SANSKRITI IAS EDITORIALS HIGHLIGHTS

22-08-2026

1. Ensuring equity amid India's educational progress(THE HINDU PAGE NO 6)

- **Syllabus**
  - GS Paper II: Issues relating to development and management of Social Sector or Services relating to Education, Human Resources, and issues relating to poverty and hunger.
  - GS Paper I: Social empowerment and regional diversity.
- **Syllabus Sub-topics**
  - UDISE+ report findings, National Education Policy (NEP 2020), Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER), Pupil-Teacher Ratio (PTR), regional and social disparities in schooling, and girl child education.
- **Key Themes**
  - **Educational Federalism and Regional Disparities:** Wide variations in infrastructure, teacher availability, and dropout rates between forward and educationally backward states.
  - **Social Inclusion vs Access Gaps:** Disparities among marginalized groups like SCs, STs, OBCs, and minorities in transitioning from primary to secondary school levels.
- **Relevant Questions and Focus Areas**
  - *Prelims:* Key indicators of UDISE+ and institutional frameworks under NEP 2020.
  - *Mains:* While India has made significant strides in school enrolment, the real challenge lies in bridging persistent regional and socioeconomic inequities. Examine in light of recent UDISE+ data.

Ensuring equity amid India's educational progress

The Unified District Information System for Education Plus (UDISE+) 2025-26 report highlights notable progress in India's school education system, covering 1.47 million schools, 240 million students, and 10.2 million teachers. Progress has been recorded in gross enrolment, student retention, dropout reduction, teacher availability, and educational infrastructure. However, the report also shows that regional and social disparities persist in access, resources, learning opportunities, and educational outcomes. Disparities in gross enrolment ratios (GER), dropout rates, pupil-teacher ratios, and infrastructure availability across regions and social groups indicate the ongoing challenge of guaranteeing equitable, inclusive, and quality education in India.

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Regional and social imbalances

The report confirms that significant variations exist across socioeconomic groups and geographic regions in terms of various indicators. The distribution of enrolled students shows that Andhra Pradesh leads in Aadhaar seeding (99.6%), followed by Chandigarh (99%), while Meghalaya records the lowest rate (35%), compared with the national average of 90.2%. Uttar Pradesh accounts for the highest share of schools and student enrolment, while Meghalaya and Himachal Pradesh have the lowest shares of schools relative to enrolment, indicating higher student-school ratios.

At the school level, West Bengal has recorded the highest proportion of foundational and preparatory schools (79%) of total, and among the lowest secondary schools (11%); Chandigarh has the highest secondary schools (83%) and the lowest foundational and preparatory schools (5%) of total. The social composition of enrolled students shows significant variation across regions. Chandigarh and Delhi have the highest proportions of General category students, while Lakshadweep, Mizoram, Meghalaya, and Ladakh have high proportions of Schedule Tribe (ST) enrolment. Punjab records one of the highest shares of Scheduled Caste (SC) enrolment, whereas Other Backward Classes representation is particularly high in Tamil Nadu and Gujarat.

At the national level, the GER has recorded highest for OBCs (49%), followed by General (27%), SCs (17%), and STs (10%). Thus, GER indicates large differences in school education enrolment in comparison to their corresponding population of each social group.

The Gender Parity Index across all school levels shows higher girls' enrolment and participation than boys across most of the States/Union Territories. The UDISE+ data show that students from minority communities account for more than 20% of enrolment, with Muslims and Parsis among the major minority groups. The average enrolment per school shows that Chandigarh registers the highest average enrolment per school (1,194), followed by Delhi (788); while Ladakh records the lowest average enrolment (64), indicating variation in the size of the schools across the country.

The pupil-teacher ratio (PTR) is an important factor influencing students' performance and achievement. The PTR varies highly, registering lowest in Union Territories and highest in densely populated States. A significant inter-State variation in PTR exists across pedagogical stages; i.e., foundational, preparatory, and middle PTRs are generally lower than secondary across most of the States. Jharkhand records the highest Secondary PTR (43), followed by Uttar Pradesh, signifying a heavy workload on teachers. On the other hand, Sikkim has the lowest secondary PTR (6), followed by Ladakh. The GER varies significantly at the levels of schools and regions across the country. Meghalaya records the highest Foundational GER (131), followed by Mizoram, while Bihar has the lowest GER (24), preceded by Uttar Pradesh. Meghalaya again records the highest Preparatory GER (171), followed by Manipur; whereas Gujarat has the lowest GER (74), preceded by Bihar. Chandigarh and Meghalaya record the highest Middle GER (118), followed by Delhi. On the contrary, Bihar has the lowest GER (70), preceded by Nagaland. Similarly, Chandigarh registers the highest Secondary GER (109), followed by Goa; while Bihar has the lowest GER (48), preceded by Nagaland.

The dropout rate determines the attainment and transition rate to the next stage of schools. Bihar accounts for the highest preparatory dropout rate (7.9%), followed by Meghalaya. On the other hand, many States/Union Territories such as Delhi, Haryana and Maharashtra do not report dropout. Similarly, Bihar records the highest middle-level dropout rate (9%), followed by Uttar Pradesh. While several States/Union Territories such as Chandigarh, Maharashtra and Andhra Pradesh do not register dropouts at this stage, Ladakh records the highest secondary dropout rate (14.8%), followed by Karnataka. West Bengal has the lowest dropout rate (1.5%), preceded by Telangana.

India's educational progress needs stronger focus on equity, inclusion, accessibility, and quality

Persistent gaps

Generally, access to schooling has improved significantly over the years. Most children now have a school at a suitable distance, but regional differences continue. Remotely located places, hilly, tribal and border areas still have limited schools and transport facilities, where school-going children face greater difficulties in attending school regularly, such as in Bageshwar district of Uttarakhand, Ganjam and Kandhamal districts of Odisha, Kathua district of Jammu and Kashmir, and Palghar district of Maharashtra. Simultaneously, children from SCs, STs, minorities, and economically poor families have a greater likelihood to face different barriers that limit their enrolment, attendance, and completion of schooling.

School infrastructure has improved in several areas of the country, i.e., access to drinking water and electricity. However, the availability of infrastructure varies regionally across the country. Educationally backward districts are still struggling to provide a learning environment in rural schools in comparison to urban areas.

Teacher availability is a factor that significantly influences educational outcomes. The report shows that many States have recruited qualified teachers, while teacher shortages continue in several regions. Rural and remote schools often face a shortage of teachers performing multiple classes and subjects and many other non-teaching responsibilities allotted by the government. High student-teacher ratios reduce the individual attention students receive and adversely affect the learning process. Despite progress in girls' schooling, challenges persist in reducing dropout rates, enhancing transition from primary to secondary education, and providing sufficient and suitable facilities for disabled children. Inclusive infrastructure, accessible classrooms, and supportive teaching practices are essential for equitable education.

Targeted investment will help

The UDISE+ 2025-26 report shows that educational inequality persists across accessibility, infrastructure, teacher availability, digital resources, and social inclusion. Addressing these dimensions collectively is essential for equitable educational development. In line with the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, targeted investment in educationally deprived regions, improved digital infrastructure, adequate teacher deployment, and stronger support for disadvantaged groups can help bridge persistent gaps.

Regional and social imbalances continue to influence educational opportunities and learning conditions. Reducing these disparities requires a balanced approach that collectively improves infrastructure, promotes equitable teacher deployment, strengthens inclusive social and economic policies, and provides dedicated support for disadvantaged social groups. A regionally and socially balanced approach that integrates educational quality, equity, and accessibility will help create a more inclusive education system, address the paradox of progress in India's evolving school education landscape, and contribute to the country's long-term social, economic, and regional development.

2. Unimpeded trade needs IPMDA as the answer(THE HINDU PAGE NO 7)

- **Syllabus**
  - GS Paper II: Bilateral, regional, and global groupings and agreements involving India and affecting India's interests.
  - GS Paper III: Security challenges and their management in border and maritime areas.
- **Syllabus Sub-topics**
  - Indo-Pacific Partnership for Maritime Domain Awareness (IPMDA), Quad framework, Information Fusion Centre - Indian Ocean Region (IFC-IOR), Sea Lines of Communication (SLOC) security, and grey-zone warfare.
- **Key Themes**
  - **Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA):** Addressing surveillance deficits, vessel tracking, dark shipping, and illegal fishing through multilateral intelligence sharing.
  - **Geopolitics of Indo-Pacific Trade:** Protecting vital global choke points like Malacca, Hormuz, and Bab-el-Mandeb against state-sponsored coercion and non-traditional maritime threats.
- **Relevant Questions and Focus Areas**
  - *Prelims:* Quad initiatives like IPMDA and operational role of IFC-IOR Gurugram.
  - *Mains:* Discuss the strategic significance of the Indo-Pacific Partnership for Maritime Domain Awareness in ensuring freedom of navigation and securing global supply chains.

Unimpeded trade needs IPMDA as the answer

Despite the diplomatic difficulties in United States-India relations due to mounting sanctions, it is increasingly clear that Washington needs regional powers such as New Delhi to support common global interests and values. Amid the U.S. visa issues for Indians and the energy crisis stemming from the war in West Asia, Indian and U.S. Foreign and Commerce Ministers have underscored the need for reciprocal trade and energy agreements. While the prime objectives in the present relations are clear, the strategy needs renewed focus on maritime domain awareness (MDA), which is crucial for the 'unimpeded trade' and has been unequivocally agreed to by both sides.

The Indo-Pacific is a trade artery

The West Asia crisis has demonstrated that the Indo-Pacific is not only a crucial geostrategic location for India and the U.S. but also for the rest of the world. Geoeconomically, it is the circulatory system of the global economy, a vast maritime corridor through which nearly $7 trillion in trade flows annually, connecting energy producers in the Persian Gulf to manufacturing hubs in East Asia and consumer markets across the Americas. Some of the world's busiest maritime chokepoints, the Straits of Malacca, the Lombok, and the Sunda, Hormuz, Bab-al-Mandeb, and Mozambique channels sit squarely within its waters, crucial for both energy and container supplies. Yet, this indispensable artery of global commerce is increasingly being threatened by a convergence of state-sponsored coercion, illegal maritime activity, and a dangerous surveillance gap – geographically, jurisdictionally and institutionally – that even the U.S. is finding challenging to address alone.

The Indo-Pacific Partnership for Maritime Domain Awareness (IPMDA) launched under the Quad framework in 2022, represents the most credible multilateral architecture yet devised to address this problem. It is a practical, technology-based mechanism for sharing near-real-time maritime data across partner nations to detect, deter, and respond to threats to the free flow of trade. And its full operationalisation is anchored in robust U.S.-India cooperation under Quad (India, Australia, Japan, the U.S.), which is now a strategic imperative. At the technological level, in 2025, India has already purchased SeaVision technology from the U.S., which includes software enhancements, training, and logistical support necessary for mutual MDA cooperation.

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Maritime cooperation through the Indo-Pacific Partnership for Maritime Domain Awareness (IPMDA) can strengthen the Indo-Pacific's trading system

A surveillance deficit

The Indo-Pacific suffers from a persistent and widening maritime surveillance deficit. As a multilayered technological assimilation, MDA provides an effective understanding of the maritime domain and its impacts on security, safety, the economy, and the environment.

Across the broader waters of the Indian Ocean, which connect to the South China Sea and the Western Pacific, hundreds of vessels routinely disable their Automatic Identification System (AIS) transponders – a phenomenon analysts call "going dark" – likely to evade sanctions, conceal cargo, and cause safety and environmental threats.

Such vessels may also be engaged in smuggling or ship-to-ship transfers of contraband. Many smaller fishing vessels fall outside mandatory AIS transponder carriage requirements, and depending on the applicable national and international regulatory framework, they are also found engaged in illegal fishing practices in other nations' waters or even at high seas. This depletes regional stocks and undermines the food security of littoral states.

Furthermore, as witnessed in recent times, non-state as well as state-affiliated actors are conducting grey-zone operations designed to intimidate and coerce, while escaping any legal or conventional military response. The Quad's Indo-Pacific Maritime Surveillance Collaboration 2026 (IPMSC), under the IPMDA architecture, is as elegant in its pragmatism as in its cooperation, based on a shared understanding that no country can monitor the vast oceans alone. By integrating data from commercial satellite-based radio-frequency monitoring, radar fusion, and existing partner-nation sensor networks, and sharing it with like-minded partners, it creates a layered, near-continuous picture of maritime activities.

The beneficiaries

For the U.S., regional cooperation in the Indian Ocean is essential if it aims to focus on its immediate neighbourhood in the Pacific and the Atlantic. For India, its Information Fusion Centre-Indian Ocean Region (IFC-IOR), established in Gurugram in 2018, is a natural institutional complement to IPMDA's regional hub architecture. IPMDA is precisely the kind of arrangement that respects India's sovereignty while amplifying its reach. With the basics already in place, U.S.-India cooperation is necessary but not sufficient.

The full potential of IPMDA/IPMSC will be realised only through the active participation of existing Quad partners as well as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) partner states, the Pacific Island nations that constitute critical maritime corridors. The European Union, which has upheld the importance of free and open trade since the Hormuz crisis, signals an appetite for engagement that Washington and New Delhi must cultivate.

The contributions and benefits of IPMDA/IPMSC for smaller, capacity-constrained partners, such as Bangladesh, the Maldives, the Seychelles, Sri Lanka, and Fiji, are significant. These countries have independent surveillance infrastructure, but their waters are frequently exploited because these systems remain ineffective at addressing maritime crimes beyond their jurisdictions. This provides an opportunity for collaboration.

The strategic environment in the Indo-Pacific has systematically dismantled the assumption that open trade is unilaterally sustainable. The freedom of navigation upon which global supply chains depend is increasingly contested, and such contestation, unrebutted, has become precedent in recent years. In a region where coercion has increasingly become the currency of power, transparency must present itself as a form of deterrence.

3. Keep UPI free. Fund it from the savings it generates(INDIAN EXPRESS PAGE NO – 8)

- **Syllabus**
    - GS Paper III: Indian Economy and issues relating to mobilization of resources, growth, development, and digital financial inclusion.
    - GS Paper II: Government policies and interventions for development in various sectors.
- **Syllabus Sub-topics**
    - Digital Public Infrastructure (DPI), Unified Payments Interface (UPI), Merchant Discount Rate (MDR), Payment and Settlement Systems Act, and cash management economics.
- **Key Themes**
    - **UPI as a Public Good:** Weighing the economic rationale of keeping digital payments free against the viability of payment aggregators and banks.
    - **State Savings vs Levy Burden:** Using government fiscal savings from reduced physical currency printing and storage to subsidize digital payment infrastructure instead of levying charges on small merchants.
- **Relevant Questions and Focus Areas**
    - *Prelims:* Statutory provisions under the Payment and Settlement Systems Act and the role of NPCI.
    - *Mains:* Digital Public Infrastructure serves as an engine of financial inclusion. Evaluate the debate surrounding the reintroduction of MDR on UPI transactions.

Keep UPI free. Fund it from the savings it generates

R S SHARMA

IN MARCH 2017, in these pages, I argued that there was no justification for a Merchant Discount Rate (MDR) on mobile payments, and that a less-cash India depended on keeping them free (Conditions for a less-cash India, IE, March 4, 2017). That argument concerned an infant technology; it now has fresh urgency. Earlier this month, Parliament passed the Taxation and Other Laws (Amendment) Bill, 2026, rewriting Section 10A of the Payment and Settlement Systems Act. That section barred any charge on BHIM-UPI and RuPay. The amendment replaces the bar with an enabling provision, allowing the government to notify in the future which modes can carry a charge. No charge is imposed today. But the door has been unlocked, and we should not walk through it.

Consider what UPI has become. In 2025-26, it carried over 24,000 crore transactions — roughly 66 crore — worth about Rs 314 lakh crore, accounting for some 85 per cent of India's digital retail payments and nearly half the world's real-time payments. It is overwhelmingly a system of small sums: The average transaction is about Rs 1,300, and 86 per cent of merchant payments are below Rs 500. Such transactions involve the vegetable seller, the auto driver, and the kirana shop. A charge here is not a charge on commerce in the abstract; it is a levy on the smallest transactions of the poorest.

After Aadhaar gave every Indian a digital identity, UPI is our most visible piece of digital public infrastructure — unlike the identity proof, the citizen reaches for it many times a day. It is not any company's product but an open, protocol-based public good — a new common language for money. Before UPI, each bank ran its own closed app; UPI asked banks only to open their APIs to a shared protocol, so that any app can move money between any two accounts at any two banks, instantly and free. It is a model the world is now studying and adopting.

Why, then, is MDR the wrong instrument? It is an inheritance from the card world, where the issuer, acquirer and network each take a slice, and where a physical card, terminal and credit-default risk give the fee something to recover. None of that exists on UPI: The point-of-sale machine is the customer's own phone, on data he has paid for; there is no card, no terminal, no credit risk, and settlement is instant.

Let's apply the "work-done" principle telecom regulation uses for interconnection — a network is paid only for the work it performs. When A pays B, A's bank makes a debit entry, the NPCI a settlement instruction, B's bank a credit entry; no cash moves. The NPCI runs the whole switch for about Rs 500 crore a year — some two paise a transaction. The cost a fee would recover has all but vanished.

None of this means the system runs on air. Banks and payment providers bear real costs, and under zero-MDR, they earn nothing directly from a UPI transaction. The government has bridged the gap with an incentive. But that bridge is being dismantled even as the traffic multiplies — the outlay is projected to fall to about Rs 437 crore from about Rs 3,631 crore two years ago. The gap is real. But MDR is the wrong way to close it, because the savings UPI creates accrue not to the merchant we would tax, but to the state and the banks.

> If digitisation saves the state and the banks such sums, the answer is not to claw money from merchants and consumers through MDR. It is for the state to return a small, defined share of its savings to those who run the rails

Look at the state first, and conservatively: The Reserve Bank spends some Rs 5,000-6,400 crore a year merely printing currency notes — more than the government spends keeping UPI free — before the cost of storing and moving cash is even counted. Then look at the banks, the largest beneficiaries. A bank must serve its customer somehow, and the channels differ hugely in cost: A counter transaction costs it Rs 40-50, an ATM withdrawal Rs 19 in interchange alone, while a UPI transaction is a small fraction of either. And by making an account as usable as cash, UPI keeps money in accounts rather than idle in pockets — the low-cost float on which banks earn their spread and lend.

If digitisation saves the state and the banks such sums, the answer is not to claw money from merchants and consumers through MDR. It is for the state — the steward of a sovereign public good, and no longer obliged to print and move the cash, which UPI displaces — to return a small, defined share of its savings to those who run the rails. This is not a grudging subsidy but payment for value delivered, as the state pays a transmission company to carry electricity: A transparent, formula-based support funded from the savings in currency management, never a price tag before the citizen.

An MDR would also be self-defeating. India is intensely price-sensitive — if paying digitally costs even a rupee more than cash, many will return to cash. A merchant charged MDR passes it on as "2 per cent extra for digital", or refuses digital altogether. Even 0.3 per cent on merchant payments would take some Rs 27,000 crore a year out of a thin-margin retail economy. To tell a hundred crore users that what was always free now costs money is the surest way to slow, even reverse, a transition still forming: We would collect a little and lose a great deal. And confining the charge to large merchants offers no lasting protection — thresholds slip, and definitions widen.

India has done what no other country has managed — made real-time digital payment free, instant and universal, pulling hundreds of millions into the formal economy. That rests on a simple bargain — paying digitally will never cost more than cash. Keep UPI free, fund it from the savings it so visibly creates, and it will repay the country many times over. That, not MDR, is the road to a truly cashless India.

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4. What we lose when we stop seeing migrants as people(INDIAN EXPRESS PAGE NO 8)

- **Syllabus**
  - GS Paper II: International relations, human rights, and global conventions on migration and refugees.
  - GS Paper IV: Ethics, human dignity, empathy, and moral responsibility toward vulnerable groups.
- **Syllabus Sub-topics**
  - Cross-border migration crises, state borders vs natural rights, criminalization of undocumented migration, post-colonial geopolitical instability, and humanitarian ethics.
- **Key Themes**
  - **Humanitarian Ethics vs Border Securitization:** The tension between sovereign territorial enforcement and the universal right to life and dignity.
  - **Colonial Legacies and Forced Displacement:** Examining how historical foreign interventions and systemic inequalities continue to drive irregular migration flows.
- **Relevant Questions and Focus Areas**
  - *Mains GS II:* Discuss the growing global tensions between national border security regimes and international human rights obligations toward migrants and refugees.
  - *Mains GS IV:* Border policies often reduce humanitarian crises to legalistic classifications. Discuss the ethical imperatives of compassion and universal human rights in governance.

What we lose when we stop seeing migrants as people

Saptarshi Basak

A PHOTOGRAPH that has been trapped in my mind for the past few days is of a young woman, around my age, wearing a jersey that could easily be mistaken for Atlético Madrid's, smiling at the camera with a football field stretching out behind her and a goalpost standing in the distance. Faten Ben Omar El Azizi drowned last month while trying to cross into the Spanish exclave of Ceuta. Playing in a women's league in Morocco while working part-time at a cemetery — where she is now buried — offered little prospect of a better future, and so she decided the crossing was worth the risk. El Azizi was among nearly 150 who died at the Morocco-Ceuta border last month. This was no anomaly: In 2025, at least 3,400 people died or went missing while trying to reach Europe. What is the natural human response to a tragedy like Ceuta? Grief, surely? Shock, perhaps even anger, at the circumstances that could make thousands decide that risking death was preferable to remaining where they were. But listen to the reaction of much of the Western political establishment and you encounter a vocabulary so impoverished that there appears to be little to say beyond "security" and "legality".

The obvious claim is that crossing a border illegally is, in fact, illegal. But an illegal act does not make a human being illegal. There is, as migration scholar Nicholas De Genova argues, nothing matter-of-fact about the "illegality" of a migrant; it is not an inherent characteristic of the person but a status produced through the state's immigration law and its enforcement. The natural rights of that person — which John Locke would describe as pre-political rights that exist independently of any government — are the same as yours and mine, the so-called "legals". The second common counterargument is that "illegals" make host countries dangerous to live in. Empirically, however, the evidence does not support a relationship between immigration and violent crime in Europe. And in the US, research finds that immigrants, including undocumented ones, generally commit crimes at lower rates than US-born people.

> Listen to the reaction of much of the Western political establishment to the Ceuta crisis and you encounter a vocabulary so impoverished that there appears to be little to say beyond 'security' and 'legality'

Why have we come to treat migration as an aberration, and not as a force that has shaped the course of history and society? People have been moving for thousands of years, transforming the linguistic and cultural landscapes of entire continents, long before the modern nation-state started insisting that everyone belongs somewhere and therefore requires permission to enter somewhere else. Migration is an ancient human phenomenon, but the discourse around it today is confined within a remarkably narrow and young framework of borders. The irony is that for much of modern history, it was the Europeans who were moving. Their mobility was framed as exploration, opportunity or empire-building, even as colonial expansion wiped out indigenous peoples across the world. And are we going to gloss over the fact that European colonialism, disease, wars, and financial and foreign-policy decisions created many of the conditions from which 21st-century migration emerges? Syrians, Afghans, Iraqis, Palestinians and Libyans, among others, did not simply appear at Europe's borders. Their journeys cannot be separated entirely from the history of Western intervention and extraction.

The language we use to describe migration shapes how we see migrants. Talking about borders cannot mean switching off our ability to see the human on the other side. So I keep returning to El Azizi. Our response to her death cannot begin and end with whether she was legally entitled to cross a line on a map.

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5. SIR's exclusion of citizens is made possible by complicity of institutions(INDIAN EXPRESS PAGE NO ⍰ 9)

- **Syllabus**
  - GS Paper II: Indian Constitution features, significant provisions, Elections, Appointment to various Constitutional Posts, Powers and Functions of the Election Commission of India (ECI), and Role of the Judiciary.
- **Syllabus Sub-topics**
  - Special Intensive Revision (SIR) of electoral rolls, universal adult suffrage (Article 326), disenfranchisement of vulnerable citizens, and judicial review of administrative procedures.
- **Key Themes**
  - **Democratic Inclusivity vs Administrative Verification:** The risk of arbitrary exclusion of poor and marginalized citizens during intensive voter documentation drives.
  - **Institutional Checks and Balances:** The constitutional duty of the Judiciary to scrutinize election body procedures and prevent executive overreach in citizenship verification.
- **Relevant Questions and Focus Areas**
  - *Prelims:* Constitutional mandate of the Election Commission under Article 324 and statutory provisions of the Representation of the People Acts.
  - *Mains:* True representative democracy relies on maximal electoral inclusion rather than rigid administrative exclusion. Analyze the constitutional concerns surrounding large-scale voter deletion exercises.

SIR's exclusion of citizens is made possible by complicity of institutions

SUHAS PALSHIKAR

ILLUSTRATION: C R SASIKUMAR

THE ONGOING special intensive revision (SIR) of electoral rolls is proving to be a textbook example of how the Indian state keeps destabilising citizens' lives. Earlier this week, this newspaper reported that tribunals in West Bengal are struggling to tackle cases arising out of the SIR ('No full stops in Bengal SIR, Those "excluded" now in dark about what next', *IE*, 17 August). There are also reports of growing numbers of "absent," "shifted," "dead" and "duplicate" citizens from each state where the exercise is going on. While the ECI may face the brunt of criticism and media attention on this count, it is important to remember that the Supreme Court has produced this impasse.

The Court's ruling in the SIR case in May 2026 is a reminder that the judiciary can, at times, become an enabler of state practices that harm citizens. *ADR & Others vs ECI & Others* offers a troubling roadmap for such an outcome: A refusal to position the judiciary as an effective arbiter between the power of the state and the rights of citizens. As we mourn the consequences for those affected by the SIR, we should not lose sight of the significance of the ruling itself. It may well prove to be a landmark judgment — not because it strengthened citizens' rights, but because it demonstrated how the judiciary can enable the state at the expense of the citizen.

The ruling not only upholds the ECI's power to conduct the SIR; it also records the Court's satisfaction with the procedure adopted by the Commission, stating that the deletions are within the parameters of that procedure. In effect, the judgment places considerable trust in the poll body.

A magnanimous reading of the verdict could be that the Court was confronted with two competing approaches. One would have been to adopt a posture of healthy suspicion on behalf of citizens — a scepticism towards claims of authority by the ECI, coupled with a recognition that judicial vigilance is necessary to maintain a balance between the state's asserted powers and reasonable fears about the protection of citizens' rights. The alternative was to repose trust in another constitutional authority, such as the ECI, on the assumption that constitutional institutions are themselves sufficiently committed to protecting citizens' rights, making intensive judicial scrutiny less necessary. The Court chose the latter approach.

In doing so, it overlooked a crucial possibility: An authority may undermine citizens' rights not through any explicit intention to do so, but through unreasonable practices. This is where the error in the SIR ruling resonates with a broader contemporary judicial tendency — one that increasingly privileges "authority" vis-à-vis citizens.

The other error lies in the Court's failure to anchor its judgment in the foundational principle underlying the controversy — representation. The logic of representation does not appear to have sufficiently informed the Court's interpretation of the ECI's authority. As democracy has evolved and the idea of citizenship has expanded, full inclusion has emerged as one of its central requirements. This not only means that citizenship should not be denied or diminished on grounds such as sex, religion, race, caste or class, but also that political representation is not meaningful if citizens are effectively disabled from participating in elections as voters.

Leaving eligible electors out of elections inevitably produces flawed representation. Having accepted that the ECI has the power to prepare electoral rolls, and, therefore, to examine whether a person is genuinely entitled to be included on them, the Court has failed to ensure that the Commission's power of scrutiny does not result in the exclusion or harassment of eligible voters.

The Court has neither engaged with the conceptual question of exclusion nor adequately considered the empirical possibility that the SIR may disproportionately affect vulnerable citizens

In a democratic election, the ECI's first responsibility must be to include, not to exclude. How is that principle to be protected? While it is unfortunate that the ECI does not appear to have been seized of the question of inclusion, the Court's failure to sufficiently engage with it is also troubling.

As a general rule, the state's axe of exclusion operates randomly. However, both in the abstract and as an empirical reality, who are most likely to be adversely affected by the insistence on a documentation regime as evidence of citizenship? It has been repeatedly pointed out that certain social sections — vast numbers of women, the poor and the marginalised — are particularly vulnerable to being trapped by such regimes. The SIR, therefore, risks becoming a hatchet rather than a purifying procedure. The Court has neither engaged with the conceptual question of exclusion nor adequately considered the empirical possibility that the SIR may disproportionately affect vulnerable citizens and, in doing so, undermine democratic representation.

This approach leaves citizens vulnerable to consequences beyond the loss of their voting rights. The SIR verdict actually directs the ECI to report to the Home Ministry the names of persons whose names have been deleted, for further adjudication of their claims. Thus, the judgment not only permits exclusion from democratic representation; it also allows the ECI and the government to potentially weaponise the SIR exercise, pushing individuals into a zone of doubt, suspicion and harassment. It is striking that a judgment so cautious about the judiciary entering the ECI's domain has, obliquely, enabled the Commission to transcend its own domain and become enmeshed with executive authority.

As the SIR leaves a growing number of voters in limbo, one cannot but rue the judiciary's role.

When the exercise is complete, it may have created a multitude of SADs — Shifted, Absent, Duplicate — who are then pushed to the margins of formal existence, as their passports or claims to various welfare schemes may also be cast into doubt. From SIR to SAD is a slippery slope that the judiciary has facilitated, perhaps unintentionally.

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6. If Naxals succeed, there will be no freedom(INDIAN EXPRESS PAGE NO 9)

- **Syllabus**
  - GS Paper III: Linkages between development and spread of extremism, Role of external state and non-state actors in creating challenges to internal security.
  - GS Paper II: Democratic governance and rule of law.
- **Syllabus Sub-topics**
  - Left-Wing Extremism (LWE), ideological dimensions of Naxalism, urban and overground networks, Government counter-Naxal doctrine (Security, Rehabilitation, and Development), and internal security threats.
- **Key Themes**
  - **Evolution of Internal Security Threats:** Shift in Left-Wing Extremism from rural guerrilla warfare to ideological propaganda and narrative battles in urban centers.
  - **Comprehensive Counter-Insurgency Approach:** Combining kinetic counter-terror operations with infrastructure development, tribal welfare, and ideological counter-narratives.
- **Relevant Questions and Focus Areas**
  - *Prelims:* Government schemes for LWE areas such as SAMADHAN doctrine and Special Central Assistance.
  - *Mains:* Left-Wing Extremism poses a challenge not only through armed violence but also through ideological subversion. Discuss the multi-pronged strategy needed to eliminate this threat.

ABHINAV PRAKASH

If Naxals succeed, there will be no freedom

PRIME MINISTER Narendra Modi's Independence Day address did what Indian political discourse has avoided for four decades. The country measured its war against Naxalism in body counts, arms recoveries and the district maps that turned green from red. What it rarely confronted was the architecture of ideas behind the insurgency. By calling out the *dimagi* Naxal (intellectual Naxal), Modi has forced a final battle upon the deadliest terror threat to have plagued India.

Naxalism was always an ideology before it was a militia. Charu Majumdar, the ideologue of Naxalbari, did not pick up a rifle out of personal deprivation; he theorised, organised and incited others toward armed "revolution". Naxal leadership across generations has drawn from comfortable, often landed or urban intellectual backgrounds.

Naxals seek to overthrow the Republic of India along with its "bourgeois constitution" and establish a communist state in which the class enemies will be liquidated by an armed revolution. These underground Naxals, their overground members and sympathisers believe India is an artificial, illegitimate entity that is denying the right of "self-determination" to different "nationalities" and is working at the behest of international capital.

After Operation Green Hunt in 2009, Maoists decided to expand aggressively in urban centres and hide in plain sight by posing as human rights activists, university professors, journalists and even corporate employees. They aim to act as couriers and provide safe houses for cadres of banned outfits, to stall any action against the terror groups, wage an ideological war on the Indian state and undermine it by promoting anarchy. They package their propaganda in acceptable terminology like human rights, Dalit assertion, farmer issues and individual rights. Their aim is ostensibly justice for the marginalised and freedom from hunger and poverty. But they don't always publicly state that their theoretical framework associates freedom from hunger and poverty or justice with the balkanisation of India. This is a messianic cult masquerading as secular ideology that seeks nothing but death and destruction in search of a promised utopia.

> The Modi government's counter-Naxal doctrine has rested on a triad of security, rehabilitation, and development. Because it worked on the ground, the Naxal intellectual ecosystem shifted its attack to development itself

The Narendra Modi government's counter-Naxal doctrine has rested on a triad of security, rehabilitation, and development. Because it worked on the ground, the Naxal intellectual ecosystem shifted its attack to development itself. Nuclear power projects, agricultural modernisation programmes and infrastructure corridors have been opposed not because of genuine local grievances or flaws in the projects themselves, but by a recurring cast of "civil society" groups whose real objection is to the writ of the Indian state.

History has a cautionary message that PM Modi's critics would do well to heed. The first wave of Naxalism, crushed by the mid-1970s, resurfaced two decades later. By the mid-2000s, nearly a third of the country's territory lay in the Red Corridor. While old ideologues had to organise physically, travel to villages, print pamphlets, and hold clandestine meetings, their successors use smartphones and build a following on Instagram, YouTube and X by monetising a persona built around resistance. The medium has changed, and the incitement is more diffuse, but the function is unchanged: Manufacturing moral cover for anti-state violence and instability.

Unfortunately, several others join them because of the allure of woke resistance, or simply for the profit anti-establishment content can generate. They don't seem to realise what they are supporting. If the Naxals succeed, there will be no freedom or liberty. There will be no police, only party militia. There will be no rule of law or courts, only kangaroo courts. Intellectuals and professors will be sent to labour camps. Why is such bluntness necessary? Because people must know what Naxalism stands for. They must realise the horrors that could be unleashed on the country if they aren't careful. Governments can be voted out in the next election, but a state, when it collapses, can't be voted back.

The writer is national vice-president, BJP youth wing

7. How to define ‘industry’: Inside SC’s split verdict(INDIAN EXPRESS PAGE NO 14)

- **Syllabus**
  - GS Paper II: Structure, organization, and functioning of the Judiciary, Statutory bodies, and Labour welfare legislation.
  - GS Paper III: Industrial growth, ease of doing business, and labour market reforms.
- **Syllabus Sub-topics**
  - Industrial Disputes Act 1947 Section 2(j), Industrial Relations Code 2020, Bangalore Water Supply case (1978) triple test, sovereign functions of state, and rights of workers in welfare institutions.
- **Key Themes**
  - **Judicial Precedent vs Legislative Evolution:** The interpretation of the triple test for pending cases under the 1947 Act while recognizing the distinct framework of the new Industrial Relations Code.
  - **Scope of Sovereign Functions:** Delineating core state functions from commercial and welfare activities to protect employee dispute-redressal rights.
- **Relevant Questions and Focus Areas**
  - *Prelims:* Key provisions and definitions under the Industrial Relations Code 2020.
  - *Mains:* Trace the judicial evolution of the definition of 'industry' from the Bangalore Water Supply case to the recent Supreme Court Constitution Bench ruling and analyze its impact on labour welfare.

• LEGAL

How to define ‘industry’: Inside SC’s split verdict

The expansive definition from 1978 will continue to apply to pending cases. It will have no bearing on the new Industrial Relations Code

VINEET BHALLA

IN A landmark judgment that brings the curtains down on a legal debate spanning multiple decades, a nine-judge Constitution Bench of the Supreme Court delivered a fractured verdict on what constitutes an “industry” under Indian labour law.

While the judgment comprises of five separate opinions that differ sharply on the interpretation of the law, they agreed on the practical position for pending proceedings: pending cases under the repealed Industrial Disputes Act, 1947, involving the definition of “industry”, will continue to be decided under the 1978 “triple test” laid down by a seven-judge SC bench in *Bangalore Water Supply and Sewerage Board vs A Rajappa*. The new Industrial Relations Code, 2020, will have to be interpreted independently under its own text and scheme.

History of dispute

The dispute centres on Section 2(j) of the erstwhile Industrial Disputes Act, 1947 which defined an “industry”. Its broad wording led to decades of judicial debate over whether workplaces like hospitals, universities, charitable institutions and government departments came within its ambit — and whether their employees were entitled to statutory protections under the Act.

In 1978, a seven-judge bench in *Bangalore Water Supply* adopted an expansive interpretation. Justice V R Krishna Iyer’s leading opinion laid down the “triple test”: an undertaking would qualify as an industry if there was systematic activity, organised through cooperation between employer and employee, for the production or distribution of goods or services calculated to satisfy human wants and wishes.

The court held that the absence of a profit motive was irrelevant. It also developed a “dominant nature” test for establishments carrying on several activities and recognised a narrow exception for genuinely sovereign functions.

The judgment was not unanimous. The effective majority was 4:3 (two concurring opinions). The dissenting judges favoured an additional requirement that the activity be carried on along commercial lines.

The expansive interpretation came under pressure. Parliament passed the Industrial Disputes (Amendment) Act in 1982, seeking to exclude, among other categories, hospitals, educational and research institutions, charitable and philanthropic bodies and certain government activities. But the amended definition was never notified — it never acquired legal effect.

Meanwhile, the SC’s own decisions diverged over issues such as government welfare activities and sovereign functions. In 1996, a three-judge bench held that the Social Forestry Department could be an industry, while a later two-judge bench took a narrower view in relation to a forest department.

In 2005, a five-judge bench in *State of UP vs Jai Bir Singh* expressed reservations about *Bangalore Water Supply* and referred the matter to a larger bench. In 2017, a seven-judge bench directed that it be placed before the present nine-judge bench.

Validity of reference

CJI Surya Kant, writing for himself and Justices Satish Chandra Sharma, Alok Aradhe and Vipul M Pancholi, upheld the validity of the reference. Justice P S Narasimha and Justice Joymalya Bagchi also agreed that the reference could validly be considered by the bench.

Justice B V Nagarathna pointed out that the 2005 reference was based on an incorrect assumption that there was a conflict between two smaller bench decisions regarding the forest department.

Justice Dipankar Datta termed it a “faltering reference”. He criticised the 2005 bench for wrongly assuming that the 1978 Bangalore Water Supply judgment was not a unanimous decision simply because some judges had written separate concurring opinions. He noted that a settled precedent, particularly one laid down by a seven-judge bench and followed for decades, should only be revisited upon the satisfaction of exacting tests like a manifest error or public mischief. He concluded that the 2005 bench failed to meet this threshold. Thus, there was effectively a 6:3 split on the validity of the reference. Justice Bhuyan also signed off on Justice Datta’s opinion.

The triple test

Here, the judges differed more substantially. CJI Kant’s opinion said the triple test required “calibration”. In his view, an activity should have a discernible commercial character analogous to trade or business to qualify as an industry. This would keep the profit motive irrelevant while excluding activities divorced from economic enterprise, including purely charitable initiatives and core sovereign functions. But this was not made the governing test for pending cases which, he held, would continue to be governed by the extant triple test.

Justice Nagarathna defended the 1978 approach, as did Justices Datta and Bagchi. They stressed the social-welfare purpose of labour legislation and argued that introducing a commercial requirement could deprive workers in institutions such as hospitals and schools of statutory protection merely because their employers were not profit-making entities. Justice Bagchi described the triple test as possessing a “rare felicity in judicial interpretation”, while Justice Nagarathna emphasised the importance of the test in protecting workers amid privatisation and changing economic conditions.

Justice Narasimha adopted a different approach. He wrote that the debate over modifying the triple test had become “unnecessary” because the Industrial Disputes Act had been repealed.

Pending cases

This is where the judges found common ground despite their differences.

The court declined to retrospectively replace the 1978 test with a newly formulated, narrower test. Pending proceedings under the old Industrial Disputes Act involving Section 2(j) will therefore continue to be decided in accordance with *Bangalore Water Supply*.

All the opinions also made it clear that the judgment does not have any bearing on the interpretation of the new Industrial Relations Code. The Code defines “industry” as any systematic activity involving cooperation between an employer and workers to produce or supply goods and services, regardless of capital investment or profit motive. Unlike the old law, the Code excludes charitable and philanthropic institutions, domestic services, and sovereign government functions from this definition.The SC has made clear that its provisions must be interpreted independently.

Sovereign functions

The ruling also dealt with the question of when government activities can be excluded as “sovereign functions”. The broad principle emerging from the opinions is that an activity does not become sovereign just because it is performed by the State or is connected with a welfare objective. The exception is confined to core governmental functions. This is consistent with the approach in *Bangalore Water Supply*.

•HOW THE ISSUE DIVIDED THE CONSTITUTION BENCH

Chief Justice of India Surya Kant | Justice Satish Chandra Sharma | Justice Alok Aradhe | Justice Vipul M Pancholi

“... this Court has repeatedly been required to navigate competing currents of thought in its search for a principled and workable understanding of Section 2(j)... it is our earnest hope that the present adjudication serves as a reliable beacon for courts and tribunals at various levels, bringing a greater measure of coherence, certainty, and finality to a question that has engaged judicial attention for decades.”

Justice Dipankar Datta | Justice Ujjal Bhuyan

“...institutional credibility lies in respecting finality, not in perpetuating doubt; and, absent compelling justification, none of which exists here, the chapter must be treated as closed.”

Justice P S Narasimha

“A statute that creates Conciliation Officers, Labour Courts and Industrial Tribunals and hands them... power... needs to say... who falls within its reach.”

Justice B V Nagarathna

“... a narrowly tailored definition of ‘industry’ would not assist in maintaining industrial peace, protection of workmen and employers...”

Justice Joymalya Bagchi

“... interpretation which yields to no manifest error, needs to be retained... the economic & technological changes since it was decided have weakened rather than strengthened the case for revisiting it.”

Balancing act

The ruling resolves the immediate problem created by the repeal of the Industrial Disputes Act without creating a new category of law for pending cases.

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By retaining the 1978 test for those proceedings, the court has avoided reopening their legal basis. But it declined to carry that jurisprudence forward as the governing interpretation of the new labour code.