EDITORIAL HIGHLIGHTS

29-10-2026

GS 2: POLITY

THE HINDU PAGE: 08

The SIR verdict, serious constitutional questions



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The top court must ensure fairness in electoral roll revisions

Did the Supreme Court of India err in its verdict dated May 27, 2026, on the Special Intensive Revision (SIR) of electoral rolls by empowering the Election Commission of India (ECI) to undertake a "limited" inquiry into citizenship for the inclusion of names in, or their exclusion from, the electoral rolls?

Second, can crystallised electoral rolls be unsettled in subsequent elections by deleting names on suspicion?

These questions arise in the context of the electoral rolls in Bihar, published on January 6, 2025, following the ECI's Special Summary Revision (SSR).

On June 24, 2025, the ECI decided to undertake a fresh SIR, beginning with Bihar. Thus, every electoral roll in Bihar between January 1, 2003 (the date of the last SIR in Bihar), and January 6, 2025 (the date of the last SSR, in Bihar), was, in effect, called into question by the ECI. This was unnecessary, as the ECI, in any case, periodically updates the electoral rolls efficiently.

This unusual exercise effectively called into question the electoral rolls used in every election held in Bihar between 2003 and 2025.

Consequently, in Bihar, the SSR dated January 6, 2025, was superseded by the SIR ordered on June 24, 2025.

The ECI's notification dated June 24, 2025, was challenged before the Court. However, the challenge was unsuccessful, with the Court endorsing the ECI's stand in its verdict dated May 27, 2026.

Even before the Court delivered its verdict on May 27, 2026, Assembly elections were held in Bihar in November 2025 and West Bengal in April 2026, following the ECI's SIR exercise, which entailed mass deletions and surprising inclusions of voters. Widespread dissatisfaction prevailed.

The SIR is now being implemented in other States amid protests.

The ECI's powers

The Court's verdict clarified that the ECI has not been empowered to determine citizenship in the "strict sense". The Court held that the power of the ECI affects an "individual's entitlement to be included in the electoral roll". It also held: "It does not, however, operate to divest the individual of claims of citizenship, nor does it foreclose a determination of that question by the competent authority under the Citizenship Act."

With respect, the words "limited" and "strict sense", in the context of an inquiry into citizenship, carry no legal significance, even as *obiter dicta* of the Court.

And the statement that the "power of ECI" "affects" an "individual's entitlement" to be "included in the electoral roll" is not capable of any interpretation other than that the ECI has the power to disenfranchise an existing voter.

This seems to give *carte blanche* to the ECI. Little wonder, then, that the ECI has been proceeding to alter the existing electoral rolls nonchalantly.

Enquiry means enquiry, no less; citizenship means citizenship, no less. The ECI's constitutional authority to inquire into citizenship remains contentious. Even a limited inquiry risks exceeding the ECI's electoral mandate. The Court seems to have erred.

While preparing the electoral roll, the ECI's function is limited only to ensuring that every person included is an adult Indian citizen.

The minimum age (18 years) and Indian citizenship are required to be ensured through documents. The ECI's role is strictly ministerial; it has no authority to conduct any inquiry – limited or otherwise – into citizenship. The problem, however, arises because no single document conclusively proves citizenship.

In other words, the Court vested the ECI with unguided discretion to remove a name from an existing electoral roll on the grounds of suspicious Indian citizenship. This amounts to a citizen, whose name was already on the electoral roll as of January 6, 2025, and who was presumed to be an Indian citizen, being disenfranchised by the ECI through the SIR process with effect from July 1, 2025.

Documents, citizenship, deletion

The Court's verdict did not even specify any document that could serve as proof of Indian citizenship.

Significantly, however, paragraph 158 of the Court's verdict reads, *inter alia*: "... it may not be out of place to note that a Ration Card, unlike a Passport or Birth Certificate, is certainly not a conclusive proof of citizenship..." Thus, the Court has ruled that a passport or birth certificate is conclusive proof of citizenship.

Is this why the Ministry of External Affairs, during a press briefing marking Passport Seva Divas on June 24, 2026, made the controversial statement that a passport was merely a travel document and not proof of Indian citizenship?

Could the Court not have, in the exercise of its jurisdiction, specified the documents that prove Indian citizenship? Or, could the Court not have issued a writ of mandamus directing the government to specify the documents that prove Indian citizenship?

The Court did neither, belying the hopes of every Indian citizen whose citizenship is questioned by the ECI.

How does one prove one's Indian citizenship? This question still cannot be answered clearly, yet the ECI can disenfranchise a person who has already voted in the last election merely on the grounds of doubts about their Indian citizenship.

On what basis have electoral rolls in India been prepared since January 26, 1950? How can an electoral roll used in a concluded election be altered on the grounds of suspicion? How can a person be disenfranchised after having voted in the previous election? What is the constitutional benchmark for disenfranchising an existing voter? These are questions that the Court could have considered.

The Supreme Court's powers are extensive under Article 32 (the right to constitutional remedies and the Court's power to issue writs for the enforcement of fundamental rights), Article 141 (the binding nature of the law declared by the Court on all courts in India), Article 142 (the power to pass orders necessary to do complete justice in any cause or matter pending before it), and Article 144 (the obligation of all civil and judicial authorities in India to act in aid of the Court). The Court can surely still set right this legal vacuum by clearly laying down a yardstick for establishing Indian citizenship.

Adulthood and Indian citizenship are the only two – repeat, only two – qualifications required for inclusion in the electoral roll. The Constitution does not prescribe any third mandatory qualification.

The question of disqualification arises only after identifying qualified voters. Only a person who is otherwise qualified can be disqualified.

Article 326 specifies the grounds for disqualification: "non-residence", "unsoundness of mind", "crime", or "corrupt or illegal practice".

The Representation of the People Act, 1950, and the Registration of Electors Rules, 1960, must comply with Article 326 of the Constitution. The overriding principles of natural justice must also be followed when disqualifying a qualified voter.

The name of a qualified voter simply cannot be removed from the electoral roll without a pre-decisional hearing.

Protecting franchise

Free and fair elections are part of the basic structure of India's Constitution. India's potential to emerge as a world power cannot be realised if this foundation and structure is weakened. If an Indian citizen remains on tenterhooks about their right to vote, how can we expect the best from such a citizen?

Although the right to vote has generally been characterised as a statutory right, its exercise is central to representative democracy and the constitutional commitment to free and fair elections. This was metamorphosed from the Court's judgments in *I.C. Golaknath vs State of Punjab* (1967), *Kesavananda Bharati vs State of Kerala* (1973) and *Indira Nehru Gandhi vs Raj Narain* (1975), and continues to hold the field. In the interpretation of this writer, the three judgments, read together, surely elevate the voting right to a basic feature of India's Constitution.

The *Kesavananda Bharati* judgment established that even Parliament's power to amend the Constitution cannot be exercised to destroy or damage its basic structure. The principle continues to safeguard essential constitutional features, including democracy.

My Lords, uphold the right to vote freely, fairly and on time.

GS 2: INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS
THE HINDU PAGE: 08

India-New Zealand trade ties set to scale new heights



Anant Goenka

President, The Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FICCI)

In 1953, Sir Edmund Hillary of New Zealand and Tenzing Norgay, the Nepalese-Indian Sherpa mountaineer made history by becoming the first ever to climb Mount Everest. This extraordinary partnership showed what co-operation, trust and determination could achieve, and we are once again set to see the India-New Zealand partnership scale to new heights with the entry into force of the India-New Zealand Free Trade Agreement (FTA).

The India-New Zealand relationship has always been cordial and extends beyond diplomatic ties. Their people share the same passion for cricket, place a high value on domestic traditions and share strong people-to-people ties. In fact, New Zealand is also home to a large Indian diaspora, strengthening relations between the two countries, be it in business, education or cultural exchange. The implementation of the FTA provides another opportunity to leverage these ties for a stronger economic partnership.

Moreover, this FTA is among the recently signed modern FTAs of India which will strengthen its foothold and economic engagement in the Indo-Pacific. The complementary nature of the two economies will help in creating greater opportunities for both countries, not just in trade but also in investments and other areas of economic co-operation.

High potential for trade expansion

India-New Zealand bilateral merchandise trade, which is at $1.2 billion, is way below potential. India caters to just 1.9% of New Zealand's merchandise imports worth $47.5 billion, while China accounts for an over 22% share and Australia, the United States, South Korea and Japan together account for another 33% share.

Most of these major suppliers (excluding the U.S.) already enjoy preferential access to the New Zealand market through respective trade agreements, thus placing Indian exporters at a competitive disadvantage.

The India-New Zealand FTA will strengthen trade, investment and professional mobility

With the India-New Zealand FTA now in force, Indian exporters will also get a level playing field in this market across all tariff lines that have been now offered duty free access.

The immediate gains for India could be significant in the labour-intensive sectors. New Zealand imported nearly $1.2 billion worth of apparel in 2025, but India's share was only around 4%. The elimination of average tariffs of nearly 10% on apparel offers Indian apparel manufacturers and exporters an opportunity to expand their presence in New Zealand. Similar potential exists in sectors such as leather, footwear, home textiles and carpets.

The opportunity is equally important in higher-value manufacturing. New Zealand imports nearly $7 billion worth of machinery and $5.2 billion worth of vehicles and automotive components annually. Yet, India's market share in these categories remains around 1% or lower. The FTA provides an opportunity for Indian engineering and automotive manufacturers to deepen their presence in New Zealand for these products.

Greater market access

The agreement also addresses regulatory barriers, which will create an opportunity for sectors such as pharmaceuticals. India already enjoyed zero-duty access for pharmaceuticals in New Zealand and has held a share of around 5.5% in New Zealand's imports. The FTA includes provisions that facilitate the use of regulatory evaluation and inspection reports from recognised regulators. This can reduce duplicative compliance requirements and further improve market access for Indian pharmaceutical companies.

New Zealand's services imports stood at $24.2 billion in 2024, and India's share was less than 3%. The FTA has provided commitments across 118 services sectors, including IT, professional services, healthcare, education and financial services.

The agreement also creates dedicated pathways for skilled professionals, providing a quota of 5,000 visas at any given time and stay for up to three years.

Additionally, the agreement ensures enhanced student mobility and post-study work opportunities. These will strengthen educational and professional linkages that exist between the two countries.

As part of the agreement, New Zealand will facilitate $20 billion worth of foreign direct investment into India over a 15-year period. This should not be difficult, given India's attractiveness to global investors and New Zealand's capital and technological expertise. India offers significant investment opportunities across sectors, be it high-value manufacturing, renewable energy, agritech, food processing, digital technologies or infrastructure.

Effective utilisation is the key

The outcomes from the FTA will flow only if they are effectively utilised. Indian businesses need targeted market intelligence, stronger distribution networks, regulatory preparedness and commercial partnerships. What is equally important is sustained engagement with New Zealand's investors to develop a pipeline of commercially viable projects.

Through the combined efforts of all stakeholders – the government, the associations as well as the industry on both sides – it should not be difficult to double India-New Zealand bilateral trade by 2030. The agreement has created an enabling framework and success will depend on how these opportunities are converted into exports, investments, jobs and meaningful partnerships.

GS 2: SOCIAL JUSTICE
THE HINDU PAGE: 09

India must build a holistic care system



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India's development story over the past decade has been one of infrastructure: highways, metro lines, electrification and digital public platforms, each treated as a foundation for growth that requires public investment and planning. One foundation on which every economy depends has not received the same attention: care.

Everyone needs care at some point in life. How care is organised shapes people's opportunities, well-being and participation in society and the economy. When services are absent, families, and women most of all, bear the cost in unpaid work, lost earnings, and narrower opportunities.

In the Periodic Labour Force Survey 2025, 44.4% of women outside the labour force cited childcare and homemaking as the main reason for staying out of the labour force. India's Time Use Survey 2024 found that 41% of women aged 15-59 provided unpaid care, spending an average of 140 minutes a day on it. Expanding access to affordable, quality care services can give women greater freedom to pursue employment, leisure and participation in public life. With an ageing population, the need for accessible care services will only grow.

Yet care rarely features in India's growth strategy. For a Viksit Bharat 2047, the question is not only how to expand women's economic participation, but how to build the care system that makes such participation possible. The Anganwadi network, strengthened through Saksham Anganwadi and POSHAN 2.0, anchors early childhood care and nutrition. Palna, under Mission Shakti, supports crèches, while Mission Vatsalya, social security and provisions for persons with disabilities and senior citizens address other needs. However, four gaps stand out.

Care is split across multiple ministries, from women and child development to housing and urban affairs. Each runs valuable programmes, but without a common framework

First, fragmentation. Care is split across multiple ministries, from women and child development to housing and urban affairs. Each runs valuable programmes, but without a common framework. This can leave gaps such as crèches that close before factory shifts end or eldercare needs that fall outside of existing schemes.

Second, coverage. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) estimates that 9-10 million women in low-income urban households need childcare. Similarly for eldercare, 24% of older persons face limitations in daily activities, while national data on service availability and coverage remain limited.

Third, the workforce. Care depends on frontline workers; from Anganwadi workers to home-based caregivers and domestic workers – many of whom remain inadequately remunerated or engaged on an honorary basis. Building on NITI Aayog's proposals, clear standards, certification, decent working conditions, social protection and career pathways would recognise care as skilled and paid work.

Finally, financing and norms. Care is still budgeted as welfare rather than investment, and workplace policies assume that caregiving is women's work. The Economic Advisory Council to the Prime Minister (EAC-PM) recommends statutory paid paternity leave in the private sector.

Comparable economies are building their own care ecosystems. Colombia's 2025 National Care Policy brings 34 government entities under one framework. Brazil's 2024 National Care Policy and 2025 National Care Plan set up inter-ministerial committees to steer implementation. In Nepal, care mapping was used to fund care pilots.

The way forward

In India, NITI Aayog's Reimagining Care: Strategies for Empowering Caregivers in Viksit Bharat@2047 report proposes a National Caregiving Council to strengthen coordination. The Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment is consulting States and Union Territories; its May 2026 national workshop discussed a National Care Economy Mission with inter-ministerial governance, aligned financing and shared data. State-level care roadmaps can make this practical. States can map needs and services together with their demographic trend, identify gaps in childcare, eldercare and disability support, and prepare costed plans with clear responsibilities.

Building on UNDP's research and lessons from UN Women's TransformCare initiative in more than 50 countries, the two agencies are supporting this agenda under government leadership, from mapping care services and skilling care workers to backing women-led childcare enterprises with the Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs and Women Entrepreneurship Platform.

India has the programmes, policy vision and evidence. On this International Day of Care and Support, the task is to connect them, finance them and hold them to account.

GS 3: ENVIRONMENT

THE HINDU PAGE: 10

Is GRAP enough to curb pollution?

What is GRAP, and why is it imposed in Delhi-NCR? Which factors worsen air pollution during winter? What restrictions are imposed under Stage I of GRAP? What additional curbs come into effect under Stages III and IV? Has GRAP consistently improved Delhi's winter air quality?

EXPLAINER

Nikhil M. Babu

The story so far:

As air quality in Delhi worsened to the 'poor' category in the national capital, the Commission for Air Quality Management in NCR and adjoining areas (CAQM) on last Wednesday announced Stage I of the Graded Response Action Plan (GRAP) in Delhi and the National Capital Region (NCR) to bring down the pollution.

Every winter, air pollution spikes in Delhi-NCR and many parts of the larger Indo-Gangetic Plains, mainly due to meteorological factors such as lower wind speeds and a drop in temperature. Pollution from stubble burning in October and November and firecrackers during the festive season adds to emissions from vehicles and dust, further worsening air quality.

What is GRAP?

The Graded Response Action Plan (GRAP) is a set of short-term emergency measures to reduce air pollution and is divided into four stages. The CAQM announces the different stages, depending on the level of pollution recorded or forecast for the near future.

Whenever the CAQM announces GRAP, it directs State governments to implement the restrictions with "immediate effect" in entire Delhi and also in the NCR districts of Haryana, Uttar Pradesh, and Rajasthan. The restrictions will come into effect on the ground when the respective State governments pass orders to implement them.

As per law, the State governments are bound to implement directions of the CAQM and the Commission can initiate legal action against officers not following its directions.

The GRAP was first notified by the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change in January 2017, pursuant to Supreme Court directions to provide for graded measures corresponding to different levels of air quality.

Initially, the GRAP was implemented by the EPCA (Environmental Pollution (Prevention and Control) Authority), which was formed in 1998 by the Supreme Court and was responsible for the management and coordination of air pollution in Delhi and the NCR.

But the EPCA was not backed by a statute, and experts had raised the issue that it lacked the teeth to act against authorities that did not follow its orders.

In 2021, the CAQM replaced the EPCA, and since then it has been implementing the GRAP. Over the years, at times after coming under attack from the Supreme Court, the GRAP has gone through multiple revisions, making it more stringent.

What now?

Most of the actions under Stage I are directing authorities to strictly implement existing norms related to air pollution.

The four stages of GRAP are: Stage I - 'Poor' Air Quality (Delhi AQI ranging between 201-300), Stage II - 'Very Poor' Air Quality (Delhi AQI ranging between 301-400), Stage III - 'Severe' Air Quality (Delhi AQI ranging between 401-450), Stage IV - 'Severe +' Air Quality (Delhi AQI > 450).

A higher AQI indicates worsening air quality.

Though the GRAP can be imposed any time during the year, the higher stages of GRAP are mostly invoked during winter as air quality deteriorates.

Under GRAP I, the CAQM has directed Delhi and its neighbouring States to ensure that diesel generator sets are not used as a regular source of power supply, among other measures.

It's under Stage III and Stage IV of the GRAP that more severe actions kick in.

For instance, under Stage III, the CAQM announces a ban on construction and demolition activities in Delhi-NCR and a ban on the plying of BS III petrol and BS IV or below emission standard diesel Light Motor Vehicles (LMVs) or cars in Delhi and in the High Vehicle Density (HVD) districts of Gurugram, Faridabad, Sonipat, Ghaziabad and Gautam Buddh Nagar.

Similarly, under Stage IV, the ban on construction becomes even more severe with fewer exemptions, and there is a ban on the entry of trucks into Delhi, except for trucks that are BS-VI, electric, CNG, and LNG. Other measures are also taken under both the stages.



Winter woes: People walk along Kartavya Path as haze envelops Rashtrapati Bhavan; every winter, air pollution spikes in Delhi-NCR and many parts of the larger Indo-Gangetic Plains, mainly due to meteorological factors. ANI

Does GRAP actually help?

The GRAP aims to cut down the sources of pollution for a short time when the air pollution is very high, so that the air quality improves, but it is not a long-term strategy.

According to an analysis released on Thursday (October 22, 2026) by the Centre for Research on Energy and Clean Air (CREA), a Finland-based non-profit research organisation, there has been "no consistent" improvement in Delhi's winter air quality over the past four years, despite the imposition of GRAP.

"Delhi's winter AQI (Air Quality Index) has fluctuated over the past four years, with no consistent improvement. The mean AQI rose from 280 in winter 2022-23 to 304 in 2023-24, fell to 285 in 2024-25 and increased again to 295 in 2025-26. The median AQI followed a similar pattern, rising from 294 to 324, falling to 289 and then increasing to 305," CREA said in a statement.

Delhi's winter air quality has not followed a consistent downward trend since the 2022 revision of GRAP, and the mean and median AQI for the latest winter were both higher than in 2022-23, said Manoj Kumar, an analyst at CREA.



Vehicles pass as an anti-smog gun sprays water to curb air pollution in central Delhi, where GRAP-I measures are in effect, in New Delhi on Tuesday. ANI

What is different this winter?

In addition to GRAP, the Delhi government in June this year issued a gazette notification of a set of restrictions for winter months. But unlike GRAP, these restrictions will come into play irrespective of the air quality at a particular time.

For instance, as per the June 23 notification, from November 1 to January 31, there will be a ban on the plying of all non-Delhi-registered motor vehicles below BSVI emission standards in the national capital. However, electric, CNG, emergency, and sovereign duty vehicles are exempted from it.

Similarly, as per the notification, from November 1 to February 28, existing parking charges at authorised parking sites will be doubled to discourage use of private vehicles, except for parking spaces owned and managed by the Delhi Metro Rail Corporation (DMRC).

But if there is any conflict between the GRAP orders and the June 23 notification by the Delhi government, the GRAP will take precedence.

With the additional restrictions imposed by the Delhi government, this winter is set to see one of the highest levels of government action in the recent past in Delhi, at least on paper.

THE GIST

- GRAP imposes increasingly stringent restrictions as Delhi's air quality worsens, from 'Poor' to 'Severe+', but its measures are short-term
- Delhi's winter air quality has shown no consistent improvement over the past four years despite GRAP, with the mean AQI rising from 280 in 2022-23 to 295 in 2025-26, according to CREA
- The Delhi government has introduced additional curbs, including a ban on non-Delhi-registered vehicles below BS-VI standards and doubled parking charges at authorised sites, regardless of air quality levels

GS 2: POLITY

INDIAN EXPRESS PAGE: 12

Inter-State Council is a meeting point that has withered away. It must be rebuilt



THAROORTHINK

BY SHASHI THAROOR

IT'S BEEN rumoured for weeks that the government wished to reconvene Parliament (whose monsoon session has deliberately not been prorogued) in order to push through the delimitation bill that it hopes will lock in a two-thirds majority for the states in which the BJP is strong. Now it seems that isn't happening, either because the government isn't sure it has the votes, or because it fears that convening Parliament in the present environment will merely give the Opposition one more forum to raise a clamour about the Election Commission's malfeasance.

Whatever it eventually does, deciding the issue of delimitation in Parliament is not enough: It bypasses an essential element in our federal system, the states. Any delimitation should only follow a grand national conversation that takes the views of state governments into account. But what forum would permit them to express their views on a matter of such transcendent importance?

There's no obvious answer, unless the government is prepared to revive the Inter-State Council from its long-standing state of desuetude. Framed under Article 263 of the Constitution, the Council was conceived by the founders as a vital institutional mechanism to foster federalism, facilitate inter-governmental consultation, and harmonise the disparate interests of the Union and the states. Yet, despite its potential, the Council lay dormant for over four decades following Independence, only to be formally constituted in 1990 on the recommendation of the Sarkaria Commission.

This initial activation was heralded as a watershed moment for Indian democracy, promising a consultative platform where state governments could engage directly with the national executive on equal terms. However, it has been subject to institutional atrophy and systemic neglect. Deprived of operational autonomy, regular meetings, and independent authority, it remains largely ineffective, leaving a critical structural void at the heart of Indian federalism.

In the process, we have betrayed the visionary intent embedded within Article 263. The framers of the Constitution were conscious that they had created a federal structure that featured a strong centralising impulse in an extraordinarily diverse country. Article 263 was deliberately drafted in flexible and wide-ranging language, empowering the President to establish a council that could investigate and discuss subjects in which some or many states, or the Union and one or more states, have a common interest. It was designed to bring about better coordination of policy and action between the Centre and the states. No wonder the Sarkaria Commission identified the dormant Inter-State Council as the missing link in India's federal equilibrium. It envisioned, as the Constitution did, a body that would serve as the premier arena for inter-governmental negotiation, policy alignment, and political conflict resolution — a dedicated constitutional organ to navigate the complexities of power-sharing in a pluralist polity.

Unfortunately, rather than operating as a constitutional chamber mediating between the Centre and the states, the Council became an appendage of the Home Ministry, subject to its bureaucratic imperatives and political priorities. This subordination rendered it a minor department within a central ministry rather than an independent administrative entity capable of setting an unbiased national agenda. The Council's statutory obligation to meet regularly was repeatedly disregarded by successive governments; long gaps of several years between meetings became the norm. This circumscribed authority reflected a preference for unilateral central policymaking or for informal negotiations over institutionalised dialogue, and the Council never acquired the prestige and leverage necessary to influence legislative initiatives or policy decisions affecting states' rights, revenues, or constitutional questions like delimitation.

> India needs a continuous, systematic process of shared deliberation and consultation with the states. The Constitution gives us one. It's time we took it out of cold storage

The result of the Inter-State Council's atrophy is the erosion of trust between central authorities and states, especially those ruled by opposition parties. In contemporary governance, most policy challenges, ranging from economic and tax reforms to ecological preservation, public health crises, and internal security, cut across jurisdictions. When a platform like the Inter-State Council is inactive, central policies are made without meaningful consultation with state CMs. This top-down approach inevitably triggers political friction, administrative resistance and constitutional controversy — as is certain to occur over delimitation.

India needs a continuous, systematic process of shared deliberation and consultation with the states. The Constitution gives us one. It's time we took it out of cold storage, reconstituted it as a genuinely autonomous body and re-energised it to serve the demands of modern governance. The Council's secretariat should be reimagined as an independent statutory authority, staffed by a diverse pool of civil servants and technical experts. Its meeting schedule must be strictly institutionalised, ensuring that the Prime Minister, key cabinet ministers, and state chief ministers are convened at predictable, regular intervals to deliberate on matters of shared national importance. The Council should serve as the primary locus for negotiating major policy reforms, evaluating the local impact of national schemes, and mediating inter-state disputes regarding resource sharing, infrastructure, environmental management and constitutional change.

Rebuilding the Inter-State Council as an empowered body would fundamentally alter the trajectory of Indian governance. By providing a permanent, inclusive platform for transparent dialogue, the Council can bridge the structural gap between central legislative authority and state administrative execution. It would transform Centre-state relations from an erratic cycle of political confrontation into a cooperative partnership grounded in mutual respect and constitutional legitimacy. It would permit state views to be taken into account before national policies are made. In a nation characterised by vast socio-economic diversity and complex federal dynamics, a fully functional and independent Inter-State Council is not a luxury but a structural necessity.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi popularised the phrase "cooperative federalism", but it has remained a platitude without a platform. He now has a chance to give it substance — and he doesn't even require a law. The Inter-State Council is already in the Constitution. Just bring it to life.

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GS 3: ECONOMY

INDIAN EXPRESS PAGE: 13

The missing middle in India's growth story



ISHAN BAKSHI

THIS YEAR, five countries — Jordan, Micronesia, the Philippines, Sri Lanka and Vietnam — have moved up to the upper-middle income category as per the World Bank. Of these, Vietnam's case is instructive. In 2009, it crossed the threshold for lower-middle income status, meaning it took the country 16 years to move up the income classification. India, which entered the lower-middle income group in 2007, remains stuck in that category, 19 years later. China's ascent was even faster, reaching upper-middle income status in 2010, just 13 years after being classified as lower-middle income.

If incomes grow at 8.5 per cent in dollar terms — as opposed to 5.4 per cent over the past decade — it would take India around six years to reach the current threshold for upper-middle income status (not future inflation adjusted). Such a shift is not impossible. And while there are reasons to be optimistic about the country's growth prospects, there are harsh realities that must be confronted. Five statistics capture both the hope and the exasperation around the Indian economy today.

One, India's labour force has increased by more than 100 million in less than a decade as per the World Bank. During this period, the unemployment rate has trended lower, suggesting that somehow the economy has managed to create just about enough jobs. But being employed, or self-employed for that matter, is not the same as being productively employed. The poor grab whatever opportunities they can get. They don't have the luxury of staying unemployed. Roughly two-thirds of the increase in the labour force is accounted for by women, most of whom are self-employed and engaged in agriculture. In fact, 43 per cent of the labour force is still employed in agriculture and 79 per cent of the non-agri labour force is engaged in informal enterprises — sectors where value added is miniscule. A country becomes rich only when its labour force moves from informal to formal, from low- to high-productivity jobs.

Two, the number of registered factories has doubled, rising from 1.3 lakh in 2004-05 to 2.6 lakh in 2024-25. Yet manufacturing's share in the economy and employment hasn't gone up. Between 2020-21 and 2024-25, fewer workers found employment in formal manufacturing than in the gig economy. The factory floor has been one of the most effective pathways for mass upward mobility. But not in India. And while value added per worker has increased, wages per worker have grown at a slower pace than profits. A more capital-intensive mode of production has weakened workers' bargaining power, and a greater share of value added accruing to capital has led to higher inequality.

Three, for the better part of this decade, the government has spent billions upgrading the country's infrastructure. From highways to airports, freight corridors and ports, the much-needed upgrade has brought down the logistics costs, improved competitiveness. But what happens next? Public investment was meant to crowd in private investment. But the baton hasn't been passed over. Companies have repaired their balance sheets, and favoured returning money to shareholders and investing selectively.

Four, there has been a tremendous expansion in renewable energy over the past decade, with solar energy being the key driver. But this has created its own set of challenges. During summer this year, even as demand surged, the solar output had to be curbed due to surplus daytime energy and inadequate transmission infrastructure: Solar-energy generation is running ahead of storage and transmission infrastructure. The electricity sector is a constraint on India's manufacturing and tech ambitions. Factories need reliable and affordable power supply. Data centres and AI also require large and dependable sources of electricity. Storage, transmission and the investments therein are therefore critical for building a strong industrial and technological base.

Five, India currently has 9.4 lakh dollar millionaires as per the UBS Global Wealth Report. This places the country alongside Switzerland and marginally behind Spain. By next year, it could well be home to a million millionaires. This will have several implications. The trend towards premiumisation will only accelerate. Demand for foreign exchange will also increase as wealthier households will increasingly opt for overseas education, investments and travel. And while the affluent also contribute more to government tax revenues, these numbers also imply that the economy is producing richer people faster than it is giving rise to a broad middle class.

India needs to move its workforce from low to high-value jobs. It needs factories that can provide employment at scale and compete in global markets. For that it needs public infra, but also for private capital to take the baton. Only through high-productivity jobs can India create widespread prosperity.

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