

SANSKRITI IAS EDITORIALS HIGHLIGHTS

03 – 08 - 2026

STRONG HEALTH SYSTEMS FOR ALL WITH BETTER PUBLIC SPENDING

(THE HINDU PAGE NO 8)

Syllabus Mapping

1. **GS Paper:** GS Paper 2 & GS Paper 3
2. **Syllabus Topics:**
 1. Issues relating to development and management of Social Sector/Services relating to Health.
 2. Important aspects of governance, transparency, accountability, and public finance management.
 3. Government budgeting and mobilization of resources.

Strong health systems for all with better public spending

The discourse on building strong public health systems tends to start with financing. Indeed, according to the World Bank, the per capita public spending on universal health coverage in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) – including government expenditure and off-budget development assistance – is about half of the minimum benchmarks. As a share of gross domestic product (GDP), the health expenditure gap between LMICs and high-income countries narrowed from 2.05 percentage points in 2000 to 1.68 percentage points in 2023. While it may seem that LMICs are “catching up”, recent World Health Organization data show that in per capita terms the gap has in fact expanded more than three-fold during this period.

Health aid under pressure
Over the years, “development assistance for health” (DAH) has played a critical role in supplementing national budgets in LMICs with the amount of such aid peaking in 2021 during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the trend of increasing DAH reversed sharply post the pandemic. Further, in early 2025, the United States, a country that has historically contributed over a third of all DAH globally per year, announced cuts to the tune of 67% to its foreign assistance programme. The United Kingdom, France, and Germany followed suit, with cuts of 39%, 35%, and 12%, respectively. As per the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), health funding could drop by up to 60% from its 2022 peak.

At the same time, national budgets are strained due to rising public debt and its costs. Global public debt reached a record figure of \$102 trillion in 2024, with developing countries accounting for \$31 trillion of this total. Since 2010, the public debt of developing countries has grown twice as fast as that of advanced countries. In 2024, according to UN Trade and Development (UNCTAD), developing countries paid a record \$921 billion in net interest payments in public



Nalini Gulati
Editorial Adviser
at 'Ideas for India'



Vikas Dimble
Works at the Isaac
Centre for Public
Policy (ICPP),
Ashoka University

debt leaving less for other needs including health. With public sources drying up, it is unlikely that more money will flow into health systems anytime soon and the way forward may be to spend available money better. There are three broad ways to make public health spending go further.

The first is to spend what is allocated. The World Bank reports that health budgets in LMICs are executed at around 85%-90%, rates that are lower than that for the general budget and for education. This effectively means that there is a deprioritisation of health at the implementation stage of budgets. In India, a parliamentary panel found that only about two-thirds of the allocation for the flagship health infrastructure mission was spent in 2024-25. Within the National Health Mission (NHM), the picture is worse: just 26% of the money earmarked for communicable and non-communicable disease programmes was actually used that year.

The right health investments
The second is to spend on the right things. Budget execution varies across expenditure categories. While wages and salary budgets tend to be implemented in full, there is underspending on goods and services. As a result, workers are not well-equipped to deliver quality health care. More broadly, there is a choice to be made in terms of the tiers of health care that are prioritised in public spending. A lot of the money goes to curative care at the secondary and tertiary levels – at the cost of preventive, primary health care. According to estimates from the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine, India spends less than one-fourth of public health money on preventive care.

Purely from a health impact viewpoint, public health money is best spent on classic public goods such as infectious disease control or sanitation, where there is a ‘market failure’ – rather than on the expansion of relatively cheap curative health services (for instance, treating common illnesses) that the private sector is

already supplying competitively. Recent evidence bears this out: public health spending markedly improves infectious disease outcomes, through greater access, vaccination, and sanitation, but does far less for maternal and child health or non-communicable diseases, making a strong case for strategic allocation. As populations age, more will need to be done for chronic conditions in terms of addressing risk factors, early detection, and management.

Better governance, better health
The third is to improve governance and operational efficiency. Good governance is key: if corruption is reduced or the quality of bureaucracy improves, countries see greater positive effects of public health spending on desired health outcomes, such as child mortality. The converse also holds: simply increasing spending where governance is weak is unlikely to improve outcomes. Moreover, with the increasing decentralisation of public service delivery, it is becoming imperative to focus on improving governance at the subnational level.

Within governance, there is a crucial role for public finance management. While a well-formulated budget is a good starting point, impact will only be achieved if the budget is implemented efficiently. There is a need to improve budget credibility and cash disbursement. Involvement of public health providers in budget processes can enhance both their accountability and motivation. Improving procurement processes can help achieve greater value for money in health sector resources. As the pandemic has taught us, budgets should be flexible to respond to unforeseen circumstances.

That said, the case for enhanced spending remains: its returns are greatest precisely where health outcomes are poorest; hence, money that is well-directed can help narrow gaps across countries.

Both writers co-authored ‘The Care Gap’, a living literature review supported by Coefficient Giving

ANALYSING THE SC'S JUDGMENT ON SEX WORK

(THE HINDU PAGE NO 9)

Syllabus Mapping

3. **GS Paper:** GS Paper 2

4. **Syllabus Topics:**

1. Structure, organization, and functioning of the Executive and the Judiciary (Judicial jurisprudence under Article 142).
2. Welfare schemes for vulnerable sections of the population by the Centre and States and the performance of these schemes.
3. Mechanisms, laws, institutions, and bodies constituted for the protection and betterment of vulnerable sections.

Analysing the SC's judgment on sex work

For more than three decades, sex workers have told governments and courts how anti-trafficking interventions cause profound harm including forced rescues, indefinite detention in "corrective homes", separation from children and even threat to life. And for decades, these accounts were only acknowledged in fragments, and never in a comprehensive rights-based framework. That is what makes the Supreme Court's judgment of May 29, 2026, so significant.

Across nearly 300 pages, the court departs from many assumptions that have long shaped anti-trafficking discourse globally. It recognises that agency and vulnerability can coexist, rejects the conflation of migration with trafficking, affirms that constitutional rights do not disappear because society disapproves of sex work, holds that consenting adult sex workers cannot forcibly be rescued; and that any intervention must begin with an inquiry into consent. Invoking Article 142, the court gives these directions legal force.

But the judgment also exposes a paradox: it adopts arguments that have been painstakingly developed by sex workers but does not acknowledge the workers or their collectives (such as the National Network of Sex Workers among others). This is not only a question of credit; it reveals how even progressive jurisprudence can reproduce a hierarchy of knowledge in which those most affected by law remain its least recognised authors.

What the judgment assumes

The judgment places faith in institutions that have repeatedly failed the very people it seeks to protect. The court assumes that clearer legal standards will produce different institutional behaviour – that police officers will assess consent without prejudice, magistrates will suspend moral judgment, shelter homes will become rights-based



Pankhuri Agarwal

Lecturer and Leverhulme Early Career Research Fellow at King's College London. Author of 'Fictions of Freedom: Migration, Modern Slavery and Bureaucracy in India' (Cambridge University Press)

support services, and sex workers will have access to legal aid.

For many women, especially those from the Dalit and Adivasi communities, bureaucracy has never been a neutral system. Caste discrimination and economic marginalisation continue to shape everyday encounters with the state. One woman, wrongly labelled a trafficker after a raid, has spent seven years reporting every month to a police station while attending court hearings where, despite all this time, her statement has never even been recorded. "I go to court and sit outside. Then they call my name, and I go inside. But they don't ask me anything. They have not even recorded my statement yet!"

The top court rightly recognises caste as one of the structural conditions that can push women into sex work. But it stops there. Caste does not simply explain entry into the profession. It also structures every institution responsible for implementing this judgment. As one worker put it: "The state says that *acche din* (good days) will come. When will our *acche din* come? Everything is about money these days. Take any actor. They can kill but do not get arrested. Those who do not have money have to keep going to the court like me." Her question exposes the judgment's central assumption: that the law is applied equally once rights are recognised. For many workers, the challenge is not only overcoming moral prejudice. It is navigating a legal and bureaucratic system that continues to be shaped by caste.

The judgment is also noticeably quieter about another source of violence: the anti-trafficking industry itself. The court recommends reforming shelter homes but does not examine the organisations that run them, the funding structures that sustain them, or the incentives that make carceral and forced rescue practices persist. The rescue industry is not solely a humanitarian project. It is sustained by a dense network of

civil society organisations that participate in forced raids, manage shelter homes, and exercise significant authority over the women confined within them.

One woman who experienced both prison and a government shelter offered a striking comparison. "Even after rescue, we are bound by the shelter. It is another form of bondage. It seems better to serve six months in jail and come out free than to stay in a shelter for an unknown time." This account is not an exception. It exposes an uncomfortable reality that anti-trafficking discourse obscures: rescue can become another mechanism of control.

The road ahead

The top Court's recommendations are important. But for the judgment to fulfil its promise, three priorities stand out.

First, sex workers and their unions must move from the margins to the centre of implementation. They should draft guidelines, monitor compliance, shape police training, and establish standards for shelters. Second, the anti-trafficking NGO sector deserves scrutiny. Longstanding evidence suggests that some have become active participants in coercive rescue practices while operating with limited accountability to the communities they claim to serve. Their funding and legal immunity should no longer be taken for granted. Finally, the structural conditions identified by the court do not require new institutions to fix. India already possesses an extensive welfare architecture. The challenge is ensuring that sex workers can access it as rights-bearing citizens.

The Supreme Court has opened an important constitutional door. Whether it leads to meaningful change will depend on whether India's institutions can abandon decades of paternalism and begin treating sex workers as citizens whose choices deserve the same legal respect as anyone else's.

Why Are Govt. Schools Shutting Down?

(THE HINDU PAGE NO 10) Syllabus Mapping

5. **GS Paper:** GS Paper 2

6. **Syllabus Topics:**

1. Issues relating to development and management of Social Sector/Services relating to Education and Human Resources.
2. Right to Education (RTE) Act implementation and challenges in school rationalisation.
3. Government policies and interventions for development in various sectors and issues arising out of their design and implementation.

Why are govt. schools shutting down?

Which States have witnessed the highest number of closures? How has school rationalisation affected children's access to education? Who bears the biggest burden of government school closures? Can the Centre step in to reverse the trend? Why has the Right to Education Act fallen short?

EXPLAINER

G. Ramakrishnan

The story so far:

A recent NITI Aayog report said some 94,000 government schools were closed over the past decade, an average of 25 a day, contributing to a 2.26 crore decline in government school enrolment. The government schools' share of total enrolment has fallen from 71% in 2005 to 49.24% in 2024-25.

Why are government schools shutting down?

School closures are happening across States on the grounds of rationalisation. The National Education Policy (2020) advocates such rationalisation but without endangering the concept of neighbourhood schools.

School closure numbers cannot be explained away as gradual demographic drift, urban migration and so on. Rather, it is a coordinated administrative decision taken in states where the poorest and most rural children have the least capacity to compensate for a school that has vanished.

Which States are among the worst affected?

Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh and Jammu and Kashmir lead in this.

In December 2023, Madhya Pradesh's School Education Department found that 7.37 lakh children in the state have no school records. They are not enrolled in any school – private or government.

In Jhabua and Shivpuri, for instance, 29,000 children fall into the 'Drop Box' category – the department's term for those at imminent risk of dropping out. Across the State's 55 districts, more than 3,500 government schools recorded zero new admissions this academic session. Another 6,500 schools saw fewer than 10 admissions.

The department's response was to



School closures are happening across States on the grounds of rationalisation. THULASI KAKKAT

instruct every district education officer to paste lists of unmapped children on school noticeboards, contact them directly, and upload their details to the State portal.

Statewide, 11.38 lakh children fall under the 'Drop Box' category. Another 1.23 lakh are already recorded as dropouts. A further 1.55 lakh have left school because their families were displaced or migrated for work.

The department's flagship outreach programmes, School Chalan Hum and the Home Contact Campaign, were built to prevent exactly this. The State's own audit of its own scheme found three quarters of a million children whom neither programme had reached.

Government data tabled in the Lok Sabha in February confirms the scale. UDISE+ figures show the national count of government schools falling from 11.07 lakh in 2014-15 to 10.17 lakh in 2023-24, a decline of roughly 89,000 that lines up almost exactly with NITI Aayog's own count. Private schools nationally grew from 2.88 lakh to 3.31 lakh over the same decade.

Madhya Pradesh's government schools fell from 1.22 lakh in 2018-19 to 99,411 the very next year – a drop of roughly 22,600

in twelve months. Uttar Pradesh's government schools fell from 1.63 lakh to 1.38 lakh in that identical year, a drop of over 25,000.

Reports on J&K's rationalisation programme documented children now travelling 4 to 6 km daily to reach a functioning school, violating neighbourhood school mandates of Right to Education Act (RTE).

More than 4,300 schools were closed or merged under a rationalisation scheme, with the Lok Sabha's own UDISE+ figures showing the state's school count falling from 23,167 in 2020-21 to 18,785 by 2022-23, alongside nearly 15,000 vacant teaching posts reported separately in the state assembly.

What is the impact of the shutdown of government schools?

Government schools in India are not a neutral public utility used evenly across classes. They are, disproportionately, the schools of the poor – of Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and the poorer strata of backward-class communities. India is home to roughly 60% of the world's below-poverty-line population, and it is their children who fill government classrooms.

A 2019 National Sample Survey analysis found access to free education declining unevenly, with Muslim and Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe households disproportionately marginalised from the schools nearest to them.

The burden falls disproportionately on girls who are the first to be withdrawn when the nearest school stops being nearby. What consolidation looks like on the ground is often a single teacher covering five classes at once – unable to know an individual child's background or tailor instruction, technically in breach of the Right to Education Act's staffing and quality norms.

Who is responsible for this trend?

In Lok Sabha, the concerned minister said education is on the concurrent list, and the responsibility for this trend lies entirely with States. But the RTE is a Central Act and the mandates on neighbourhood schools are the Centre's responsibility.

Further, the Centre seeks to intervene in State school education by making Central fund allocation for schools conditional on NEP implementation and also imposes a language policy. There are avenues for the Centre to step in against this trend.

The RTE Act, in force since 2010, guarantees free and compulsory education from age six to 14. RTE says nothing binding about the quality of what is delivered once a child is inside the classroom. It creates entitlements that children, by definition, cannot assert on their own – and parents, particularly poor and rural parents, often lack the legal and institutional capacity to enforce either. RTE assumes a symmetry of power between the state, the school, and the family that does not exist on the ground. RTE is not justiciable, in practice. School Management Committees, the one mechanism written into the RTE to give parents and communities a formal voice, largely go unconvoked.

(The author is Chairman, Central Control Commission, CPI(M))

THE GIST

Nearly 94,000 government schools have closed over the past decade under State-led rationalisation drives, with Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh and Jammu and Kashmir among the worst affected, leading to falling enrolment and rising dropout risks.

The closures have disproportionately affected poor, rural, Scheduled Caste, Scheduled Tribe and girl students, while questions remain over the Centre's role in enforcing neighbourhood school norms under the Right to Education Act.

A NEW COMPACT BETWEEN AI & AGRICULTURE: AN ANDHRA PRADESH OPPORTUNITY

(INDIAN EXPRESS PAGE NO 9)

Syllabus Mapping

1. **GS Paper:** GS Paper 3
2. **Syllabus Topics:**
 1. Science and Technology—developments and their applications in everyday life (AI applications in agriculture).
 2. Infrastructure: Energy (Agri-photovoltaics, solar power, and PM-KUSUM).
 3. Major cropping patterns, technology missions in aid of farmers, and public-private partnerships.

A new compact between AI & agriculture: An Andhra Pradesh opportunity



FROM PLATE TO PLOUGH
BY ASHOK GULATI, S BASKAR REDDY AND KALYAN CHAKRAVARTHY GUNTUBOYINA

ANDHRA PRADESH Chief Minister Chandrababu Naidu has proved to be a visionary and investment-friendly politician. He has secured one of India's largest technology investments in recent years. Google has committed \$15 billion to a one-gigawatt AI data centre in Visakhapatnam, expected to be the largest such centre in Asia when it becomes operational in 2028. Such a large data centre will require 24 GWh of power each day. Meeting this demand by diverting power from other consumers, particularly agriculture, could provoke social tensions, while expanding thermal generation would come at an unacceptable environmental cost. Andhra Pradesh will have to look for alternatives like nuclear energy or renewables like solar power. Herein lies an opportunity for agri-households to become participants in the emerging AI economy by generating clean electricity while continuing to cultivate their land. Agri-voltaics enables this dual use of farmland, allowing farmers to produce both food and power while multiplying their incomes.

Andhra Pradesh has already introduced a policy innovation that grants data centres a Deemed Distribution Licence (DDL), which allows hyperscale operators to procure and manage their own power rather than draw it as ordinary consumers. However, this innovation needs to be followed up by a series of complementary measures to avoid power cuts for other sectors.

We propose that Google devote a modest portion of its investment to developing captive solar generation on farmers' fields. Farmers would continue cultivating their land while also holding equity in the solar enterprise.

ICRIER has already established agri-photovoltaic pilot projects in Rajasthan, Odisha and Madhya Pradesh. This needs to be scaled up, and Naidu can take the lead here. But it would require an ecosystem to be created by organising farmers into a community-owned solar utility cluster (solar co-operatives on the lines of milk cooperatives) and creating a special-purpose vehicle (SPV) company in which farmers also hold some equity (borrowed from banks) but contribute mainly through utilisation of their land, while holding its title. In the agri-photovoltaics system, solar panels are mounted at about 10 to 12 feet to enable seamless cultivation of high-value crops beneath them. A blended stack of investment from Google and public finance will help in developing the requisite infrastructure. Google could provide zero- (or very low) interest long-term debt that could be adjusted against energy supplied by the SPV. The PM-KUSUM programme can

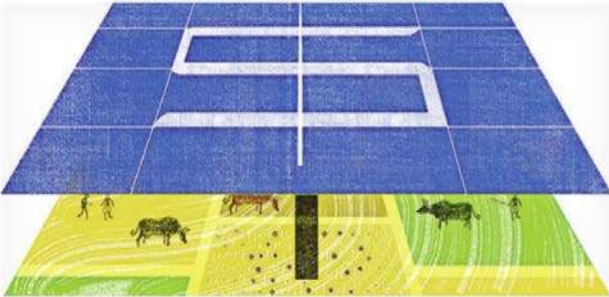


ILLUSTRATION: C.R. SASIBUMAR

be tweaked to provide some capital subsidy. Commercial capital could also be leveraged through a credit guarantee from the Credit Guarantee Trust Fund for Small and Medium Enterprises. In such agri-photovoltaic systems, solar energy is virtually the third crop and augments farmers' incomes (eight to 10 times in ICRIER pilots). Beyond producing renewable energy, agri-voltaics would enable farmers to grow two irrigated crops beneath the panels, diversify into higher-value shade-loving crops, undertake value addition through processing, and earn recurring revenue from electricity sales to the Google data centre.

Under the new DDL licence, Google can contract that green generation through open-access and banking arrangements and stand behind it as a long-term off-taker. The farmers' solar utility gains a creditworthy, permanent customer. In one stroke, the data centre's load becomes the demand that finances rural electrification, not the demand that starves it.

This model can create an extraordinary win-win-win situation for farmers, Google and the government. Their land works twice over for farmers — it produces a high-value crop, and earns a dividend from the power company it part-owns. For Google, the difference is between merely buying electricity

in a competitive market and earning the lasting trust of farmers by helping them become producers of that electricity. A gigawatt or even a few hundred megawatts of it sourced from farmer-owned agri-photovoltaic systems is a legacy story the company can tell for decades to come. In a country where large projects live or die on social licence, that goodwill is not a soft sentiment. It is the cheapest insurance Google can ever buy. For the state government, the model could preempt a conflict that might otherwise have become the defining controversy surrounding its marquee investment. Instead of being forced to choose between the cloud and the cultivator, it can point to an arrangement in which the former pays for the latter.

It is now for Sundar Pichai and Naidu to work with farmer-producer companies, co-operatives and rural entrepreneurs to set up at least 5,000 agri-photovoltaic systems of 1 MW each across the state. Assuming each 1 MW agri-voltaics system costs about Rs 4 crore, we estimate an investment of Rs 2,00,000 crore (about \$2.2 billion) to ensure a self-sustaining captive energy requirement for Google. As mentioned earlier, innovative blended financing instruments and guaranteed buyback can ensure that funding does not become a stumbling block. More importantly, there will be minimal burden on the state or national budget as it would be a market-based mechanism.

The choice that Andhra Pradesh faces is not between development and farmers. It is between two kinds of development models. In one, land is acquired, power is drawn, and what is left behind is a one-time rent and long-lasting grievance. The other model treats farmers as co-owners, the agri-photovoltaics system as an asset, and the data centre as a customer. Being a proponent of the very licence (DDL) that makes it possible, Andhra Pradesh is uniquely placed to show the rest of the country how the cloud can shower prosperity on agri-households.

Gulati is distinguished professor at ICRIER, Reddy is executive director of Global Agri-Entrepreneurship Academy, and Guntuboyina is regional manager for International Cooperation (Asia) at Wageningen University, Netherlands. Views are personal

What Makes Kerala Particularly Vulnerable to Landslides

(INDIAN EXPRESS PAGE NO 11)

Syllabus Mapping

3. **GS Paper:** GS Paper 1 & GS Paper 3

4. **Syllabus Topics:**

1. Important Geophysical phenomena such as landslides, extreme rainfall events, and regional geomorphology.
2. Disaster and disaster management (Early warning systems and Landslide Atlas mapping).
3. Conservation, environmental degradation, and anthropogenic impacts of unscientific land use.

• CLIMATE

What makes Kerala particularly vulnerable to landslides

Anagha Jayakumar
New Delhi, August 2

TWO YEARS after the devastating Wayanad landslides, exceptionally heavy rain triggered fresh landslides, mudslides and flooding across parts of Kerala on Saturday, killing at least six people and leaving several others feared missing.

The India Meteorological Department (IMD) said that widespread rainfall was likely over Kerala on Sunday and Monday, with heavy rainfall in isolated places and strong winds with 40 to 50 kmph speeds.

Neetha K Gopal, head of the IMD's Meteorological Centre in Thiruvananthapuram, told *The Indian Express* that the intense spell was being driven by an offshore trough extending from the south Gujarat coast to Kerala, strong southwesterly winds across the Arabian Sea, and a strong north-south pressure gradient along the west coast. Together, these conditions had strengthened the monsoon flow and produced widespread rainfall across Kerala.

"This was not rainfall confined to one or two places. It was a widespread heavy rainfall event," Gopal said. She added that

a large quantity of rain had fallen within a short period, leaving little time for the water to drain away.

"It was the cumulative effect of the preceding rainfall, combined with today's intense and widespread rainfall activity," Gopal said, underscoring that the landslides were not triggered by a single burst of rain alone.

Why landslides occur

Landslides are natural disasters that occur mainly in mountainous terrains with conducive soil, rock, geology and slope conditions. A sudden movement of rock, boulders, earth or debris down a slope is called a landslide.

While they are fairly common, landslides are extremely hazardous and pose a threat to human and animal lives, damaging property, roads and bridges, disrupting communication lines and snapping power lines.

Landslides generally result from a combination of two sets of factors:

• **Conditioning factors, such as soil topography, rocks, geomorphology, and slope angles,** among others, make some parts of

Landslide atlas

• In 2023, ISRO's National Remote Sensing Centre, Hyderabad, released a 'landslide atlas' based on landslide events recorded from 1998 to 2022.

• The database showed that while the Western Ghats recorded fewer landslide events than the Himalayan region, Kerala accounted for a disproportionately high share of landslide fatalities.



Rescue operations in Kottayam after a landslide on Saturday. PTI

the country more vulnerable to landslides.

• **Triggering factors, which include intense rainfall and anthropogenic activities such as haphazard land use, unscientific construction, and large-scale destruction of forests.**

Most landslides in India are rain-induced events. Other natural causes include earthquakes, snow-melting and undercutting of slopes due to flooding. They may also be caused by anthropogenic activities such as excavation, cutting of hills and

trees, excessive infrastructure development, and overgrazing by cattle.

How human intervention increases risk

Kerala's landslide risk is largely concentrated along the Western Ghats, especially in central and northern districts such as Idukki, Pathanamthitta, Kottayam, Wayanad, Kozhikode and Malappuram. The region's steep slopes, geology and changing land use make it inherently susceptible to landslides.

During spells of intense or prolonged rainfall, water infiltrates the loose soil and reaches the interface between the soil and the underlying rock, weakening the bond between the two. This is significant because preceding rainfall can progressively saturate slopes, while a subsequent burst of heavy rain can add large quantities of water over a short period, increasing runoff and the likelihood of slope failure.

Land-use changes and human interventions have also contributed to the region's fragility, with quarrying, road laying, and the expansion of plantations altering the stability of slopes and natural drainage.

Next Conservation Challenge Lies Beyond Protected Areas

(INDIAN EXPRESS PAGE NO 8)

Syllabus Mapping

5. **GS Paper:** GS Paper 3
6. **Syllabus Topics:**
 1. Conservation, environmental pollution and degradation, environmental impact assessment.
 2. Wildlife protection, ecological corridors, and Other Effective Area-based Conservation Measures (OECMs).
 3. Infrastructure expansion and eco-friendly mitigation frameworks.

Next conservation challenge lies beyond protected areas



V B MATHUR

Protected areas cannot function as isolated ecological islands if they are to sustain wildlife movement, genetic exchange and resilient ecosystems. Ecological corridors are the foundation of a modern conservation strategy

OVER THE past five decades, India has built one of the developing world's most representative protected-area (PA) networks. This achievement has provided a robust scientific foundation for conserving many of the country's most important species, habitats and ecological processes. However, the ecological realities of the 21st century demand changes in conservation paradigms. Wildlife moves across landscapes rather than administrative boundaries. Rivers connect forests, wetlands and farmlands. Climate change is altering habitats, while rapid infrastructure expansion is fragmenting them. **Conserving biodiversity can therefore no longer rely solely on protecting isolated sites — it must also secure the landscapes that connect them.**

The challenge is to complement national parks and wildlife sanctuaries by a more connected and inclusive conservation vision. **The emergence of Other Effective Area-based Conservation Measures (OECMs) under the Convention on Biological Diversity offers such an opportunity. Rather than treating OECMs as another international reporting requirement, India should recognise them as a framework for acknowledging the many forests, wetlands, community-managed landscapes and other biodiversity-rich areas that already make substantial contributions to conservation beyond the formal PA network.** The more important question, therefore, is not where the next PA should be notified. It is this: How do we recognise, connect and strengthen all the landscapes that collectively sustain India's biodiversity?

The answer lies in **reimagining the conservation landscape through a National Conservation Estate — an ecological network comprising PAs, OECMs and other biodiversity-rich landscapes that together safeguard the country's natural heritage, irrespective of ownership, legal designation or primary management objective.** PAs and OECMs cannot function as isolated ecological islands if they are to sustain wildlife movement, genetic exchange and resilient ecosystems. **Ecological corridors and connected landscapes are therefore not peripheral additions; they are the very foundation of a modern conservation strategy.**

This imperative has become even more urgent as India undertakes one of the world's largest infrastructure expansion programmes. **The wildlife overpasses and underpasses incorporated in the Delhi-Dehradun Economic Corridor, together with mitigation measures in the Pench-Seoni landscape, demonstrate that economic development and ecological connectivity need not be mutually exclusive.** Roads, railways, transmission lines and canals can support development without severing ecological networks, provided connectivity is embedded in planning. This vision demands a wider partnership. Government must continue to provide leadership, but communities, corporations and civil society must become equal partners.

The next conservation revolution will be measured by our ability to recognise, connect and steward every landscape that sustains biodiversity. India's conservation future will be secured by weaving stronger ecological and institutional connections across landscapes and society.

The writer is former chairperson, National Biodiversity Authority of India