EDITORIALS - 26TH AUG 2026

1. End the culture of secrecy in judicial appointments (GS Paper II Governance)

This editorial '**End the culture of secrecy in judicial appointments**' was published in **The Hindu** on 26th Aug 2026, highlights the need to reconcile **judicial independence** with transparency, merit and **constitutional accountability** in collegium appointments.

Collegium's Transparency Deficit

- **Justice Ujjal Bhuyan** argued that greater collegium openness would strengthen **public confidence** and preserve merit in judicial appointments.
- The **First Judges Case (1981)** favoured executive primacy, the Second Judges Case (1993) shifted it to senior judges, and the Third Judges Case (1998) created the **five-member collegium**.
- Protection from political interference cannot make **judicial independence** immune from **constitutional accountability**, particularly after three decades of opaque functioning.
- Absence of vacancy notifications, eligibility matrices and assessment methods obscures **selection criteria**; even collegium architect Fali Nariman later criticised its inaccessibility to the **Bar**.

Declining Disclosure and Judicial Lineage

- Collegium resolutions began providing brief reasons in **October 2017**, but since November 2024 they have omitted participants and reasoning; CJI B.R. Gavai confirmed the retreat in **November 2025**.
- Protecting **candidate confidentiality** cannot justify complete secrecy, especially when the **MediaOne judgment (2023)** rejected sealed-cover governance as incompatible with accountability.
- Concerns over **'Uncle Judges'** persist: 11 of 33 Allahabad High Court recommendations flagged in 2018 involved judges' relatives, while nearly 30% of Supreme Court judges reportedly had **familial links** in 2025.
- A **January 2025** proposal sought greater scrutiny of judges' relatives but created no legal bar, leaving **objective standards** necessary to distinguish merit from lineage-based advantage.

Constitutional and Comparative Standards

- **Articles 14 and 16** require equality in public appointments, while the **Umadevi judgment (2006)** rejected backdoor selection and mandated transparent procedures.
- Judicial qualities cannot be reduced to examinations, but **qualitative judgment** does not eliminate the need for **due process** and comparable standards.
- In **CPIO v. Subhash Chandra Agarwal (2019)**, the Court brought the CJI's office under the **Right to Information Act**, strengthening the case for openness in judicial selection.
- The **United Kingdom** publicly advertises vacancies and conducts structured interviews, while **South Africa** invites public nominations and televises interviews without abandoning judicial independence.
- In the modern **public sphere**, appointments and judicial remarks face immediate scrutiny; **contempt jurisdiction** cannot suppress criticism or preserve institutional legitimacy through secrecy.

Reform, Not Retreat

- Modernisation should include **advance vacancy notices**, applications from eligible advocates, objective eligibility criteria and **reasoned recommendations** explaining candidate preference.
- Sensitive **confidential inputs** may remain protected, but **process transparency** requires disclosure of selection criteria and institutional reasoning.
- The issue is not judiciary versus executive but **opacity versus transparency**; independence, equality, fairness and reasoned decision-making are complementary **constitutional values**.

Beyond Editorial

Representational Diversity in the Higher Judiciary

- **Gender representation:** As of February 2026, women occupied only one of 33 Supreme Court positions and 116 of 814 working High Court judgeships, revealing persistent underrepresentation.

- **Social diversity:** Among 575 High Court judges appointed since 2018, government data in March 2023 identified only 67 Other Backward Class, 17 Scheduled Caste and nine Scheduled Tribe appointees.
- **Regional imbalance:** In February 2026, the Punjab and Haryana High Court had 18 women judges, while Manipur, Tripura and Uttarakhand High Courts had none, indicating uneven regional progress.
- **Professional pluralism:** Justice Indu Malhotra became the first woman advocate directly elevated from the Bar to the Supreme Court in 2018, demonstrating the value of wider professional pathways.
- **Disability inclusion:** The Supreme Court's accessibility committee, chaired by Justice S. Ravindra Bhat, identified physical and technological barriers that similarly require attention within appointment procedures.
- **Historical exclusion:** Justice Anna Chandy became India's first woman High Court judge in 1959, while Justice M. Fathima Beevi entered the Supreme Court only in 1989.
- **Diversity monitoring:** England and Wales publish annual judicial-diversity statistics, reporting in 2026 that women constituted 45% and ethnic minorities 13% of judges, offering India a transparency model.

2. The limits of air power, implications for theatre-isation (GS Paper III Security)

This editorial '**The limits of air power, implications for theatre-isation**' was published in **The Hindu** on 26th Aug 2026, highlights the **limitations** of **air power** and the need to test India's flexible **command model** against China while considering theatre-isation.

Limits of Air Power

- The Ukraine and Iran wars show that **air power** remains indispensable but cannot independently secure **strategic victory** or end a conflict.
- Ukraine's **networked air defence** denied Russia complete control despite its larger air force, proving that **air superiority** cannot eliminate contested airspace.
- Allied dominance of Iranian skies enabled strikes but failed to compel Tehran, showing that **air-space control** does not guarantee a **decisive outcome**.
- Methods effective against Pakistan may fail against **China**, whose strategic depth and military capacity allow it to absorb **battlefield losses** and continue fighting.

- Iran’s Shahed-type drones cost about $20,000–$50,000, while interceptors cost millions; **Operation Sindoor (2025)** similarly exposed this adverse **cost arithmetic** for India.
- China could employ inexpensive drones on a far larger scale, challenging India’s **interceptor capacity** and requiring a fundamental **doctrinal rethink**.

IAF’s Flexibility Model Under Test

- The **Indian Air Force** prioritises operational flexibility over fixed commands, a model proven during Balakot and Operation Sindoor but **untested against China**.
- India’s estimated 460–520 combat aircraft face the People’s Liberation Army Air Force’s roughly 65 squadrons; limited airbases and mountainous terrain could restrict **rapid redeployment** and weaken **operational flexibility**.
- India lacks adequate **joint-force generation** for the China front, while coordination deficiencies exposed during Kargil in 1999 remained visible during the **Ladakh crisis (2020)**.
- Effective **peacetime jointness** requires common training and planning, allowing flexibility to operate through integration rather than compensating for its absence.
- Uneven ranks, unsettled joint command chains and career-based resistance impede **institutional integration**; unlike India, the United States mandates **joint postings**.
- The proposed Joint Coordination Centre depends on consensus, whereas a **theatre commander** provides unified authority during crises when **consultative command** may respond too slowly.

Strategic Risks of Delay

- Only one issue concerns how the IAF fights; the remaining questions concern **defence organisation**, making theatre-isation a decision for **political leadership**.
- Success in Balakot and Sindoor does not establish India’s ability to mobilise rapidly or conduct **joint operations** during a major **China contingency**.
- Simultaneous crises in Ladakh and Siachen could force immediate allocation of limited Rafale aircraft and S-400 systems, exposing unresolved **resource prioritisation** and **command authority**.
- Continued delay could leave Integrated Battle Groups along the **Line of Actual Control** dependent on air support that may not arrive when needed, weakening **territorial defence**.
- Theatre-isation need not reduce IAF flexibility; an effective **joint structure** could preserve it during the demanding **multi-front crisis** India has not yet faced.

BEYOND EDITORIAL

Capability Gaps Beyond Command Reform

- **Squadron strength:** The Indian Air Force had 31 active fighter squadrons against an authorised 42 in December 2024, while a parliamentary committee estimated a requirement of at least 180 additional fighters.
- **Force multipliers:** The Defence Research and Development Organisation delivered three NETRA airborne early-warning aircraft in initial operational configuration, but wider coverage remains essential during simultaneous threats.
- **Munitions reserves:** The ₹2,971-crore Astra Mk-I contract with Bharat Dynamics Limited began indigenous production of beyond-visual-range missiles, illustrating the need for reliable wartime replenishment.
- **Base resilience:** The Indian Air Force activated the Purvanchal Expressway emergency landing facility by day and night in April 2026, demonstrating how alternative runways can sustain operations after base attacks.
- **Training ecosystem:** Operationalisation of the C-295 simulator before domestic aircraft deliveries shows that platform acquisition must be supported by trained crews, maintenance facilities and technical expertise.
- **Industrial capacity:** The ₹36,468-crore order for 83 Light Combat Aircraft Tejas Mk-1A strengthens domestic production, but timely deliveries remain crucial for closing the squadron deficit.
- **Spectrum dominance:** GSAT-7A provides military communication support, while the approved indigenous electronic-warfare suite for Mi-17 V5 helicopters demonstrates the growing importance of secure networks and electronic protection.

3. T.N. can lead India on revenue reform (GS Paper III Economy)

This editorial '**T.N. can lead India on revenue reform**' was published in **The Hindu** on 26th Aug 2026, and highlights how Tamil Nadu can strengthen **sustainable revenue** while establishing internationally comparable **fiscal-reporting standards**.

Tamil Nadu's Structural Revenue Challenge

- Tamil Nadu's **Revenue Augmentation Committee**, chaired by Montek Singh Ahluwalia, must improve own-tax and non-tax revenue, buoyancy and **fiscal self-reliance**.

- The State's **own-tax revenue** declined from 9.3% of Gross State Domestic Product in 2002–03 to 6.4% in 2016–17, with **tax buoyancy** below one in eight of 14 years.
- Own-tax revenue was budgeted at 6.2% of GSDP in 2024–25, below Karnataka's 6.9% and Telangana's 8.2%, while **non-tax revenue** formed only 7% of total revenue, indicating a **structural weakness**.

Defining and Reporting Revenue

- **Resource mobilisation** includes taxes, user charges, borrowing, bonds, blended finance and asset monetisation, but these instruments have different **fiscal consequences**.
- Under the **GFSM 2014**, revenue comprises taxes, social contributions, grants, fees, royalties, rents, interest and dividends, ensuring internationally consistent **fiscal classification**.
- Loans and bonds create liabilities and constitute **financing**, while outright asset sales merely exchange one asset for another and do not generate **government revenue**.
- Borrowing and asset sales may finance investment or temporary gaps but cannot sustainably cover **recurrent expenditure**, despite creating an appearance of greater **resource mobilisation**.
- Tamil Nadu should publish a supplementary **GFSM statement** separating revenue, asset transactions and financing, alongside fuller reporting of arrears, guarantees, off-budget borrowing and **public-enterprise finances**.

Building Sustainable Revenue

- Better **tax administration**, including linking Goods and Services Tax data with registration, vehicle and property databases, can reduce evasion and improve **revenue buoyancy** without raising rates.
- User charges, royalties, licence fees, concession charges and public-asset rents require periodic cost-based review to strengthen **non-tax revenue** and ensure **efficient pricing**.
- State-owned enterprises should provide predictable returns through better governance and transparent **dividend policies**, rather than exceptional payouts for closing **budget gaps**.
- Borrowing for recurrent expenditure increases debt and interest costs, making **revenue reform** inseparable from expenditure efficiency, liabilities and **fiscal-risk management**.

BEYOND EDITORIAL

Distributional Effects of Revenue Reform

- **Tax progressivity:** Greater Chennai Corporation calculates property tax using location, usage and building-size categories, enabling larger and non-residential properties to bear a higher relative burden.
- **User-charge safeguards:** Tamil Nadu provides the first 100 electricity units free to domestic consumers and compensates the distribution utility, illustrating how targeted support can accompany tariff reforms.
- **Digital inclusion:** Goods and Services Tax Seva Kendras provide local assistance to taxpayers, showing how physical support centres can prevent technology-based administration from excluding smaller enterprises.
- **Local finances:** Greater Chennai Corporation raised ₹200 crore through a municipal bond in May 2025, demonstrating how creditworthy urban bodies can finance infrastructure without depending entirely on State grants.
- **Environmental pricing:** Rajasthan's Transport Infrastructure Development Fund uses a motor-vehicle cess, green tax and stamp-duty cess to support buses, depots and other public-transport infrastructure.
- **Compliance burden:** The Goods and Services Tax Composition Scheme offers simplified voluntary compliance for small taxpayers, providing a model for reducing procedural costs without granting complete tax exemptions.
- **Fiscal legitimacy:** Pune's participatory-budgeting process allowed residents to propose neighbourhood works, demonstrating how visible citizen influence over expenditure can strengthen trust and willingness to pay taxes.