban Areas", was discussed by the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Housing and Urban Affairs, headed by TDP MP Magunta Sreenivasulu Reddy, on Wednesday. The Ministry, while deposing before the panel, said the old "rural-urban" binary was outdated and inadequate because of the diversity and complexity of economic activity.

The Economic Advisory Council to the Prime Minister (EAC-PM) argues that



Taking count: The Registrar-General of India has said that it was too late to alter the framework for Census 2027. FILE PHOTO

the country's urbanisation level could have been as high as 63% in 2015 based on satellite data – more than double the official Census 2011 estimate of 31%. According to the 2011 Census, out of the total population of 121 crore, around 83.3 crore Indians or nearly 68.8% of people live in rural areas, while 37.7 crore people or 31.2% of the population reside in urban areas.

A Census Town is defined as a village with a minimum population of 5,000, at least 75% of the male working population

engaged in non-agricultural pursuits, and a population density of at least 400 persons per sq. km. The definition has remained unchanged since 1981.

Male bias questioned

In a communication to the RGI in February 2024, the Ministry had flagged several issues with the continued use of the 1981 definition. It objected to uniform national thresholds, saying they disadvantaged hilly and northeastern States. The Ministry also questioned the "male bias", where only the male work-

ing population was being used as a parameter to define a town. The female workforce participation should also be utilised, it said.

The Ministry also said population density was calculated using administrative boundaries rather than built-up areas, resulting in misclassification of settlements. It proposed greater use of satellite imagery and suggested a "transitional areas" category to better capture rapidly urbanising regions.

The Ministry further argued that the binary rural-urban classification overlooked peri-urban settlements and growth corridors that functioned like urban areas. It said the current system, based on data from the previous Census, could lead to both exclusion and inclusion errors. However, the RGI maintained that it was too late to alter the framework for Census 2027, as enumeration blocks, boundaries, training and field deployment depending on the rural-urban classification being finalised in advance.

GS 2: GOVERNANCE THE HINDU PAGE: 6

India remains at 131st rank in global gender parity index

Press Trust of India
NEW DELHI/GENEVA

India retained the 131st rank on the Global Gender Gap Index 2026 released by the World Economic Forum on Wednesday, with Iceland, Finland and Norway maintaining their top three slots respectively.

The 14 countries ranked below than India on the index include Papua New Guinea, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Tajikistan, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Morocco, Mali, Algeria, and Congo.

Chad was the lowest-ranked country in the index, with Iran and Pakistan joining it in the bottom three.

For India, the progress towards gender parity stood at 64.5%, below the global average. While India's score improved slightly over the last year, its global ranking remained unchanged at 131st.

GS 2: Polity

THE HINDU PAGE: 8

Nationalism beyond borders, the question of loyalty

A section of Hindu nationalists in India has long questioned the national loyalty of its religious minorities. Under attack, Muslims and Christians have often sought to affirm their loyalty to the nation. But in a curious turn of history, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), a key platform of Hindu nationalism, is now explaining to the world that loyalty to a nation is not determined by the faith traditions of its citizens.

"There is no conflict in being Indian and being a citizen of another country for a Hindu," RSS chief Mohan Bhagwat said. At an event titled Celebrate Oneness/Celebration of Oneness in London, on September 6, 2026, Mr. Bhagwat said: "If British Hindus are good, committed, and true Hindus, there will never be a conflict between British and Bharat interests. If at all that happens, it is obvious that British Hindus will go with Britain. Exceptions may happen, but Hindutva is clear on this. Your Karmabhoomi is where your loyalties lie. Your Janmabhoomi, or land of your origin or your birthplace, Punyabhoomi or Janmabhoomi, is where you get your values, and you have to live those values in your Karmabhoomi, serving the Karmabhoomi. So, Hindutva never asks you to betray your Karmabhoomi. You are living there, you are earning there, you are living there," he said.

Two forms of nationalism

Nationalism is a shared sense among a group of people that they are a group. Broadly, there are two types of nationalism: territorial and cultural. Territorial nationalism supposes that all people who are in a particular place are one. Whether one is Hindu, Christian, or Muslim, everyone who lives in India is Indian, according to this conception. Cultural nationalism, on the other hand, assumes that all people who share a culture are one, regardless of where they live. For instance, it could hold that all Christians, Muslims, or Hindus form one nation, wherever they live.

In real life, it is impossible to enforce such clear notions, because people and ideas move across national borders, which are themselves subject to change over time. Concepts and practices often get mixed up. In the Indian context, the territorial nationalism depicted in Jawaharlal Nehru's *The Discovery of India* draws upon culture too.

The cultural nationalism that the RSS represents considers all Hindus around the world as one nation, but it also holds strident views about the territory of India. The RSS anthem is the Sanskrit hymn *Namaste Sada Vatsale Matribhume*, underscoring the primacy of territory even while claiming Hindu universalism. Secularists, on the other hand, also draw upon



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The RSS's global outreach revealed contradictions in the Sangh's ideas about the people and territory that make up a nation

the cultural iconography of *Bharat Mata*.

The link between culture and territory in the conceptualisation of the nation has never been simple, but it has been further complicated by globalisation and anti-globalisation politics around the world in recent decades. It is this complication that Mr. Bhagwat has been trying to grapple with through his global outreach tour to mark the Sangh's centenary. On average, around 1.5 lakh Indians give up their Indian citizenship each year to become citizens of another country.

They may find themselves caught in the political equivalent of what clinical psychologists term dissociative identity disorder, or split personality disorder. After giving up their Indian passports, they attend meetings such as those addressed by Mr. Bhagwat and those organised by Prime Minister Narendra Modi in various parts of the world, where they chant "*Bharat Mata ki Ja*". In Australia and the United Kingdom, some of them support India when it plays cricket against their newly adopted motherlands. Not only are they caught between two mothers in terms of their loyalties, but they have also transported their fraternal conflicts from the subcontinent to the new territories. They carry their old battles over sects, castes and religions to their new motherlands.

The 'internal enemy' theme

Hindutva's foundational author, V.D. Savarkar, framed this concern about the split loyalties of those residing in the territory. In *Hindutva: Who Is a Hindu?*, he distinguished between those who are in the territory of India by the accident of birth and those who consider it their sacred land.

The true Hindu, in his formulation, is one who has India as both *pitrubhumi* and *punyabhumi*, a test that excludes Muslims and Christians who may have their sacred lands elsewhere. This fear of the resident alien, or even the enemy within, continues to persist in Hindutva thinking. Mr. Bhagwat himself has spoken of this. "This war is not against an enemy without, but against an enemy within. So there is a war to defend Hindu society, Hindu Dharma and Hindu culture. Foreign invaders are no longer there, but foreign influence and foreign conspiracies continue..." he told *Organiser* in an interview in 2023. This theme of the internal enemy continues to animate Hindutva nationalism, at any rate, a vocal section of it.

When the RSS says it is spreading the message of the oneness of the world, how does this sit with its notions of territory and people? Is the RSS an organisation meant for all Hindus, wherever they may be in the world, or is it about uniting all Indians?

Rather than an easy answer, what one might encounter in the Sangh's stated principles and

practices are contradictions, and perhaps a struggle to come to terms with a changing world. The Sangh has become a global actor, partly by accident and partly by design. Mr. Bhagwat also maintains that all people who are in India and share the same ancestry are all Hindus.

If all people who share the same ancestry are Hindus and part of the nation, there is no reason why the RSS should be anxious about the movement of people from anywhere in the subcontinent. But that is not the RSS's position, which calls for the stringent protection of Indian borders and the removal of so-called infiltrators by all possible measures.

Migrations linked to colonialism dispersed Indians across distant shores. Wherever Indians settled, the anti-colonial movement also took root. Intellectual and organisational strands of the Indian national movement were present in many parts of the world in the early 20th century. In fact, both Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi and Vinayak Damodar Savarkar developed their ideas while living in the United Kingdom.

Diaspora dilemma

The visible emergence of Hindus in the West as a political community in recent decades has been a double-edged sword for Hindutva. The U.K. has had a Prime Minister of Hindu faith, Rishi Sunak. The RSS and the Bharatiya Janata Party introduced a new vocabulary of the *janmabhoomi-karmabhoomi* duet when they launched their diaspora politics under Atal Bihari Vajpayee's government. This worked quite well in reaching out to western audiences until native nationalisms in the West began to view migrants with suspicion. It so happened that the RSS's intensive diaspora politics, which became part of India's state policy under Mr. Modi, coincided with the rise of nativism in the West. Mr. Bhagwat's London speech sought to address this concern: Can a person of an allegedly foreign faith be a loyal citizen of the country?

If this moment is truly one of self-reflection and marks an evolutionary milestone for the RSS in its 100th year, it must apply the same standard everywhere, across the entire *bhumi*. What is true in London must be equally true in Lucknow: loyalty to the nation is not determined by the faith one follows, but by one's residency and the modern concept of citizenship. Mr. Bhagwat has done well in stating that people of Indian origin must choose their adopted country over India in all situations, echoing Jawaharlal Nehru's position on this question. However, Mr. Bhagwat's words will be tested equally in the Indian context if they are to be accepted as a marker of the RSS's evolution.

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GS 2: INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

THE HINDU PAGE: 8

Secularists, on the other hand, also draw upon a nation encounter in the Sangh's stated principles and

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China's strategy amid West Asia's security realignment

Chinese President Xi Jinping's visit to Egypt (September 1-2, 2026) marked a shift in Beijing's engagement with West Asia. In talks with Egyptian President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi, Mr. Xi set out a four-point formula for a new regional security architecture. Beijing has long talked about the need to rethink regional security, but this is the first time it has elaborated what such an architecture should look like.

Among the four points, the first is the need to "unleash the internal momentum of regional common security". The core component of this is to reduce the "interference by external forces" while supporting regional countries to strengthen dialogue on peace and security. Second, Mr. Xi called for the issues in the region to be discussed comprehensively, while prioritising the goal of a two-state solution for the Palestinian question. Third, he stressed that "lasting stability and security in West Asia relies fundamentally on development". In doing so, he articulated Beijing's opposition to the weaponisation of international waterways, while positioning economic diplomacy and development cooperation as the preferred instrument for Chinese engagement. Finally, Mr. Xi insisted that all these efforts must happen through the United Nations framework.

A shifting security order

The announcement comes at an interesting moment in the evolution of West Asian geopolitics. The United States-Israeli war against Iran, the fracturing of Gulf security assumptions, disrupted energy flows and the closure of the Strait of Hormuz, and rising Türkiye-Israel tensions have all pressed on Chinese interests. Pakistan's brokering of a U.S.-Iran understanding, which Beijing supported, offered a template for extending influence without exposure. Then came the Mecca Joint Defence Agreement on August 7, 2026 between Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and Türkiye.

In theory, a North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)-style mutual defence agreement would



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The Chinese President's visit to Egypt has outlined Beijing's approach

not be welcome in Beijing. Over the years, the Chinese leadership has repeatedly pushed back against what it says is Cold War mentality and bloc politics. But in this case, it has been extremely cautious. There has been no formal comment, no direct leadership statement, and no word from its ambassadors. That, however, does not mean that there has not been an internal debate.

Mecca pact, Chinese views

For instance, Long Chen of Renmin University's Chongyang Institute has argued that the Mecca pact might actually serve American purposes. Every administration since (then) U.S. President Barack Obama has sought to shed direct security costs, the 2025 National Security Strategy says as much explicitly, and regional states arming themselves is precisely what offshore balancing requires. He noted that all three signatories remain dependent on American weapons and intelligence. Of course, what all of this ignores is the difficult security relationship that Mecca pact members have with Israel, a key American ally in the region.

Others such as Zhou Li, a former Vice-Minister of the International Department of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China has argued that the pact is an exercise of regional strategic autonomy, produced by the erosion of American hegemony, and consonant with China's Global Security Initiative. Mr. Zhou has contended that comparing this agreement to a NATO-style treaty is foolhardy, as there is no published text, no joint command, no cost-sharing, and no binding obligation.

Essentially, Mr. Zhou concludes that such a pact dilutes American primacy without creating a rival bloc that Beijing would have to position itself against. Mr. Zhou also suggested that the next member to join the agreement could be Egypt, which is where Mr. Xi's statement and the choice of venue for it are significant. In calling to "unleash the internal momentum of regional common security", Mr. Xi seems to have weighed

in on the domestic debate, leaning in favour of Mr. Zhou's argument.

What likely prompted him to do so is the belief that while Washington remains the preponderant military power in the region, its ability to defend allies against Iranian strikes, to enforce its will in the Strait, and to sustain commitment as its dependence on Gulf energy declines are all now open questions. Gulf states are, therefore, hedging, buying insurance from Pakistan and others. In other words, the American credibility problem has become an opportunity too juicy to miss out on. This is a moment during which Beijing can throw cautious support behind attempts among regional actors to pursue autonomy, with little practical cost to itself.

Beijing's interests

China has significant economic and energy stakes in West Asia. If regional states are building their own architecture, Beijing can support the process economically and remain militarily disengaged. It already has substantial defence and technology trade with Pakistan, growing ties with Saudi Arabia, and openings in Türkiye and Egypt. Saudi Arabia and Egypt together absorbed roughly a third of China's combat drone deliveries in the decade to 2023, according to Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) data. Riyadh has also built domestic solid-fuelled ballistic missile capacity with Chinese technical assistance and is increasingly attracting Chinese technology investment. So there could be money to be made and influence to be cemented in terms of defence and technological engagement.

In essence, the formula announced by Mr. Xi in Cairo is a significant position being articulated with regard to the emerging security framework in West Asia. Whether this framework will demand certain guarantees that China remains reluctant to offer is something that must be noted going forward. More interestingly, it seems that despite all the friction, Beijing and Washington might be able to find some common ground in West Asia.