

EDITORIAL HIGHLIGHTS

26-08-2026

GS 3: SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY THE HINDU PAGE: 03

Cow gut enzymes can fight persistent infections: IISc study

The Hindu Bureau
BENGALURU

Researchers at the Indian Institute of Science (IISc) have identified enzymes from a cow's gut that can break down the polysaccharide components of biofilms on wounds and medical surfaces, which contribute to persistent infections.

According to IISc, the bacterium *Acinetobacter baumannii* poses threat in healthcare. Biofilms are communities of bacteria that form a physical barrier which reduces antimicrobial penetration and the effectiveness of host immune cells.

In the study, researchers identified specific enzymes from bovine rumen

(cow gut) that can break down the polysaccharide components of these biofilms. They used genomic data from rumen microbes to identify enzymes capable of digesting cellulose.

The team found that a specific enzyme named CRhAB (Cow rumen hydrolase against *A. baumannii*) was highly effective against the bacterium's biofilms as well as those of the bacterium *Klebsiella pneumoniae*. This enzyme drastically reduced biofilm formation and substantially suppressed the expression of key biofilm-related genes in the bacteria.

The researchers are also working on a patch-like wound dressing to treat challenging infections such as diabetic foot infections.

GS 3: ENVIRONMENT

THE HINDU: 06

Minister seeks fundamental shift in fight against drought

Global approach to droughts must move from reactive relief to proactive resilience, says Environment Minister Bhupender Yadav while addressing UNCCD conference in Mongolia

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

There ought to be a fundamental shift in the global approach to droughts from reactive relief to proactive, technology-enabled resilience, Union Environment Minister Bhupender Yadav said at the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) conference in Mongolia on Tuesday.

Addressing international delegates at the Ministerial Dialogue on “Accelerating Drought Resilience” in Ulaanbaatar during the 17th Conference of Parties (COP17) to the UNCCD, Mr. Yadav warned that dry spells are rapidly escalating. Drought is “no longer an occasional event, but a defining development challenge”, he said, citing its compounding disruptions to global water security, agricultural food systems, biodiversity, and economic stability.

‘Restore the forest’

He highlighted India’s coordinated, multi-institu-



Union Minister Bhupender Yadav says droughts are no longer an occasional event, but a defining development challenge. FILE PHOTO

tional approach integrating early warning, mitigation, relief and community resilience. Rainfall monitoring and satellite-based drought assessments trigger preparedness at the inter-ministerial and State levels, ensuring that a dry spell does not escalate into a crisis. Emphasising the critical link between land and water, he called for restoring “the forest, before the flow”, underscoring India’s focus on catchment and riverscape forestry to reduce erosion, improve water retention and recharge groundwater.

The Minister advocated

for integrating predictive technologies, localised early-warning monitoring, and proactive land management policies. The goal, he noted, is to equip vulnerable communities to anticipate and absorb environmental shocks rather than relying primarily on post-disaster relief.

Summit objectives

The ministerial talks form a central component of UNCCD COP17, hosted by Mongolia under the theme “Restoring Land. Restoring Hope”. Adopted in 1994 following the 1992 Rio Earth Summit, the UNCCD

is one of the three major Rio Conventions – alongside the framework conventions on climate change (UNFCCC) and biological diversity (CBD). It stands as the sole legally binding international agreement linking environmental management directly to sustainable land stewardship.

The 17th conference serves as a pivotal negotiation platform as land degradation currently impacts up to 40% of the planet’s land surface, undermining the livelihoods of billions of people worldwide.

During these biennial sessions, delegates from 197 member parties – alongside civil society leaders, scientists, and international financial institutions – convene to negotiate binding frameworks and policy guidance.

The agreements negotiated at COP17 aim to translate high-level environmental commitments into measurable, investable solutions for water and food security over the next decade.

GS 3: INTERNAL SECURITY THE HINDU PAGE: 8

The limits of air power, implications for theatre-isation

The wars in Ukraine and Iran delivered the same verdict to every air force. Ukraine kept the larger air force at bay, while in Iran, the skies were dominated by the opposing side, yet air superiority still failed to end the war. Both point to the same limitation of air power: it has not grown weaker, but it is no longer sufficient to win a war on its own.

That is the real stake in India's own debate: its Air Force has long favoured operational flexibility over fixed commands – an approach proven against Pakistan but untested against China.

Air power's limits exposed

Two wars and one wider pattern illustrate three ways in which air power falls short.

The first is the denial of airspace. What determined control of Ukraine's skies was not Russia's aircraft numbers, but Ukraine's networked air defence. This is what the United States Air Force's 2025 guidance concedes: contested low-level airspace is a problem that air superiority alone cannot solve. For India, this cuts both ways – integrated air defence could deny China control of the skies, or leave India exposed to the same risk in reverse.

The second is dominance of the air space. The allied air campaign against Iran is the clearest case of dominance without a decisive outcome. The allies had complete control of the skies, yet Tehran held firm. What they could see, they hit; what Iran hid, it survived. That should concern India, because what has worked against Pakistan may not hold against China. Pakistan lacks strategic depth and can be stressed quickly; China, given its military capacity, can absorb losses and continue fighting.

The third is the cost-arithmetic. This structurally favours the weaker force. A Shahed-type drone (Iran) costs roughly \$20,000 to \$50,000, while the interceptors can cost millions. India saw a version of this during Operation Sindoor (May 2025), when Pakistan's cheaper drones forced the use of costlier



Harinder Singh

Retired Lieutenant General who commanded the Leh Corps during the 2020 Ladakh crisis

India's flexible air strategy faces an uncertain test against China

interceptors. Against China, that arithmetic operates on a much larger scale, and India is not yet prepared for it.

These limits are already forcing a doctrinal rethink across most modern air forces. For India, the challenge is structural: the centralised model of the Indian Air Force (IAF), proven against Pakistan, remains untested against China, where the terrain could compound these limitations.

The IAF's case against theatre-isation

The IAF favours flexibility over fixed commands. Four tests decide whether that position holds against China too.

The first is the flexibility principle. The IAF's claim is that what has worked before will work again. Against Pakistan, it did – Balakot (2019) and Sindoor demonstrated that. Against China, however, the numbers are tighter: 460-520 combat aircraft against the People's Liberation Army Air Force's roughly 65 squadrons. The mountains make the challenge even greater, with fewer airbases and less room to redeploy. So the flexibility that defines the IAF's approach may not hold where it matters most.

The second is the integration deficit. If flexibility cannot close the gap, then joint-ness might. Two parts can help bridge this deficit. The first is joint-force generation, which has never been built sufficiently for the China front. The second is peacetime jointness, which requires no new hardware, only training and shared planning. Kargil exposed this gap in 1999; the Ladakh crisis in 2020 showed that it still persisted.

The third is more institutional, than operational. Two aspects matter. The resistance is more about career progression than doctrine. Also, ranks do not map evenly across the three services, leaving joint chains of command unsettled. Neither factor determines whether flexibility or jointness will actually work, although both matter. The United States made joint postings mandatory; not a career risk.

The fourth is consultative authority. The IAF's own proposal – a Joint Coordination Centre – depends on everyone agreeing, and a crisis leaves no time for that. A theatre command puts one person in charge, with the power to act. The U.S., China and Israel have each already made that choice – not proof that it guarantees success, but evidence that a consultative process has its limits.

Of the four questions here, only one concerns how the IAF fights. The rest concern how India organises itself for the next war. That decision lies beyond the IAF; it belongs to India's political leadership, which has a larger stake in the outcome.

The cost of delay

The IAF's position is defensible where it has been tested – in Balakot and Sindoor. What it does not tell us is how quickly the force could mobilise or how effectively it could conduct joint operations against China.

The cost of leaving this debate unresolved is real. If, for instance, China moves into Ladakh the same week that Siachen Glacier flares up, someone will have to decide, in real time, which front gets the limited pool of Rafales and S-400 systems.

A jointness gap left unaddressed for another decade could mean that an Integrated Battle Group (IBG) commander along the Line of Actual Control is still planning around air support that may not reliably arrive when needed to defend India's territorial integrity. And if that were to happen, people would not remember the missing theatre command, but a military that was simply not ready for war.

None of this is a case against the IAF. It is a case against testing the IAF's convictions in a crisis, when there may be no second chance. Therefore, one could argue that theatre-isation does not dilute the IAF's flexibility; rather, it is the missing structure that could allow that flexibility to survive contact with the one border crisis India has not faced in many decades.

GS 3: ECONOMY

INDIAN EXPRESS PAGE: 12

Simpler mining tax model can mean more revenue for states



S MAHENDRA
DEV

Mining is a long-term, capital-intensive, and labour-intensive activity. For such an industry, certainty in the fiscal environment is a vital prerequisite

IN SEPTEMBER 1974, at the Two Continents restaurant in Washington, economist Arthur Laffer drew a hump-shaped graph on a napkin to argue that tax rates and government revenue have an inverted-U relationship. His argument was simple: When governments cut high tax rates they have the potential to increase total revenue, while an increase of tax rates beyond a particular level would inversely reduce collections. Since then, the world has seen the Laffer Curve play out on multiple occasions.

In India, the most recent example of this was in the case of GST 2.0 where the rationalisation in tax rates further boosted demand, thereby increasing revenue collections. The recent passage of the Mines and Minerals (Development and Regulation) Amendment Act, 2026, in Parliament is another attempt at focusing on maximising revenue to states rather than increasing taxes, and adds to the mining reform journey that began 12 years ago.

India had the talent, enterprise and mineral wealth to grow. A missing element was a system that could unlock value. Before 2014, mineral blocks were allotted at discretion, approvals took years, and investors stayed away. India's mining sector was a closed system, marked by opacity, inefficiency and corruption, with the burden ultimately falling on state finances. Today, every block is allocated through transparent, competitive e-auctions. Once allocated, progress is monitored end-to-end. There is a plan for the welfare of mining communities, for scientific closure of mines and a vision for sustainability. This shift from discretion to certainty is the same principle this Act now extends to taxation.

At the heart of this amendment is an effort for the establishment of a simple uniform and predictable tax system so that misaligned fiscal choices do not fracture the national market for minerals. Mining is a long-term, capital-intensive, and labour-intensive activity. For such an industry, certainty in the fiscal environment is a vital prerequisite.

Minerals are the building blocks of the wider economy. Critical minerals will increasingly determine our technological,

energy and strategic capabilities. The Act enables the creation of an integrated national market for minerals. A strong cooperative federalism framework enables states to grow stronger as part of one national economy. A predictable fiscal framework will allow mineral-producing states to attract investment, expand production, and develop downstream industries, while giving businesses across the country greater certainty and competitiveness. Greater investment means more exploration, increased production, and expanded downstream industrial capacity.

Today, however, mineral producers face a complex fiscal landscape, with up to 14 types of taxes, charges, fees, and levies across different states. The recent legislation addresses this fragmentation. It will keep India's mineral market integrated, protect essential sectors from uncompetitive taxation, and help mineral-rich states realise the full value of their resources. All this is being done by retaining the state's own revenue pool from mineral production.

Mining reforms over the past 12 years have boosted the state's mineral revenues. Since the auction regime began in 2015, states have received more than Rs 7 lakh crore, which is almost 90 per cent of total revenue, from both coal and non-coal sector, through royalty, auction premium, DMF and GST. The recent amendments retain this revenue-sharing formula with 90 paise of every rupee earned from mineral production continuing to be retained by states.

Even with rich domestic resources, an uncompetitive mineral market can make India import-dependent. Therefore, rational taxation is vital for conserving foreign exchange, strengthening our supply chains, and reducing dependence on imports, important in a world of geopolitical uncertainties.

India's mining sector has moved decisively from a system of untapped potential to one of transparency, competition, investment, and national purpose. The task ahead is to build higher, to explore, produce, process more and add greater value within India.

The writer is chairperson, Economic Advisory Council to the Prime Minister

GS 2: INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

INDIAN EXPRESS PAGE: 13

Our Central Asia strategy needs less romance, more realism



RAJA MANDALA
BY C RAJA MOHAN

WHEN THE Soviet Union dissolved in 1991 and five new republics emerged in Central Asia, there was extraordinary enthusiasm in Delhi about reconnecting with a region that had deep historical ties with India. But India's lack of direct access, limited national capabilities, and persistent geopolitical headwinds have complicated that engagement.

India was not alone in imagining a grand reconnection between Central and South Asia. After the 9/11 attacks, the Bush administration bet that Afghanistan's long-term stability could be secured by reconnecting the two regions. In 2006, Washington reorganised the State Department to bring the Central Asian states together with Afghanistan and the Subcontinent in a new South and Central Asian bureau. The hope was that Afghanistan could become a natural bridge between the two regions. That vision proved difficult to realise amid Afghanistan's internal and external conflicts and the enduring tensions between India and Pakistan.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who travels to Central Asia this week for a bilateral visit to Uzbekistan and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation summit in Kyrgyzstan, will find a region very different from the one he toured in 2015. Four broad trends stand out.

The first is the growing geopolitical agency of Central Asia. Long viewed as five vulnerable landlocked states — Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan — on the periphery of Russia and China, they are acquiring greater internal coherence. Since 2018, the five have met regularly at the summit level in the consultative meetings of the heads of state of Central Asia. They have now signed a friendship treaty among themselves and plan to give it some

organisational substance and turn the region into a genuine Central Asian community.

The Central Asian Five invited Azerbaijan to form the C-6 that links Central Asia more closely to the Caucasus and Türkiye.

Equally important has been the settlement of the long-running border disputes in the Fergana Valley among Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. Growing intra-regional trade has reinforced the new political cooperation. Central Asia is becoming more of a region in its own right rather than merely the sum of five post-Soviet republics.

Second is the diversification of great-power relations. The traditional "Great Game" framework — external powers competing for control over a passive Central Asia — is utterly inadequate. In 2025, Central Asian leaders held summits with the EU, China, Russia, the United States and Japan. Central Asia has never been more courted — and perhaps never less amenable to exclusive relationships.

Russia remains an important partner in security, but the Ukraine war and China's rising economic influence have weakened Moscow's former dominance. Washington has returned with a new emphasis on commerce, critical minerals and energy corridors. Europe, Japan and others are also expanding their engagement. Central Asia's answer

India cannot match China's infrastructure spending, Russia's geographic advantages or Türkiye's direct access across the Caspian. Nor does it need to. Sustained political attention should be matched by a practical economic agenda

is the familiar "multi-vector" strategy — not unlike India's own multi-alignment. It engages all and commits exclusively to none.

The third trend is Central Asia's growing entanglement with the Greater Middle East. Although predominantly Muslim, the region's political and cultural orientation was long shaped by its Russian and Soviet past. That balance is changing. At the Central Asian summit with the US in Washington last November, Kazakhstan announced its accession to the Abraham Accords. Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan signed the charter of Trump's Board of Peace at Davos in January. Gulf capital has become increasingly important across Central Asia. Türkiye has transformed the Organisation of Turkic States from a largely cultural forum into an instrument for wider political, economic and defence cooperation.

The Iran war has complicated Central Asia's traditional southern access to the open seas and increased the importance of alternative routes westward across the Caspian towards Azerbaijan, Türkiye and the Mediterranean. The region's geopolitical horizons are widening well beyond the old Russian-Chinese framework.

Fourth is the diminution of the Afghan question. The much-feared export of revolution after the Tali-

ban's return to power five years ago has not materialised. Central Asian states including Tajikistan, which was most fearful of the Taliban, have moved towards pragmatic engagement with Kabul. Meanwhile, they have cracked down hard on the radical forces at home. But new problems are arising, for example on the management of the shared waters of Amu Darya.

Where does all this leave India? Delhi enjoys considerable goodwill in Central Asia, but geography continues to constrain its ambitions. India has no direct land access. Pakistan blocks the obvious overland route, while Afghanistan remains unstable. Chabahar and the International North-South Transport Corridor offered an alternative, but the growing conflict between Iran and the US has complicated their prospects. India's one hard-built connectivity node in the region now sits idle.

The changing regional dynamic therefore calls for a less romantic and more modest Indian approach.

India cannot match China's infrastructure spending, Russia's geographic advantages, Europe's financial resources or Türkiye's direct access across the Caspian. Nor does it need to. Sustained political attention should be matched by a practical economic agenda focused on areas where India can contribute. Delhi must also consider whether greater diplomatic flexibility towards Pakistan, Türkiye and Azerbaijan can improve its room for manoeuvre in the region.

Above all, India must recognise the political character of the new Central Asia. Its states do not want another patron; they want multiple partnerships that expand their room for manoeuvre. Modi's visit should be less about grand schemes and more about ensuring a modest, sustained and steadily expanding Indian presence in a Central Asia that is increasingly confident of playing its own game.

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ILLUSTRATION: C.R. SAKHUMAR

GS 2: GOVERNANCE INDIAN EXPRESS PAGE: 19

• GOVERNANCE

Why govt jobs are few: The narrow selection pipeline

Every year, crores of people hope to get that coveted 'sarkari naukri'. There are many exams, at central and state levels, but chances of getting in are minuscule



SHYAMLAL YADAV

THE DREAM of a *sarkari naukri* (government job) holds a powerful draw in India. Every year, crores of people apply for a far fewer number of job vacancies in the central and state governments.

Behind this appeal — among youth, technocrats, and even those in professions such as medical and engineering — are economic realities such as the lack of private jobs, social psychology and career benefits that private-sector employment can rarely match. The lack of systemic support for entrepreneurship also makes government jobs a secure haven. The recent protests over paper leaks and government exams, especially in Jharkhand, are a reflection of this appeal.

Size of government workforce

Besides technocrats and government staff such as doctors, the government workforce is primarily divided into three groups (Group A, B and C). There was earlier a Group D category (peons) as well, but it has been merged with Group C.

According to data from the Department of Expenditure's website, the total number of employees in the Union government — including Union Territories and missions abroad — as on March 1, 2023 was 30.62 lakh, against a sanctioned strength of more than 40 lakh. This is just the number of permanent employees, not including contractual employees and consultants.

The Union government spent Rs 2.95 lakh crore on the salary of these employees in 2023-24. More than 80% of this figure went towards defence, railways, postal services and home affairs.

While there is no accurate figure of all government employees of the Centre and states, it is estimated that this number is more than 1.5 crore — including the civil administration, armed forces, police, healthcare workers, teachers and others.

Central recruitment

Central government recruitments are carried out by agencies such as the Union Public Service Commission (UPSC), Staff Selection Commission (SSC), the Ministry of Defence (including the Army, Navy and Air Force), the Ministry of Railways, public sector undertakings and universities,

• CENTRAL GOVT RECRUITMENT: LIMITED JOBS, MANY ASPIRANTS

1.5 crore

The estimated number of all central and state government jobs. These include the civil administration, armed forces, police, healthcare workers, teachers and others. Both the Centre and states have many recruitment paths.

Union Public Service Commission

The prime recruitment body (for Group A and Group B posts) conducted 22 examinations in 2022-23.

25.70 lakh:

Candidates who appeared for these examinations

7,999: Candidates whose appointment was recommended

6,074 of the candidates were for the various civil services. The remaining **1,925** were picked for defence services.

Railways jobs

Railways is the largest central govt employer. In 2024, it issued 10 recruitment notices.

92,116

The number of vacancies for which it issued the 10 notifications

3.58 cr

The number of candidates who appeared in exams for these posts

12 lakh

The total size of Railways workforce

40 lakh

The sanctioned strength of employees in the Union government (including Union Territories and missions abroad):

30.62 LAKH of these posts were filled as on March 1, 2023.

This is just the number of permanent employees — contractual employees and consultants are not included in this figure.

Staff Selection Commission

The SSC (which recruits for non-gazetted Group B posts and non-technical Group C positions) conducted 20 examinations in 2024-25.

2.05 crore: Total number of candidates for all these exams

55.99 lakh: The number of candidates in SSC's largest examination — the Multi-Tasking Staff (Non-Technical) and Havaldar Examination.

83,857: The number of people recruited from the 56 lakh candidates

SOURCES: DOPF REPORTS, PARLIAMENT QUESTIONS, SSC AND UPSC ANNUAL REPORTS, RAILWAYS ANNUAL REPORT

among others. Every year, several crore people attempt to enter the central government service through one of these routes. Only around 1.20 lakh make it each year.

UNION PUBLIC SERVICE COMMISSION

The UPSC, the prime recruitment body, primarily selects Group A and Group B civil servants — high- and mid-level officers. Its most prominent exam is the Civil Services Exam, which is aimed at recruiting officials for 19 civil services including the Indian Administrative Service (IAS) and the Indian Police Service (IPS).

In 2022-23, 25.70 lakh candidates appeared for the 22 examinations conducted by the UPSC. The body recommended the appointment of only 7,999 candidates — 6,074 candidates for civil services and 1,925 candidates for defence services. Most UPSC examinations have three tiers — prelims, mains and personality tests.

STAFF SELECTION COMMISSION

The SSC carries out recruitments for most non-gazetted Group B jobs (mid-level supervisory and administrative posts) and non-technical Group C positions (clerical, technical and support posts) in various ministries and departments of the central

State govt jobs

States have their own recruitment system. State Public Service Commissions select Group A and Group B officials (high and mid level officials).

• States' Staff Selection and Subordinate Selection Commissions select Group C staffers (clerical and support posts).

government, as well as their attached and subordinate offices. The SSC also recruits assistants and lower divisional clerks for various ministries and attached offices based on their requirement.

Group C jobs make up the bulk of central as well as state government jobs.

In 2024-25, the SSC conducted 20 examinations in which a total of 2.05 crore candidates appeared. Its largest examination was the Multi-Tasking Staff (Non-Technical) and Havaldar Examination which saw 55.99 lakh candidates appearing at 279 venues in 130 cities. Of that 56 lakh, only 83,857 people were recruited.

RAILWAYS: LARGEST EMPLOYER

The Railways is the largest central government employer, with a workforce of more than 12 lakh. It maintains an annual recruitment calendar and conducts all-India examinations (since it's a central entity).

According to a July 22 Lok Sabha answer, 5.56 lakh people were recruited through these exams between 2014-15 to 2026-27 (up to June 30, 2026).

During 2024, the Railways issued 10 recruitment notices for 92,116 vacancies. The number of candidates appearing in tests to fill these 3.58 crore.

State recruitment

While recruitments for Union Territories are made by central government agencies itself, the recruitment for three all-India services (IAS, IPS, Indian Forest Service or IFoS) have a centre-state nature — the UPSC allots recruits state cadres and they work under state governments. A limited percentage of officers are always on central deputation to serve under the Union government.

State governments also have their own recruitment system — the State Public Service Commissions to select Group A and Group B officials for services such as the Provincial Civil Service (PCS), Provincial Police (PPS), and State Forest Service, among others. The nature of the all-India services is such that officials from state services, after a particular year in service, are elevated to positions in IAS, IPS or IFoS. A mix of IAS, IPS and PCS and PPS of respective states run the government administration on the ground.

Like the UPSC, these state commissions have similar three-tier systems of recruitment. In several states, however, recruitment controversies have erupted from time to time — Jharkhand is just the latest case. According to a rough estimate, all state public service commissions recommend nearly 25,000 to 30,000 candidates every year based on vacancies.

There is no compiled data available for the total number of state employees. In Uttar Pradesh, for instance, there are nearly 16.35 lakh government employees, including nearly the police force of around 4 lakh.

Tamil Nadu has an estimated 12 lakh state government employees. The figure is nearly 5.50 lakh in Kerala, around 4 lakh in Odisha, and nearly 4.5 lakh in the Union Territory of Jammu and Kashmir.

The West Bengal government recently promised to recruit 1 lakh employees to fill its vacancies.

SUBORDINATE SELECTION COMMISSIONS

As most government employees are in Group C, many such posts — including police constables and sub-inspectors — are filled through separate recruitment bodies such as state Staff Selection Commissions, Subordinate Selection Commissions and Police Recruitment Boards.

Holding these exams is a challenge as paper leaks have become a phenomenon. But for several youth, faced with a lack of private sector jobs, it is also the only option. A few years ago, over 48 lakh candidates applied for 60,244 police constable positions in Uttar Pradesh — which means 80 candidates for each post.

GS 2: POLITY

INDIAN EXPRESS PAGE: 19

LEGAL

'Essential practice' test: Why Allahabad HC rejected schoolgirl's hijab plea

Amaal Sheikh
New Delhi, August 25

THE ALLAHABAD High Court last week rejected a Muslim student's challenge to a school dress code, holding that years of attending class in a headscarf did not entitle her to continue doing so and that her claim of religious necessity rested on a "bare assertion" unsupported by evidence.

The order is the latest in a line of judgments that have turned on the "essential religious practice" test under Article 25 of the Constitution. The question of whether wearing a headscarf is religiously obligatory has travelled through multiple HCJs and remains pending before a larger bench of the Supreme Court.

Background of the case

The petitioner, a minor student at a school in Prayagraj, had studied there from Class VI to Class X wearing a headscarf, with photographs and ID cards on record

showing her in uniform, scarf included, through those years. She argued that she had worn a headscarf throughout her years at the school without objection and sought permission to continue doing so.

The school said that the scarf violated the dress code and that other students from her own religious community followed the code without it. Admitting her with the scarf would affect "the administration of the School".

The Assistant District Inspector of Schools, in a report to the District Magistrate, noted that the school is self-financed and has autonomy over its internal discipline and dress code.

The student, who belongs to the Muslim Shia community, told the court the scarf is part of her faith. She pointed out that the school allows students to wear "formal and decent" attire and argued that singling out the scarf effectively treated it as improper. She said that such refusal violates her right to free expression under Article 19(1)(a) and

argued that being denied the scarf affected her dignity and bodily integrity.

What the court held

The court rejected each of those arguments. On the years she wore the headscarf without objection, the bench held that this created no enforceable right going forward. The school's silence back then, it said, could just as easily be attributed to "lethargy, inaction, lack of will, non-enforcement of the uniform policy, even courtesy or hesitation", none of which prevented it from enforcing the dress code later.

The court also said that this was not a case where the school had changed its uniform policy, it said, but rather a case where the school was insisting that the student give up an addition she had made to the prescribed uniform while studying in the lower classes.

The bench held that as long as a dress code is "uniform, bona fide, non-discriminatory and intended to maintain discipline

and institutional identity", the choice of uniform lies primarily with the school.

On the religious claim, the court described the petitioner's case as a "bare assertion". It noted that no authoritative religious text, expert, material or other evidence had been placed on record to establish that wearing a headscarf inside the classroom was obligatory upon her or that not doing so would alter the fundamental character of her faith.

The petition, the court observed, relied largely on the fact that she had worn the headscarf since childhood and throughout her years at the school.

The court also noted that in the photographs placed on record, no other girl student was wearing a headscarf, including students whom the school said belonged to the same religious community as the petitioner.

It held that permitting students to depart from a prescribed uniform, "even a little bit... would militate against the idea of a uniform. It would transfer the authority

to determine School discipline from the institution to individual students."

Why the ruling is familiar

The Allahabad HC located its decision within a line of judgments that have generally treated school uniforms as matters for educational institutions and required students claiming religious protection to demonstrate that the practice in question is obligatory to their faith.

Among them, it most heavily relied on the Karnataka High Court's 2022 Full Bench judgment in the hijab case, which held that "wearing of hijab by Muslim women does not form a part of essential religious practice in Islamic faith".

The court in that case also held that a uniform requirement did not violate students' rights under Articles 14 (right to equality before law), 15 (prohibition of discrimination on grounds of religion, race, caste, sex or place of birth), 19 (protection of certain rights regarding freedom of

speech, expression, profession, etc.), or 21 (protection of life and personal liberty).

After the case reached the SC, a two-judge bench in October 2022 delivered a split verdict. Justice Hemant Gupta held that "a student... cannot claim the right to wear a headscarf to a secular school as a matter of right", saying that students are required to follow a prescribed uniform in state-run educational institutions.

Justice Sudhanshu Dhulia dissented, saying that "a girl child has the right to wear hijab in her house or outside her house, and that right does not stop at her school gate... To say that these rights become derivative rights inside a classroom, is wholly incorrect."

The matter was referred to the Chief Justice of India to constitute a larger bench. Since there is still no authoritative SC ruling on the issue, the Allahabad HC treated the Karnataka judgment, along with similar HC decisions, as "persuasive authority of great value".

GS 1: POST-INDEPENDENCE INDIA INDIAN EXPRESS PAGE: 19

• HISTORY

The century-long evolution of the demand for a Gorkha state

Sweety Kumari
Kolkata, August 25

THE UNION Ministry of Home Affairs on Saturday constituted a high-level committee to prepare a framework for a "permanent political solution" to the Gorkha issue. This came after a meeting of Gorkha leaders, Home Minister Amit Shah and West Bengal government representatives in Siliguri.

Roots in differential treatment

The Gorkhas' movement for a separate administrative identity is among the oldest of its kind in India, going back over 100 years.

Darjeeling and its adjacent areas — including Kalimpong, Kurseong, the Terai, and the Duars — are culturally, ethnically, and linguistically distinct from the rest of West Bengal. Its residents speak Nepali and have faced racial profiling. This persistent alienation has fueled a deep-seated identity crisis, driving the demand for a separate state to affirm their identity as Indian citizens.

But its origins go further back. The movement began in 1907, when the Dar-

jeeling Hillmen's Association, led by Sonam Wangyel Laden La, submitted a petition to the Minto-Morley Reforms Committee seeking to separate Darjeeling and Jalpaiguri from Bengal.

It highlighted the differences between the populations of Darjeeling and the plains, and argued that a legislative body composed mostly of representatives from the plains could not be expected to understand or appreciate the needs and aspirations of the hill people.

Joined by other groups, members of the movement later presented a case to the Simon Commission (1929) and British officials Sir Samuel Hoare and Lord Pethick-Lawrence for an alternative governance system, like a Chief Commissioner's Province, for direct rule. By 1947, the undivided Communist Party of India (CPI) formally submitted a memorandum for "Gorkhasathan" to interim leaders Jawaharlal Nehru and Liaquat Ali Khan.

The Gorkhaland movement

In the 1980s, the demand for a separate

New panel's mandate

• The new committee is tasked with examining all dimensions of the Gorkha issue within the framework of the Constitution.

• Alongside evaluating structural governance, the panel will examine financial assistance for the region and review a roadmap to grant ST status to 11 key Gorkha communities.

state took on a violent, high-profile dimension under Subhas Ghising, founder of the Gorkha National Liberation Front (GNLF), who coined the term "Gorkhaland". The resulting unrest led to the creation of the Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council (DGHC) in 1988, a semi-autonomous body that governed the hills for 23 years.

In 2007, politician Bimal Gurung formed the Gorkha Janmukti Morcha (GJM), reigniting the statehood demand and leading to the establishment of the Gorkha Territorial Administration (GTA) in 2011 to replace the DGHC.

The hills experienced their longest and most intense period of unrest in 2017, after the West Bengal government announced Bengali as a mandatory language in state-run schools across the region. As the state cabinet held a historic meeting in Darjeeling, GJM supporters clashed with security forces, burning outposts and prompting military intervention. The violent agitation lasted 104 days, resulting in 11 protestor deaths, bomb blasts that claimed the life of a civic volunteer, and a complete shutdown

of the region's tourist economy.

Changed political landscape

The fallout from the 2017 protests permanently altered hill politics.

State action forced Bimal Gurung underground, creating a rift that led party leaders Anit Thapa and Binay Tamang to form a breakaway faction aligned with the ruling Trinamool Congress (TMC).

This development permanently split the Gorkha votes between TMC-backed local administration and BJP-aligned national candidates. In the June 2022 GTA elections, held after 10 years, Thapa's newly formed Bharatiya Gorkha Prajatantrik Morcha (BGPM) won 27 of 45 seats to take control of local governance, while the BJP and Gurung's GJM boycotted the process.

However, the BJP has maintained a strong grip on parliamentary and state contests, winning the Darjeeling Lok Sabha seat in 2019 and 2024, as well as securing victory across all three assembly seats (Darjeeling, Kalimpong, and Kurseong) in the 2026 West Bengal Assembly elections.