



NEXT IAS

DNA : DAILY NEWS ANALYSIS

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PRELIMS TOPICS

- NON-SCHEDULED DRUG PRICES
- RIGHTS OF DISABLED PERSONS
- TURN SOFT SPOT FOR RUSSIA INTO HARD GAINS FOR DELHI
- COLUMBO SECURITY CONCLAVE
- PRIVACY IN A 'FISHBOWL SOCIETY
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NON SCHEDULED DRUGS AND ITS PRICES

Context: A Parliamentary panel has asked the NPPA to frame a policy to curb excessive pricing of non-scheduled drugs, as profit margins remain unregulated and often exorbitant.

Syllabus Integration:

- **GS 1:** Impact of rising medicine prices on vulnerable populations, socio-economic implications for health access.
- **GS 2:** Government regulation of pharmaceuticals, statutory bodies (NPPA), health governance, policy oversight by Parliamentary committees.
- **GS 3:** Pricing mechanisms, market failures, regulation of essential commodities, inflation and WPI linkages, supply-chain margins, public health economics.
- **GS 4:** Ethical pricing, corporate responsibility, fairness in public health markets, duty of the state to ensure affordable medicines.
- **Prelims:** Drug Price Control Order, NPPA functions, scheduled vs non-scheduled drugs, MRP norms, GST basics, essential medicines list.

House panel: Need policy to bring down non-scheduled drug prices

Anonna Dutt
New Delhi, December 2

STATING THAT lack of government regulatory control over "non-scheduled drugs" might lead to widespread profiteering, a Parliamentary Standing Committee on chemicals and fertilisers, which is looking into the rising prices of medicines, has asked the Department of Pharmaceuticals and the National Pharmaceutical Pricing Authority (NPPA) to come up with a policy to plug the loophole at the earliest.

According to the committee's report titled "Price rise of medicines in the pharmaceutical sector impacting the lives of ordinary citizens adversely", the department had informed the panel they were working on a trade margin rationalisation policy, earlier used for very select drugs in case of health emergencies, and for a limited period.

As per the report, the allergy medicine Cetirizine manufactured by a multinational pharma company which carried an MRP of Rs 21.06 reaches the stockists at Rs 2, making the markup 953%; Pentoprazole, an acidity drug, with an MRP of Rs 102, reaches the stockists at Rs 10, making the markup 920%.

The committee also examined the price to stockist vs the MRP for several drugs used commonly and found margins were as high as 600%, 1200%, and 1800%, the report said. The committee also pointed out that the price to stockists remains undisclosed to the people.

E. EXPLAINED

Link GST to actual MRP, say experts

Industry experts expressed doubts as to how regulator NPPA could fix initial pricing for different formulations. They said it would be easier to fix proportion of markup allowed at different stages of manufacture and supply. Linking GST to actual MRP instead of prices wholesalers, stockists or retailers pay might help prune prices, since companies would restrain from leaving a huge margin, they said.

A trade margin rationalisation policy usually fixes the margin of profit for manufacturers and the supply chain on specific products.

The government has already used this to regulate the prices of 42 formulations of anti-cancer medicines, bringing down the prices of nearly 500 brands of medicines by 50%, accruing savings of around Rs 984 crore to patients.

Trade margin of oxygen concentrators, pulse oximeters, blood pressure monitoring machines, among others was capped in 2021 during the Covid-19 pandemic.

The committee, according to the report, said it has been five years since the pilot trade margin policy and a new policy

should be introduced at the earliest. "The Committee, therefore, desires that the Department of Pharmaceuticals in consultation with NPPA should come forward for a policy review in the matter at the earliest so that medicines are available to the ordinary citizens at affordable prices," the report said.

At present, the mechanisms used to control the drug prices include the Drug (Prices Control) Order 2013, which allows the NPPA to set the ceiling price for scheduled drugs—those listed in the essential medicine list by experts. This list is updated from time to time by an expert committee.

The ceiling prices are revised every year based on WPI. However, many companies choose not to hike prices. When it comes to drugs not on the list of essential medicines, there is a 10% limit on annual increase. The department informed the committee, as per its report, that over the five-year period between April 2020 and March 2025, the price of these non-scheduled drugs increased only by 5.6% on average each year, broadly in line with the WPI and less than the permissible limit. However, there is no way for NPPA to fix initial price of the drug.

This, the panel said, as per its report, creates a loophole as the NPPA cannot control trade margins on non-scheduled drugs, allowing companies to launch their products at whatever prices, even when huge markups may be evident. **FULL REPORT**

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NON SCHEDULED DRUGS AND ITS PRICES

Parliamentary Standing
Committee

**Calls for Regulation of
Non-Scheduled Drugs**



Committee has asked
Department of Pharmaceuticals
and **NPPA** to frame policy to
control prices of non-scheduled
drugs, warning lack of regulation
is leading to profiteering and
affecting patients.

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NEWS)**

NON SCHEDULED DRUGS AND ITS PRICES

NON SCHEDULED DRUGS AND ITS PRICES

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

Scheduled Drugs

Scheduled drugs are those listed in the National List of Essential Medicines (NLEM) and are subject to price caps under the Drug (Prices Control) Order – DPCO, 2013

VS

Non-scheduled Drugs

Non-scheduled drugs are outside this list and only have a restriction of a maximum 10% price hike annually, but no control over the initial price or trade margins.

NON SCHEDULED DRUGS AND ITS PRICES

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

**Parliamentary Standing Committee
on Chemicals and Fertilisers**

is examining the issue of rising drug
prices, especially those not covered
under direct price controls

SCHEDULED DRUGS AND ITS PRICES

SCHEDULED DRUGS

- These are drugs listed in the National List of Essential Medicines (NLEM).
- Prices of scheduled drugs are regulated under the Drug (Prices Control) Order, 2013.
- The NPPA (National Pharmaceutical Pricing Authority) fixes the ceiling price for these medicines.
- Manufacturers cannot sell above the ceiling price + applicable GST.
- Any revision is based on Wholesale Price Index (WPI).

Examples:
Paracetamol,
insulin,
antibiotics,
anti-TB drugs,
anti-HIV drugs, etc.



NON SCHEDULED DRUGS AND ITS PRICES

NON-SCHEDULED DRUGS

- These are drugs not listed in the NLEM.
- Their prices are not controlled, but they are allowed to increase prices only by 10 % annually
- No restriction on the initial launch price
- Trade margins (from manufacturer to retailer) are not regulated, often leading to exorbitant markups
- ♦ Examples: Many branded generics for lifestyle diseases (acidity, allergy, painkillers, etc.), newer formulations

NON SCHEDULED DRUGS AND ITS PRICES

1. High Trade Margins

Huge difference between **manufacturer price** and MRP due to unregulated trade margins.

Example from report: Cetirizine MRP ₹21.06 vs stockist price ₹2 = 953% margin.

Leads to profiteering by distributors, hospitals, and retailers.

2. Non-transparency in Pricing

Public is unaware of real cost vs, charged price

No disclosure norms for prices to stockists/distributors

CORE ISSUES IN DRUG PRICING IN INDIA

3. Initial Launch Price of Non-Scheduled Drugs

Companies launch drugs at arbitrary high prices.

NPPA has no authority to cap initial price
→ significant policy gap

4. Ineffective Monitoring

Weak mechanisms to track price trends in real time

Lack of data integration between NPPA, hospitals, e-pharmacies, and manufacturers

NON SCHEDULED DRUGS AND ITS PRICES

COMMITTEE OBSERVATIONS

Formulate a comprehensive policy for price regulation of non-scheduled drugs, not just during health emergencies

Review stent pricing, noting a 44 % increase in bare-metal stents and 29% in drug-eluting stents (2017-2024)

Trade Margin Rationalisation (TMR) has been there for five years and a new policy should be introduced at the earliest., beyond the pilot done for cancer drugs

Establish a real-time data collection mechanism for drug prices across manufacturers, distributors, and hospitals

Link GST with actual MRP rather than price at wholesale/retail level to indirectly control MRP inflation

Strict monitoring of online cancer drug sellers to ensure authenticity and curb counterfeit or substandard drugs

NON SCHEDULED DRUGS AND ITS PRICES

CHALLENGES IDENTIFIED



NPPA cannot fix initial launch price of non-scheduled drugs.



Lack of legal power to cap trade margins across the supply chain for such drugs.



Rising hospital infrastructure costs cited by industry as justification for high cancer drug prices, but committee criticizes this as biased due to industry lobbying.

RIGHTS OF DISABLED PERSONS

Context: The article argues that although the RPwD Act recognises 21 disabilities, rights and entitlements remain uneven, leaving many conditions—like haemophilia—excluded from key benefits despite legal recognition.



NIPUN MALHOTRA AND
HARSHITA KUMARI

RECENTLY, THE Supreme Court issued a notice to the central government on a petition seeking the explicit inclusion of haemophilia under the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016 (RPwD Act). The petitioners argued that haemophilia results in serious mobility limitations and recurrent hospitalisations, yet individuals with haemophilia continue to be denied reservation benefits, educational support, and welfare entitlements available to other recognised disabilities. Observing that “the objective of the RPwD Act is inclusion, not exclusion”,

For disabled, recognition doesn't always mean rights

the Bench emphasised that the rights of persons with long-term health conditions must be grounded in social justice and equality.

At first glance, this appears contradictory: Haemophilia, thalassaemia, and sickle cell disease are already among the Act's 21 disabilities; their exclusion exposes enduring implementation gaps. This reflects a broader tension in India's disability law: Although the RPwD Act expanded recognition of disabilities from seven to 21, this has not translated into corresponding entitlements, leaving many newly recognised conditions outside the benefits the law was meant to guarantee.

The RPwD Act marked three key shifts: It shifted from a narrow, medicalised framing of disability to a socio-medical model that recognises how social barriers restrict participation; it expanded legal protection to 21 disabilities, and it adopted a rights-

based framework replacing welfare-oriented language with enforceable guarantees of equality, dignity, and full participation.

While the Act guarantees equality, non-discrimination, community living, protection from violence, inclusive education, voting access, and access to justice, the difference emerges in entitlements. These apply only to persons with benchmark disabilities (40 per cent or more of a disability),

While the RPwD Act guarantees equality, non-discrimination, inclusive education, voting access, and access to justice, the difference emerges in entitlements

who get five per cent reservation in higher education, four per cent in government jobs, and free schooling between ages six and 18.

Notably, the reservation in jobs applies only to five categories: Blindness and low vision; deafness and hardness of hearing; locomotor disabilities, including cerebral palsy, leprosy-cured persons, dwarfism, acid attack survivors, and muscular dystrophy; autism, intellectual disability, specific learning disability, and mental illness; and multiple disabilities arising from these categories. This narrow design, embedded in the Act and replicated across recruitment systems such as the UPSC, means many with legally recognised disabilities, including those who meet the benchmark threshold, remain excluded from affirmative action.

A closer look reveals three structural concerns: First, “visible” or traditionally recog-

nised disabilities are prioritised. Second, the reservation system still reflects the seven categories from the 1995 Act, undermining the 2016 law's broader intent. Third, this creates a structural double whammy: Those excluded from reservation are often simultaneously screened out of employment as “medically unfit”, leaving them with neither a fair chance nor affirmative action recourse.

What this case brings to the fore is not an isolated omission but a design flaw. Legal recognition does not automatically translate into enforceable inclusion. A favourable ruling could help ensure that the RPwD Act's promise of rights becomes meaningful inclusion for all disabilities.

Malhotra is founder, Nipman Foundation and director, The Quantum Hub. Kumari is analyst, The Quantum Hub.

Syllabus Integration:

- **GS 1:** Social justice for vulnerable groups, societal barriers to inclusion, demographics of disability in India.
- **GS 2:** Welfare legislation, rights-based frameworks, government schemes for persons with disabilities, judicial review, affirmative action policies.
- **GS 3:** Public health implications of chronic conditions, disability measurement frameworks, socio-economic impact of mobility limitations.
- **GS 4:** Ethical inclusion, equity versus equality, fairness in state entitlements, dignity and rights of marginalised populations.
- **Prelims:** RPwD Act 2016 provisions, definition of benchmark disability, categories of disabilities, constitutional provisions for vulnerable groups, Supreme Court jurisdiction.

PRELIMS PYQs

CSE – 2011

India is home to lakhs of persons with disabilities. What are the benefits available to them under the law?

1. Free schooling till the age of 18 years in government-run schools.
2. Preferential allotment of land for setting up a business.
3. Ramps in Public building.

Which of the above statements are correct?

- a. 1 only
- b. 2 and 3 only
- c. 1 and 3 only
- d. 1, 2 and 3

Answer: d

SUPREME COURT



HAS ISSUED
NOTICE

TO THE CENTRAL GOVERNMENT

on a petition seeking explicit inclusion of haemophilia under the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016, especially for job reservation benefits

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RIGHTS OF DISABLED PERSONS

RIGHTS OF DISABLED PERSONS

KEY HIGHLIGHTS



SC NOTICE TO CENTRE

Supreme Court issued a notice on a PIL demanding inclusion of haemophilia under the actionable sections of the RPwD Act, 2016



PETITIONERS' ARGUMENT

Haemophilia causes significant mobility issues and requires frequent hospitalization, but persons with haemophilia are denied reservations, educational support, and welfare schemes



CONTRADICTION IN LAW AND PRACTICE

Although haemophilia is included among the 21 disabilities under the RPwD Act, many individuals with it are not entitled to reservation benefits

RIGHTS OF DISABLED PERSONS

Evolution of Disability Law: From 1995 to 2016

India's disability regime has evolved through two main statutes:

Persons with Disabilities (Equal Opportunities, Protection of Rights and Full Participation) Act, 1995 (PwD Act)

- Recognised only 7 disabilities
- Strongly medicalised – disability viewed as an individual defect to be compensated

Evolution of Disability Law: From 1995 to 2016

India's disability regime has evolved through two main statutes:

Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016 (RPwD Act)

Enacted to align domestic law with the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD)

- Brought three major shifts:
- From a purely medical model to a socio-medical model, acknowledging that social and physical barriers restrict participation
- Expanded the Schedule of disabilities from 7 to 21, explicitly including blood disorders such as haemophilia, thalassaemia and sickle cell disease
- Adopted a rights-based framework, guaranteeing equality, dignity, community living, non-discrimination, inclusive education, and access to justice

RIGHTS OF DISABLED PERSONS

IMPLEMENTATION GAPS



**FROM 1995 TO 2016:
SHIFT FROM 7 TO 21
RECOGNISED DISABILITIES**

**HOWEVER,
RESERVATIONS AND
ENTITLEMENTS ARE
STILL LARGELY
CONFINED TO THE
ORIGINAL 7
CATEGORIES FROM
THE 1995 ACT**



Even among benchmark disabilities, only 5 broad categories get reservation benefits

DESIGN FLAW IN POLICY

The RPwD Act adopted a socio-medical model and a rights-based framework, but practical entitlements are only granted to 'benchmark disabilities' (≥40% disability).

Limited Reservations in UPSC and Govt Jobs

Only 5 Groups considered
for job reservation



Blindness



Hearing



Locomotor



Mental
Illness



Certain
Multiple
Disabilities

**Many disabilities recognised in 2016 Act
excluded from recruitment
including haemophilia**

Structural Challenges Identified:



**Prioritisation of 'visible' disabilities –
those that are easily identifiable**



**Legacy bias of 1995 law still influences
reservation categories**



**Double discrimination: Excluded from
both reservation and often declared
'medically unfit' for jobs**

ACTS AND POLICIES



Acts and Policies

- Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016
- National Policy for Persons with Disabilities
- Benchmark Disability: Definition and benefits



Constitutional Provisions

- Article 14 (Equality before law)
- Article 15 (Prohibition of discrimination)
- Article 21 (Right to life and dignity)

RUSSIA-INDIA

Context: The article argues that India should convert its long-standing goodwill with Russia into strategic, diplomatic, and economic gains as Moscow becomes increasingly dependent on partners amid geopolitical shifts.

Turn soft spot for Russia into hard gains for Delhi

PRESIDENT VLADIMIR Putin's visit to India this week — his first in four years — comes in the midst of intensifying peace efforts in Ukraine. It offers Delhi an opportunity to reinvent the relationship with Russia that is much-valued but performs well below potential and is rather skewed.

Despite Delhi's ritual celebration of Moscow as India's "best friend forever", the reality is less flattering. Indo-Russian ties have been reduced to a thin gruel over the years. Its narrow government-to-government interface has little traction among India's new elites or its dynamic private sector. The Russian presence in Indian public life is a faint echo of the Soviet past. In Moscow too, India remains marginal to the Russian elites preoccupied with America, Europe, and China. If the relationship has endured, it is thanks largely to Putin's personal commitment rather than a structural Russian interest.

Putin's visit is a chance to break out of this drift. But reinvigoration cannot be built on the familiar menu of defence sales — S-400s and S-500s, Su-57s, or yet another nuclear reactor — nor on the short-term bonanza of discounted oil. A durable transformation requires building a substantive commercial, technological, and scientific partnership. Without an economic foundation, Delhi's lofty rhetoric about promoting "multipolarity" with Moscow will ring hollow.

The numbers underline the challenge. India exports barely \$5 billion a year to Russia (compare this with its \$11 bn exports to Bangladesh). There is much room for growth. Russia is a \$2.5 trillion economy. If peace breaks out and Moscow reconnects with Europe and the US, the Russian economy could see major expansion — and Ukraine will inevitably require large-scale

reconstruction. India must position itself to participate in both.

That Delhi must do this while Russia remains locked in conflict with India's principal economic partners — the US and Europe — is unfortunate. But having ignored economic ties for so long, India has little time to waste.

There are, however, reasons for cautious optimism. Nearly four years into the Ukraine war, it is evident that the West cannot defeat Russia at its own borders. President Volodymyr Zelenskyy's shift from demanding a "just peace" to a "dignified peace" reflects Kyiv's weakening hand and the inevitability of Western concessions. It is only a question of when and how much.

At the same time, pragmatic voices in Moscow recognise that a permanent confrontation with the West is unsustainable. Contrary to much of Indian commentary, Russia seeks accommodation with the collective West, wants an honourable place at the G8, and a decisive voice in shaping the European order.

A high-powered American delegation is in Moscow to push forward a peace settlement. After consultations with Zelenskyy's advisers, President Donald Trump's envoys — real estate mogul Steve Witkoff and son-in-law Jared Kushner — landed in Moscow this week to attempt a comprehensive deal. Prime Minister Narendra Modi should receive a first-hand account of these negotiations from Putin.

Delhi has every interest in a stable peace in Ukraine. The war has severely stressed India's doctrine of multi-alignment. The idea that Delhi could maintain strong



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BY C RAJA
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ties with all the major powers collided with Russia's confrontation with the West and its consequences for India's commercial ties with the US and Europe. Worse, the war tightened Russia's dependence on China, the rising power with which India has multiple disputes. Only a Russian accommodation with the West can loosen this unfavourable external environment that India faces.

Delhi's reluctance to condemn Russia's invasion and its dramatic surge in oil imports triggered widespread irritation in the West. President Joe Biden resisted turning India's Russia ties into a breaking point in the expanding US-India partnership. Trump took the opposite approach — imposing an additional 25 per cent tariff on Indian exports, citing India's large purchases of Russian oil.

It is not that Trump is more anti-Russia than Biden. On the contrary, Trump is arguably the most pro-Russian US president since World War II. While penalising India for buying Russian oil, Trump is eager to open US access to Russian hydrocarbons and minerals. American and European media reports suggest that Trump's peace diplomacy is intertwined with ambitions to cultivate business opportunities in Russia and secure privileged access to Ukraine's natural resources.

Europe, India's most important partner after the US, has also been unsettled by Delhi's stance on Ukraine. Unlike Trump, Europe has avoided punitive measures against Delhi. As India seeks deeper links with Europe, it would prefer to see peace between Europe and Russia. Putin's visit gives Delhi an opportunity to reaffirm its support for reconciliation in the old continent.

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Europe has been jolted by Trump's *commerzpolitik*, awakening to a Washington more interested in cutting deals with Moscow than defending its allies. The war has ruptured the natural economic interdependence between Europe and Russia. Trump could well sideline Europe in Ukraine's economic development.

Europe faces two anxieties: The threat from Russia and the fear of abandonment by America. It dislikes a peace dictated by Trump and Putin. Europe's long-term quest for strategic autonomy, then, requires both deterrence and a direct engagement with Moscow to build a new regional security architecture.

In many ways, the difficult negotiations over Ukraine open the door to a potential restructuring of relations among the US, Europe, and Russia. India must navigate this flux by strengthening ties with all three. What looked impossible in 2022 now appears plausible. But Delhi must first correct the distortion in its Russia policy. A partnership built overwhelmingly on defence and nuclear cooperation must broaden to include trade, technology, and scientific collaboration.

A quarter century ago, when Putin made his first visit to India as president in 2000, he sought to end Russia's post-Soviet neglect of India. That opportunity was missed by both sides. This week offers a fresh chance for Modi and Putin to put the relationship on a stronger, more modern footing.

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Syllabus Integration:

- **GS 1:** Geopolitical changes in Eurasia, world history influences on contemporary alignments, regional power dynamics.
- **GS 2:** India's foreign policy, strategic autonomy, bilateral and multilateral diplomacy, changing global order, impact of Russia-Ukraine conflict on India's interests.
- **GS 3:** Energy security, defence procurement diversification, economic cooperation, technology transfers, sanctions and global markets.
- **GS 4:** Realpolitik, national interest versus ideological positions, ethical dimensions in foreign policy decision-making.
- **Prelims:** India-Russia relations basics, key defence agreements, geopolitics of Eurasia, major international groupings (BRICS, SCO), global power shifts, foreign policy doctrines.

MAINS PYQs

CSE 2020

What is the significance of Indo-US defence deals over Indo-Russian defence deals? Discuss with reference to stability in the Indo-Pacific region. (Answer in 250 words)



Vladimir Putin's visit to India is seen as a chance for New Delhi to convert its long-standing political goodwill with Russia into concrete economic and strategic gains, especially in trade and reconstruction opportunities linked to the Ukraine conflict.

**WTN
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RUSSIA-INDIA

KEY HIGHLIGHTS



Stagnant Relations

Indo-Russian ties have narrowed to a limited government-to-government relationship, lacking broader economic or civil society engagement.



Putin's Role

The continuity of the relationship owes much to Putin's personal commitment rather than deep institutional or economic integration



Defence Dependency

The partnership still revolves heavily around defence items like S-400s, Su-57 jets, and nuclear reactors



Weak Trade

India exports only \$5 billion to Russia annually, far less than its exports to Bangladesh (-\$11 billion), despite Russia being a \$2,5 trillion economy

INDIA'S STRATEGIC DILEMMAS



OIL IMPORTS & WEST'S REACTION

India's increased imports of discounted Russian oil have caused friction with Western partners, especially the US and Europe



IMPACT OF UKRAINE WAR

India's multi-alignment doctrine has been tested due to the Russia-West conflict; the war has pushed Russia closer to China, which complicates India's strategic calculus



PEACE DIPLOMACY

High-level US delegations in Moscow (e.g. Jared Kushner) are trying to broker a settlement; Delhi must stay informed and agile



EUROPEAN CONCERNS

Europe fears being sidelined by a Trump-Putin peace deal; Delhi must engage with Europe's need for strategic autonomy and stability

INDIA–RUSSIA RELATIONS

**India–Russia
Defence Deals
(S-400, BrahMos,
Su-30MKI)**

**India's Trade
Statistics with
Major Countries**

G8

BRICS

SCO



**Key Events in
Russia-Ukraine
Conflict**

India-Russia Ties – Background & Current Status

Historical Background



Soviet Era (1950s–1980s)

= USSR was India's
principal defence
partner

✈ Strong cooperation
in space (e.g.,
Rakesh Sharma's
mission), industry
and heavy
infrastructure

🏠 Political alignment during
the Cold War (e.g., 1971
Treaty of Peace, Friendship
and Cooperation)

Post-Soviet Transition (1990s)

! Relations weakened due
to Russia's internal turmoil
and India's economic liberalization,
leading to diversification of partners



MODERN ERA



DEFENCE PARTNERSHIP

Russia remains India's largest defence supplier (~60–70% of India's defence imports historically)

Joint Projects: BrahMos missile, licensed production of Su-30MKI, T-90 tanks, S-400s and S-500s, Su-57s



NUCLEAR COOPERATION

Construction of Kudankulam Nuclear Power Plant



ENERGY

India imports discounted Russian crude; stakes in Russian oil fields (e.g. Vankor)



MULTILATERAL COOPERATION

Common platforms: BRICS, SCO, Eurasian Economic Union, INSTC

CURRENT CHALLENGES

Trade Imbalance:

Russia's exports (mainly crude oil, fertilisers) far outweigh India's exports.

Limited Private Sector Engagement:

Few Indian companies have a footprint in Russia



Russia-China Axis:

Closer Moscow-Beijing ties worry New Delhi amid LAC tensions



US Pressure & CAATSA Threats:

Strategic choices becoming more complex



OPPORTUNITIES

Participation in Ukraine's reconstruction (if peace prevails)



Investment in Arctic energy, defence R&D, technology collaboration, and digital infrastructure

Rebalancing ties to reduce overdependence on either the US or Russia

COLUMBO SECURITY CONCLAVE

Context: The article explains how the revived Colombo Security Conclave (CSC) is emerging as a practical framework for maritime security cooperation among India and Indian Ocean island states against evolving regional threats.

A template for security cooperation in the Indian Ocean

On November 20, 2025, India hosted the 7th National Security Adviser-level summit of the Colombo Security Conclave (CSC). India's National Security Adviser, Ajit Doval, hosted his counterparts from other member-countries, Sri Lanka, the Maldives, Mauritius and Bangladesh, while counterparts from Seychelles and Malaysia were observer state and guest, respectively. The CSC has sought to position itself as a critical forum to promote and foster cooperation in the domain of security in the Indian Ocean region.

Initiated as a trilateral grouping between India, Sri Lanka and Maldives in 2011, the group lost steam in light of the political transition in the Maldives and Sri Lanka, and lack of convergence among the member-states to identify priorities in security cooperation in the Indian Ocean. The group reconvened its engagement under the aegis of the CSC in 2020, a proposed framework to further cooperation in maritime security, counter-terrorism, trafficking and organised crime and cybersecurity. Since then, the group has remained steady in not just maintaining momentum among its member-states but also inducting countries. In 2022, Mauritius joined as a full member, while in 2024, the group saw the admission of Bangladesh.

A region witnessing shifts

For India, the summit, in 2025, comes at a pivotal moment. Frameworks of cooperation in the maritime domain, in the broader Indo-Pacific, and indeed in the Indian Ocean appear to be undergoing a crucial shift. Given the focus of the CSC on non-traditional issues of maritime security, it is vital to bolster cooperation in mitigating the looming challenges. While the



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There are encouraging signs that member-country engagement is deepening in the Colombo Security Conclave, but challenges remain

Indian Ocean maritime security architecture remains fragmented due to the lack of any singular institutional framework, groups such as the CSC must remain committed to enhancing cooperation in this regard.

The issue of development

Importantly, for the wider Indian Ocean littoral world, and especially the members of the CSC, maritime security challenges are often coupled with their developmental priorities.

Given the extent of dependency these countries have on the oceans for their economic progress, securing challenges emanating from the maritime domain is crucial. In many ways, maritime security challenges are deeply intertwined with the lives and livelihoods of not just the littoral communities in these countries but also appear to unlock new opportunities for their national economies in today's era of sea-borne globalisation.

This year's summit has been crucial in many ways. First, the group saw further expansion by way of accession of Seychelles as a full-member into the forum. This signals a deep commitment among countries in the region to harness cooperation within the mandate of the CSC. Second, for India, the CSC also marks a new step in further deepening engagement with its maritime neighbours, amidst an increasingly volatile geopolitical and security shift that appears to be underway in the region in lieu of China's growing presence and influence.

Third, the summit further underscores the growing vitality of the security dimension in enhancing cooperation to boost regional cooperation in the Indian Ocean.

Fourth, the inclusion of Malaysia in this year's

summit as a guest participant may pave the way for further expansion of the group.

Viewing the China factor

However, as the CSC envisages its expansion and broadening the contours of its agenda, some key challenges appear to be looming. First, for India, a key maritime security priority is anchored in the nature and extent of the Chinese presence in the Indian Ocean. On the other hand, the other member countries of the CSC appear to not view the Chinese presence in the Indian Ocean as a major security challenge given their dependence on Beijing as a key developmental partner. Therefore, a careful balance needs to be achieved by India to address the question of growing Chinese presence in the Indian Ocean.

Second, the CSC must direct efforts to strengthen an institutional framework. At present, the group operates at a National Security Adviser-level structure. With growing synergies among its member-countries, the group must seek to institutionalise cooperation such that it remains consistent in aligning policies with actionable pathways of cooperation.

Third, domestic uncertainties in countries such as Bangladesh, and the ensuing impact on how Dhaka continues to engage with India and the other member-countries may run the risk of uncertainty over the group's resilience.

Given this context, the CSC has made significant advances in heralding a new framework of cooperation in a region that suffers from a deep lack of cohesion and convergence among countries on issues of security. Efforts to imagine the way ahead must remain anchored in the need to foster institutional resilience and cohesion among its member-countries.

Syllabus Integration:

- **GS 1:** Geopolitical significance of the Indian Ocean, strategic maritime routes, regional political dynamics.
- **GS 2:** India's neighbourhood policy, regional cooperation mechanisms, maritime diplomacy, multilateral security frameworks.
- **GS 3:** Maritime security challenges, coastal surveillance, counter-terrorism cooperation, emerging naval threats, technological capacity-building.
- **GS 4:** Cooperative security ethics, shared responsibility, trust-building, and strategic transparency among maritime neighbours.
- **Prelims:** Indian Ocean geography, maritime security terms, regional groupings (CSC, IORA), SAGAR doctrine, coastal security architecture, role of National Security Advisor.

PRELIMS PYQs

CSE 2022

Consider the following:

1. Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank
2. Missile Technology Control Regime
3. Shanghai Cooperation Organisation

India is a member of which of the above?

- (a) 1 and 2 only
- (b) 3 only
- (c) 2 and 3 only
- (d) 1, 2 and 3

Answer: (d)

COLUMBO SECURITY CONCLAVE



MAINS PYQs

CSE 2025

Why is maritime security vital to protect India's sea trade? Discuss maritime and coastal security challenges and the way forward.

CSE 2022

'India is an age-old friend of Sri Lanka.' Discuss India's role in the recent crisis in Sri Lanka in the light of the preceding statement.

CSE 2021

The new tri-nation partnership AUKUS is aimed at countering China's ambitions in the Indo-Pacific region. Is it going to supersede the existing partnerships in the region? Discuss the strength and impact of AUKUS in the present scenario.

COLUMBO SECURITY CONCLAVE



7TH NATIONAL SECURITY ADVISER-LEVEL MEETING COLOMBO SECURITY CONCLAVE



held in New Delhi
on 20 November 2025,
hosted by India's NSA
Ajit Doval and attended
by member states from
the Indian Ocean region

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COLUMBO SECURITY CONCLAVE



COLUMBO SECURITY CONCLAVE

KEY HIGHLIGHTS



Summit Host

India's NSA Ajit Doval chaired the Chennai Security Conclave meeting with NSAs from Sri Lanka, Maldives, Mauritius, and Bangladesh.



Guest Participation

Malaysia participated as a guest country, indicating potential future expansion.

New Member

Seychelles joined as a full member, expanding CSC's footprint in the western Indian Ocean.



COLUMBO SECURITY CONCLAVE

KEY AREAS OF FOCUS



**MARITIME
SECURITY**



**COUNTER-
TERRORISM™**



**TRAFFICKING AND
TRANSNATIONAL
ORGANIZED CRIME**



CYBERSECURITY

Indian Ocean Security Challenges



Fragmented Architecture

Lack of a strong regional institutional framework



Non-Traditional Threats

Piracy, illegal fishing, trafficking, cyber threats



China's Growing Footprint

Naval and economic footprint is a strategic concern for India

COLUMBO SECURITY CONCLAVE



Development Link

Maritime security is tied to economic and developmental needs of CSC members, many of whom rely heavily on the ocean economy.

Divergence in Threat Perception

While India views China's presence in the Indian Ocean as a strategic concern, other CSC members see Beijing as a developmental partner, leading to diverging priorities.



Need for Institutionalisation

CSC currently operates through NSA-level meetings. A formal secretariat or institutional mechanism is needed for sustained and policy-aligned cooperation.

WHAT IS THE COLOMBO SECURITY CONCLAVE (CSC)



Origin

Started in 2011 as a trilateral maritime security cooperation mechanism between India, Sri Lanka, and Maldives

Revival in 2020

In light of growing maritime security threats and China's strategic assertiveness

Initial Focus

Maritime security and countering piracy and terrorism

Dormancy

The group went into hiatus post-2014 due to political changes in Maldives and Sri Lanka

COLUMBO SECURITY CONCLAVE

MEMBERS

India
Sri Lanka
Maldives
Mauritius

OBSERVERS

Bangladesh
Seychelles



COLUMBO SECURITY CONCLAVE



2025 SUMMIT OUTCOME

ACCESSION OF SEYCHELLES

The group saw further expansion by way of accession of Seychelles as a full-member into the forum.



DEEP COMMITMENT

This signals a deep commitment among countries in the region to harness cooperation within the mandate of CSC

INDIA AND REGIONAL ENGAGEMENT

For India, the CSC also marks a new step in further deepening engagement with its maritime neighbours, amidst an increasingly volatile geopolitical and security shift that



VITALITY OF SECURITY DIMENSION

The summit further underscores the growing vitality of the security dimension in enhancing cooperation to boost regional cooperation in the Indian Ocean

COLUMBO SECURITY CONCLAVE



India's Role as Security Provider in the IOR

India sees itself as a net security provider in the Indian Ocean Region.



Addressing Non-Traditional Security Threats

Illegal, Unregulated, and Unreported (IUU) fishing, drug and human trafficking, piracy, climate change-related disasters, and cybersecurity as key regional issues.

STRATEGIC SIGNIFICANCE OF CSC



Geo-economic Stakes

Major global sea lanes and energy trade routes pass through the Indian Ocean, Securing Sea Lines of Communication (SLOCs) is vital



China Factor

India is increasingly concerned with:

- Chinese naval presence in Indian Ocean
- Port development projects ie.g., Hambantota in Sri Lanka, Gwadar in Pakistan)
- Debt-trap diplomacy affecting sovereignty of smaller littoral states
- Many CSC members are beneficiaries of Chinese aid/investment, making unified stance against China difficult.



Challenges Ahead for CSC

INSTITUTIONAL WEAKNESSES

- No permanent secretariat or coordination body.
- Still relies on NSA-level coordination; needs bureaucratic and operational institutionalisation.

DIVERGENCE IN STRATEGIC INTERESTS

- India sees the Indian Ocean through a security lens, others through a developmental and economic lens.
- Lack of consensus on China's role and influence.

INTERNAL POLITICAL INSTABILITY

- Changes in political leadership (e.g., Bangladesh, Maldives) can affect foreign policy continuity.

OVERLAPPING REGIONAL FORUMS

- Other groupings like IORA, IOR Defence Ministers' Conclave, Indo-Pacific Quad, ASEAN, etc., create duplication and lack cohesion.

Colombo Security Conclave (CSC): Promising Indian Ocean Maritime Cooperation Platform

Evolving Platform for Regional Maritime Cooperation



1. Build robust
institutional
structures



2. Create joint
operational
mechanisms



3. Address divergences
in member
priorities through
consensus-building
diplomacy



4. Strategically balance
China's influence while
maintaining cooperative
development goals

PRIVACY IN A FISHBOWL SOCIETY

Context: The article critiques India's evolving data governance regime, arguing that despite new laws, citizens increasingly live in a 'fishbowl society' where privacy is fragile amid expanding state and corporate surveillance.

Syllabus Integration:

- **GS 1:** Impact of surveillance and digital technologies on society, changing state–citizen relations in the information age.
- **GS 2:** Right to Privacy jurisprudence (Puttaswamy), data protection laws, state surveillance, accountability mechanisms, governance of digital public infrastructure.
- **GS 3:** Cyber-security threats, digital economy regulation, AI and algorithmic governance, data flows and storage, technological vulnerabilities.
- **GS 4:** Ethics of privacy, autonomy, informed consent, balancing security and liberty, responsible state and corporate behaviour.
- **Prelims:** Fundamental Rights (Right to Privacy), DPDP Act 2023 basics, IT Act provisions, cyber-security concepts, data protection terminology.

Privacy in a 'fishbowl society'

In the age of Artificial Intelligence (AI), technology is a double-edged sword, with users grappling with the trade-offs between convenience and privacy. While India has a normative privacy framework in terms of the Puttaswamy judgment (2017); the Information Technology Act, 2000 and its Intermediary Guidelines; and the Digital Personal Data Protection Act, 2023, and Rules, the reality of privacy remains opaque.

We now live in a fishbowl society where we are gauging 'harm' from a myopic lens of privacy and dignity instead of obscurity. As Meredith Brunsard notes in her book *Artificial Unintelligence*, society's over-reliance on technology is leaving us ill-prepared to cope with the very systems we have built. This not only exposes individuals to the risks of data breach but also pushes them into obscurity, especially in cases of Non-Consensual Intimate Image Abuse (NCII), where algorithms generate deepfake pornographic images without one's knowledge or control. Regulating such an assault is an urgent legal and policy imperative. The conventional frameworks for addressing such abuses are inadequate. Traditional approaches often describe risks of any such surveillance as loss of privacy, when in reality it is many more things as well: anxiety, chronic fear of being watched, victim blaming and shaming, societal stigma, career stagnation, permanent loss of autonomy, and bodily integrity.

Laws are not enough
Surprisingly, despite cybercrimes being on the rise, there is no contemporary data on NCII. Data of the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) puts all cybercrimes in one category, without any granular classification of specific offences. We filed an RTI to Information Application on October 3, 2025 seeking



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information on the number of cases registered in the previous year relating specifically to cyberbullying and cyberstalking, along with the gender-wise distribution of victims. After more than a month, the Ministry responded that "law and order" and "police" fall under the State List, and therefore, the most appropriate authority to furnish such information would be the respective State governments.

This shows that mere legal provisions are not sufficient to address the realities of online abuse. Accessibility, awareness, and social acceptance of these laws play an equally critical role in determining their effectiveness. A significant share of young women are unaware of what offences such as voyeurism or deepfake porn legally entail. The lack of digital literacy is compounded by deep-rooted social stigma, shame, and fear of blame, which often deter victims from reporting. In extreme cases, this has driven some survivors to self-harm.

Going beyond an SOP

On November 11, 2025, the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology issued Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) to curb the circulation of NCII. These guidelines mandate that such content must be taken down within 24 hours of reporting and seek to safeguard the "digital dignity" and privacy of women by offering multiple platforms for complaints. This is a welcome and long-awaited step. However, an SOP is only the starting point. Its effectiveness depends on being backed by strong capacity-building programmes, stakeholder consultations, and strengthening of enforcement agencies.

A key limitation lies in the absence of a gender-neutral framework. Studies show that transgender persons, particularly transwomen, are disproportionately targeted through deepfake-based harassment. Yet the SOP is silent on transgender victims,

overlooking the Supreme Court's recognition of transgender persons as the "third gender" entitled to equal rights. Further, it does not establish clear accountability mechanisms, define the quantum of punishment, or articulate specific regulations for deepfake generation, dissemination, and tracing. Thus, having a dedicated law on NCII is the need of the hour – one that goes beyond the traditional focus on *actus reus* and *mens rea* and emphasises explicit duties on platforms, AI developers, and intermediaries, more specific and comprehensive than the Information Technology (Intermediary Guidelines and Digital Media Ethics Code) Amendment Rule, 2025.

With the proliferation of AI-generated deepfakes, mainly used to harass, shame, and silence victims (mostly women), privacy is increasingly shaped and threatened by technological capabilities rather than legal protections. The lack of procedural safeguards, traceability norms, and independent oversight mechanisms has allowed such crimes to go unreported and unpunished for years, even as their frequency and severity escalate. These challenges raise an important question: Is an SOP enough?

Lack of awareness of rights or even of what "voyeurism" or "revenge porn" legally constitutes, inadequate sensitisation of police officials, victim-blaming, and deficient cyber-investigative capacity further dilute the impact of existing laws. As NGOs and research studies highlight, thousands of cases are filed daily across India, yet convictions remain disproportionately low. In this context, while the SOP is a crucial first step, a meaningful response to NCII and deepfake harms requires gender-neutral reforms, police training, capacity building, platform accountability, AI-specific safeguards, and stronger victim-centric legal mechanisms.

The government has issued Standard Operating Procedures to curb the circulation of Non-Consensual Intimate Image Abuse. But this is only a starting point

PRELIMS PYQs

CSE 2018

Right to Privacy is protected as an intrinsic part of Right to Life and Personal liberty. Which of the following in the Constitution of India correctly and appropriately imply the above statement?

- a. Article 14 and the provisions under the 42nd Amendment to the Constitution.
- b. Article 17 and the DPSP in Part IV
- c. Article 21 and the freedoms guaranteed in Part III
- d. Article 24 and the provisions under the 44th Amendment to the Constitution

Answer: c

PRIVACY IN A FISHBOWL SOCIETY



MAINS PYQs

CSE 2024

Right to Privacy is intrinsic to life and liberty and is inherently protected under Article 21 of the constitution. Explain. In this reference discuss the law relating to DNA testing of Child in the womb to establish its paternity. (Answer in 250 words)

CSE 2017

Examine the scope of Fundamental Rights in the light of the latest judgement of the Supreme Court on Right to Privacy.

FISHBOWL SOCIETY



The illustration depicts a woman in an orange shirt sitting inside a large glass fishbowl. The water is filled with numerous stylized eyes of various colors (red, yellow, blue). To the right of the fishbowl, a person in a black hoodie and mask (hacker) is holding a smartphone. The phone screen shows a profile picture with a red prohibition sign over it. A red warning triangle is also visible near the hacker. The background is a solid yellow color.

Pervasive digital technologies and AI create privacy risks and cybercrime vulnerabilities

- 🔒 Non-consensual intimate image abuse

India passed laws, but gaps remain in:

- Enforcement
- Victim support

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PRIVACY IN A FISHBOWL SOCIETY

PRIVACY IN A FISHBOWL SOCIETY

LEGAL LANDSCAPE IN INDIA



Puttaswamy Judgment (2017) affirmed Right to Privacy as a Fundamental Right under Article 21.



IT Act, 2000 and Intermediary Guidelines address online content regulation, but lack specificity on NCII and deepfakes.



Digital Personal Data Protection (DPDP) Act, 2023 provides a framework for digital data privacy but is general in nature.



In November 2025, MeitY released SOPs mandating content takedown of NCII material within 24 hours.

PRIVACY IN A FISHBOWL SOCIETY



Deepfake and NCII crimes often go unreported due to social stigma, fear, and lack of awareness



No granular NCRB data on NCII; RTI response shows states hold such data but don't disaggregate it

KEY ISSUES IDENTIFIED



SOPs are not backed by clear accountability, punishments, or procedural safeguards



The SOP lacks gender inclusivity — notably, it excludes transgender victims, violating SC's NALSA judgment (2014)

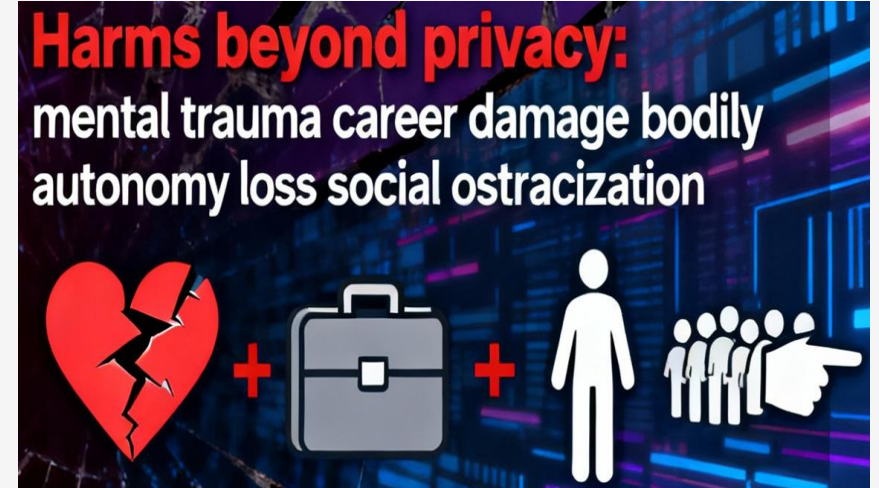
PRIVACY IN A FISHBOWL SOCIETY

AI and Privacy Concerns

Deepfakes growing threat
- AI content invades privacy
of women marginalized groups

An illustration featuring a cracked, dark red background. On the left, a digital face with a blue and pink pixelated texture is shown. To its right is a yellow padlock icon. The background also includes a cracked glass effect on the left side.

Harms beyond privacy:
mental trauma career damage bodily
autonomy loss social ostracization

An illustration with a dark blue background featuring glowing digital lines. It includes a red broken heart icon, a grey briefcase icon, a white silhouette of a person, and a group of white silhouettes of people with one pointing. Plus signs are used to connect the icons.

Meredith Broussard
Artificial Unintelligence
- unintended societal harms of
AI over-reliance

An illustration with a dark blue background featuring glowing digital lines. It includes a pink brain icon, two grey gears, and a yellow warning triangle with a black exclamation mark. The background also includes a cracked glass effect.

Gaps in Deepfake Legal Framework

1. No AI-specific laws for deepfakes



2. Missing victim-centric gender-neutral tech provisions



3. SOPs lack traceability platform liability oversight



PRIVACY IN A FISHBOWL SOCIETY

KEY LEGAL GAPS



No specific law criminalizing deepfake generation or dissemination.



Lack of gender neutrality in frameworks — contrary to *NALSA v. Union of India* (2014) which recognized transgender persons as third gender with equal rights.



Further, it does not establish clear accountability mechanisms, define the quantum of punishment, or articulate specific regulations for deepfake generation, dissemination, and tracing.

PRIVACY IN A FISHBOWL SOCIETY

Way Forward



Enact a dedicated NCII Law

- Define and criminalize deepfake generation/dissemination.
- Emphasize victim-centric, gender-neutral, and AI-aware legal framework



Platform Accountability

- Amend intermediary rules to mandate proactive monitoring,
- Introduce traceability norms for deepfake detection



Capacity Building

- Train police and judicial officers on cybercrimes and digital rights
- Establish dedicated cybercrime cells with gender sensitivity training



Data and Transparency

- Direct NCRB to disaggregate data on cyberbullying, NCII, deepfakes, and gender distribution of victims



Victim Support Systems

- Expand access to legal aid, counseling, and reporting platforms
- Remove stigma through awareness campaigns and digital literacy



DIGITISATION OF SIR

Context: The article argues that the Election Commission's Special Intensive Revision (SIR) of electoral rolls must be fully digitised because reliance on outdated, manual processes threatens voter inclusion and electoral integrity.

Syllabus Integration:

- GS 1:** Democratic participation, social inclusion in electoral processes, impact of administrative inefficiencies on vulnerable groups.
- GS 2:** Electoral reforms, ECI powers and limitations, governance of elections, use of ICT in public administration, issues of exclusion and duplication in voter rolls.
- GS 3:** Digital infrastructure, data management, cybersecurity for electoral systems, technological solutions for public service delivery.
- GS 4:** Integrity of democratic institutions, fairness, transparency, accountability in electoral processes, ethical duty to ensure universal enfranchisement.
- Prelims:** Election Commission of India functions, electoral rolls, SIR process, voter registration rules, digital governance basics, constitutional provisions for elections.

Why the SIR needs to be completely digitised

The Election Commission is facing criticism for its Special Intensive Revision of electoral rolls as reliance on outdated data threatens voter inclusion and the integrity of upcoming elections

Rajeev Kumar

A flawed foundation can never produce a strong system – whether in science, engineering, governance, or IT. Faulty datasets always yield unreliable results, and electoral roll revision is no exception; broken base data cannot generate integrity, no matter how many procedures are added. Only a modern, accurate foundation can sustain a credible electoral system.

This is precisely the problem with the ongoing Special Intensive Revision (SIR), which relies on the legacy rolls of 2002 to 2004 which were created entirely on paper through manual, error-prone processes when India was entering its digital era. It is astonishing that the Election Commission of India (EC) still relies on these outdated records today, despite India being an IT powerhouse and the Commission itself operating one of the world's most advanced electoral systems, ECI-Net.

This regression has erased decades of digital progress, forcing SIR 2.0 to operate on outdated methods and unreliable, unverifiable data. An exercise meant to produce clean and updated voter rolls has instead pushed the country into a prolonged crisis lasting months.

A glimpse at the legacy rolls
The past SIRs functioned mainly as routine summary revisions, focusing on deletions such as removing voters who had shifted, died, or become ineligible, and adding those who had moved or reached voting age. It was executed casually, with little effort to update or correct records.

Therefore, the resulting rolls contain incomplete, ambiguous, and missing information, with standards varying across states and constituencies. Some of the common issues include entries showing only first and middle names without last names, missing PAN or house numbers, and widespread spelling errors, for example, Agrawal/Agarwal, Kalyan/Kalyani, Sargol/Sargal, and Veer/Vir.

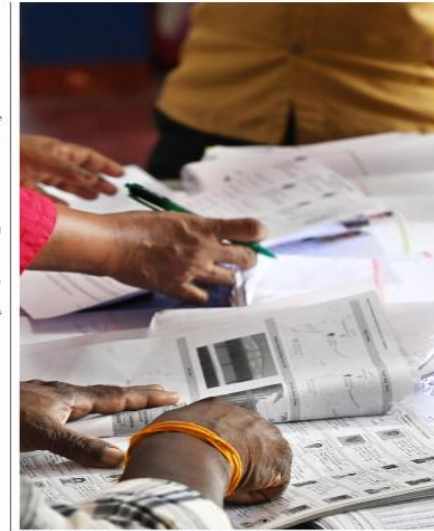
Random inspections of the rolls reveal alarming anomalies, such as entries implying polygamy. For instance, the husbands of Kiran and Seema are listed as Sharda. The author himself, after days of manually scanning hundreds of thousands of entries in Himachal Pradesh, and Bengal, could not find his own record – despite having voted in every general election. These experiences illustrate the flaws in the 2002-04 dataset.

Moreover, as the rolls exist only in paper form, a database of more than 600 million entries cannot undergo verifications or consistency checks. The EC's search interface is essentially non-functional, typically returning "no details found" or "error" when queries are made. After several hundred search attempts, the author found no valid matches and was repeatedly directed to PDS or Booth Level Officers (BLOs). The search page also includes a disheartening note that the rolls are published exactly as received from State Chief Electoral Officers (CSEOs). The SIR merely boots them. This effectively distances the EC from the very officers it oversees. Without digitisation, these rolls serve only archival

purposes. These incomplete, non-searchable legacy records form the foundation of today's SIR – leaving countless genuine voters unable to find their names anywhere.

Underutilisation of resources
ECI-Net allows voters to search the current one-billion record database using mobile numbers, EPIC numbers, names, dates of birth, addresses, and family structure. It detects duplicate or missing entries and supports services such as registration, deletion, corrections, Aadhaar linking, locating constituencies and polling booths, contacting BLOs, downloading EPIC cards, filing complaints, and tracking their status. These functions are comprehensive and typically work flawlessly, enabling even offline submission of Enumeration Forms (EPFs) through Aadhaar-based verification.

Yet, legacy SIR data has not been integrated into ECI-Net with the same efficiency. With minimal effort, the 2002-04 rolls could be digitised and made searchable, offering the same capabilities needed for filling EPFs. Its continued reliance



Tedious process: A BLO helping voters fill up enumeration forms in Kochi on November 25, 2024.

on the weaknesses of the legacy rolls. The EC's expectation that voters can recall where they voted in 2002-04 is unrealistic. EPIC cards were not archived, and people relied on scrap paper slips. For voters who have moved multiple times over two decades, remembering decade-old house, part, and serial numbers is impossible.

BLOs offer little help: most function mainly as distributors and collectors of paper EPFs. Lacking past poller records, many demand birth certificates and state address proofs despite EPFs requiring none. Many also lack data-entry skills, resulting in piles of undigitised EPFs over half of Uttar Pradesh's BLOs remain undigitised as per an EC press release on November 27. Paper EPFs double the workload: forms are filled by hand and then digitised, and photo pasting forces poor voters to pay for photographs while BLOs re-digitise them. This digital-to-paper-to-digital loop is inefficient and error-prone.

By contrast, ECI-Net enables fast, error-free online EPF submission with no

digitisation, paper-photos, signatures, or documents. Forms 6, 7, and 8 facilitate online insertion, deletion, correction, and Aadhaar linking – separate from BLOs. Aadhaar verification makes the process smooth and reliable.

Minor mismatches – mostly inherited from flawed 2002-04 rolls – can be corrected via Form 8, yet the EC has imposed unnecessary approval requirements that are rarely granted. Voters who have been deleted from the EC rolls have to falsely declare themselves as first-time voters when using Form 8. EPF submissions via BLOs show only "received," with no details, unlike transparent online submissions. Thus, a simple digital workflow is blocked by bureaucratic hurdles and official inertia.

For non-tech-savvy citizens, the EC could have deployed mobile digital kiosks with hand-held devices and trained staff to help them file EPFs online, thereby easing pressure on BLOs and eliminating the need for paper forms.

Instead of delivering the paperless, people-friendly, transparent system it promised, the EC's paper-era methods have created confusion and crisis engulfing both voters and BLOs.

How to go fully digital
The following workflow can make SIR 2026 fully digital, paperless, and verifiable:

Searchability through digitisation: convert all State/UT rolls into a fully searchable digital format, using English as the standard for searchable data and metadata, with regional languages retained as non-searchable fields.

Data integration: fuse old records with reliable datasets – Aadhaar, PAN/Income Tax, driving licence, and local body records – using robust APIs and consistency checks. Aadhaar must be strengthened as the anchor for identity verification.

Differentiate voter categories: classify voters into three groups: (i) stable-address voters, (ii) frequent movers, and (iii) those with immigration/nationality issues.

Submission of EPFs online: secure EPFs are submitted entirely online, supported by mobile digital kiosks operated by trained personnel. India has an ample supply of tech-savvy workers who can assist efficiently, while electoral officials handle ground verification.

Digitise all steps: complete document verification, uploads, and post-validation checks entirely online, with transparent workflows.

With these reforms, SIR 2026 can transition from its dependence on outdated paper records to a modern, trusted, technology-driven national exercise.

The way ahead
A fully digital system, as outlined above, would eliminate the long-standing flaws of legacy SIR and enable seamless integration of all processes through ECI-Net. These reforms are straightforward, feasible, and implementable within the extended timelines of the ongoing SIR. Most steps require minimal effort; only data integration may be deferred beyond SIR 2026. Once adopted, the new SIR will become simpler, faster, and more reliable, with grievances addressed in real time, preventing panic, confusion, and unnecessary stress.

A digital SIR is not optional; it is indispensable – there is no alternative. SIR 2026 must become a trust revolution powered by technology, transparency, verification, and integrity. It is better late than never.

Rajeev Kumar is a former professor of computer science at IIT Kharagpur, IIT Kanpur, BITS Pilani, and IIM, and a former scientist at DRDO and ISRO.

ELECTION COMMISSION'S SPECIAL INTENSIVE REVISION



**MUST BE
DIGITISED**

The entire SIR process must be fully digitised to protect voter inclusion and the integrity of upcoming elections, instead of relying on outdated “legacy” paper records and fragmented data systems.

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DIGITISATION OF SIR

Key Highlights



Legacy Flaw:

SIR 2.0 relies on manual, paper-based electoral rolls from 2002–2004, which are riddled with errors, ambiguities, and non-searchable formats



Missed Digital Potential:

Despite India's ECINet, a robust electoral IT platform, legacy data remains outside its scope, limiting searchability and verification

Key Highlights



Data Anomalies Noted:

- Missing EPIC numbers, house numbers
- Spelling inconsistencies (e.g., Agarwal vs Agraval)
- Partial names and duplicate or contradictory entries
- Non-functional search interfaces and unverifiable databases

DIGITISATION OF SIR



Voter deletions are widespread, and real-time grievance redressal is absent

GROUND-LEVEL CHALLENGES



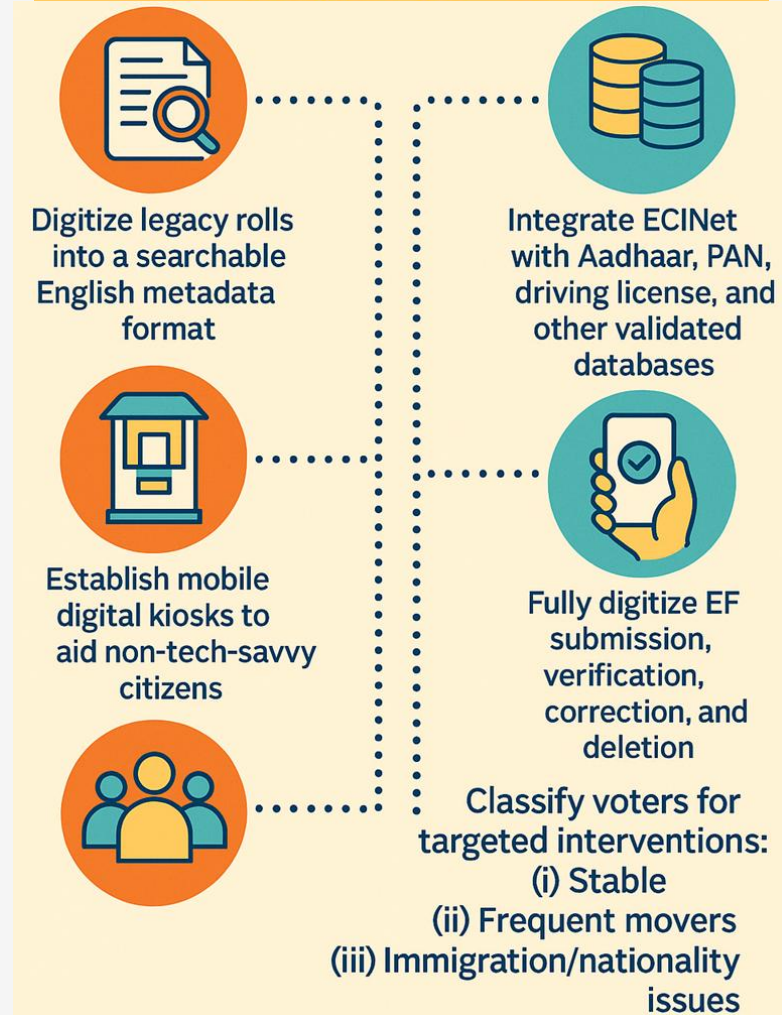
Citizens are burdened with photo pasting, redundant documentation, and repeated digitisation cycles



BLOs lack data-entry skills and function mainly as form collectors

DIGITISATION OF SIR

Reform Proposal for SIR 2026



MAINS TOPICS

DELHI CAN STOP BLAMING FARM FIRES FOR ITS POLLUTION WOES
FOR DEMOCRACY'S SAKE, AN INDEX FOR LEGISLATURES

DELHI AIR POLLUTION AND BLAME ON FARMERS

Context: The article argues that despite a sharp fall in Punjab–Haryana stubble burning, Delhi’s pollution still peaked in 2025, proving that local emission sources—not farm fires—are now the dominant drivers of its winter smog.

Syllabus Integration:

- **GS 1:** Urbanisation, environmental degradation, population pressures, regional geography, urban morphology.
- **GS 2:** Inter-state coordination, governance mechanisms, environmental policy, regulatory institutions.
- **GS 3:** Air pollution, climate and environmental sustainability, agriculture–environment linkages, technological and policy interventions.
- **GS 4:** Environmental ethics, responsibility of stakeholders, accountability in public policy.
- **Prelims:** Air pollutants and their types, AQI standards, particulate matter (PM_{2.5} and PM₁₀) characteristics, pollution sources, agricultural residue burning, environmental institutions (CPCB, SPCBs), basic climate and atmospheric concepts.

Delhi can stop blaming farm fires for its pollution woes

Stubble burning in Punjab and Haryana is at a five-year low, yet Delhi's pollution is peaking

DATA POINT

The Hindu Data Team

The paddy harvesting season for 2025 officially ended on November 30. Punjab and Haryana recorded a 90% reduction in stubble burning incidents this year compared to 2021. In fact, farm fires in the two States declined to their lowest levels in five years in 2025. However, pollution levels in Delhi remained stubbornly high, triggering protests last month. This disparity shows that local sources remain the primary driver of the capital's persistent pollution crisis.

Notably, the Supreme Court on Monday suggested that farmers could not be made scapegoats for air pollution in the national capital. The Court also asked why blue skies were visible during the pandemic years when stubble burning was relatively high and vehicles were off the roads. The Centre for Science and Environment (CSE)'s assessment of Delhi's early winter trends and annual air quality confirms this reality: Delhi and the National Capital Region (NCR) can no longer hide behind the smoke-screen of farm fires.

The incidence of crop burning has substantially reduced in Punjab and Haryana this year, partly due to the massive floods in Punjab during the monsoon. In the October–November period, the daily contribution of farm fires to pollution levels in Delhi mostly remained below 5%, or between 5–15% for a few days and peaked at 22% only between November 12 and 13 (Chart 1). While the reduced fires prevented extreme spikes, the Air Quality Index (AQI) stayed in the 'very poor' to 'severe' range for almost the entire month of November, indicating the significance of Delhi's local, year-round sources of pollution.

Importantly, PM_{2.5} remained the prominent pollutant for 34 days in the October–November pe-

riod. Data show that the air is toxic to breathe not just because of the increase in the levels of particulate matter but also due to the contribution of local sources. According to the report, the daily particulate pollution spikes are closely reinforced by traffic-related emissions of both NO₂ and CO, especially under low-dispersion winter conditions (Chart 2). Both NO₂ and CO are highly toxic and harmful gases.

This problem has become widespread over the years. CSE's report noted that in 2018, about 13 hotspots were officially identified based on their pollution levels that not only exceeded the standards but also the city's average levels. These hotspots have continued to remain extremely polluted. With an annual PM_{2.5} average of 119 µg/m³ in 2025, Jahangirpuri is the most polluted hotspot, followed by Bawana, Wazirpur and Anand Vihar.

Over the years, several other hotspots have emerged in the city. Vivek Vihar recorded 101 µg/m³ in 2025, similar to Ashok Vihar. Nehru Nagar, Alipur, Sirifort, Dwarka Sector 8, and Patparganj have all recorded more than 90 µg/m³ (Chart 3).

The report also noted that several NCR cities remained just as polluted as Delhi, and were often worse off. While a region-wide smog episode affected NCR towns too, Bahadurgarh endured persistent conditions, with the episode lasting 10 days. The town's average smog intensity exceeded that of Delhi. This indicates that the entire region behaves as a single airshed where even smaller towns are becoming hotspots, facing equal or even greater pollution pressure.

Data suggests that Delhi is on the verge of losing its air quality gains from previous years. Between 2018 and 2020, Delhi saw a steady decline in year-on-year PM_{2.5} levels. However, since 2021–22, the levels have been largely elevated, and the annual average level has taken a sharp upward turn.

Not a burning problem

Charts were sourced from 'Toxic cocktail of pollution during early winter in Delhi–NCR', a report published by the Centre for Science and Environment on December 1, 2025. The report was authored by Sharanjeet Kaur and Anumita Roychowdhury

CHART 1: Delhi's Air Quality Index (left axis) versus contribution of farm fires (right axis: %) in the October–November period

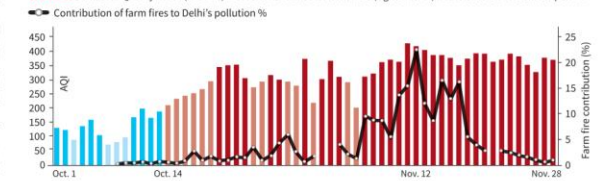


CHART 2: Correlation of PM_{2.5} with CO and NO₂ in the Nov. 21 – Nov. 28 period. In the graphs, the PM_{2.5} values are plotted on the left axis

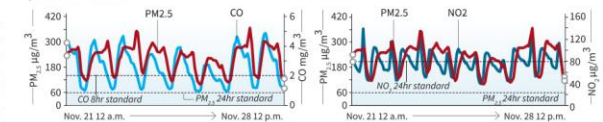
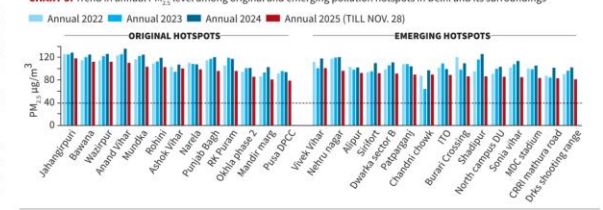


CHART 3: Trend in annual PM_{2.5} level among original and emerging pollution hotspots in Delhi and its surroundings



DELHI AIR POLLUTION AND BLAME ON FARMERS

MAINS PYQs

CSE - 2015

Mumbai, Delhi and Kolkata are the three Mega cities of the country but the air pollution is much more serious problem in Delhi as compared to the other two. Why is this so? (Answer in 200 words)

DELHI AIR POLLUTION AND BLAME ON FARMERS

Stubble burning incidents in Punjab and Haryana have fallen sharply to a five-year low in 2025



Yet Delhi's air pollution this winter remains extremely high, showing that local sources are the main driver of its pollution crisis

Data highlight that toxic levels of PM₅, NO₂ and CO in Delhi are largely linked to local emissions such as vehicles, industry and construction, rather than farm fires in neighbouring States

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DELHI AIR POLLUTION AND BLAME ON FARMERS

DELHI AIR POLLUTION AND BLAME ON FARMERS

THE STUBBLE BURNING MYTH

Stubble burning in Punjab and Haryana has reached a **five-year low** in 2025, yet Delhi's winter pollution remains at **crisis levels**.



DELHI AIR POLLUTION AND BLAME ON FARMERS

Despite minimal farm fire incidents, Delhi recorded toxic levels of $\text{PM}_{2.5}$, NO_2 , and CO , proving farm fires are not the primary pollution driver.



DELHI AIR POLLUTION AND BLAME ON FARMERS

Supreme Court noted that even when paddy harvesting occurs, **local sources remain the main contributor to Delhi's pollution crisis.**



DELHI AIR POLLUTION AND BLAME ON FARMERS

LOCAL POLLUTION SOURCES: THE REAL CULPRITS



Vehicle emissions and traffic-related pollution contribute significantly to PM2.5 and CO levels in Delhi's air.

Data reveals pollution levels are closely linked to local activities rather than long-range transport from neighbouring states' farm fires

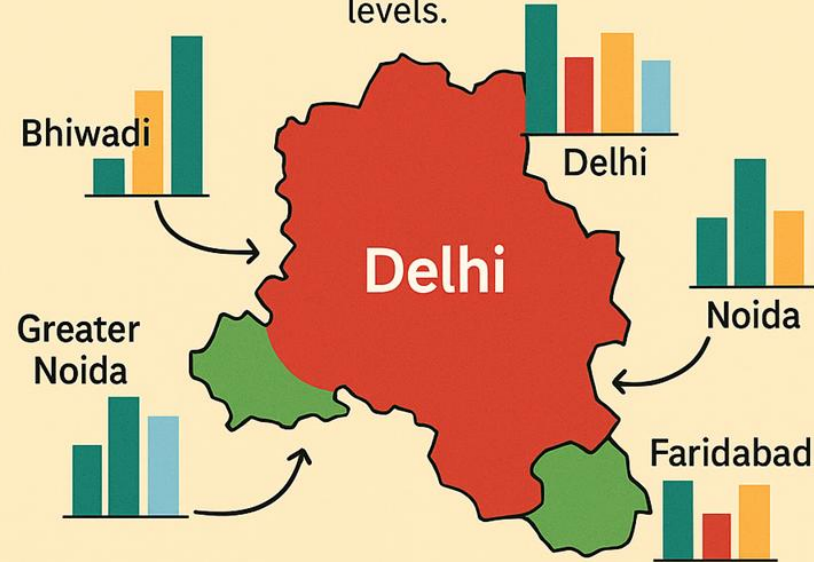
Industrial emissions, construction dust, and local hotspots drive sustained pollution, particularly during winter months



DELHI AIR POLLUTION AND BLAME ON FARMERS

EMERGING POLLUTION HOTSPOTS

New pollution hotspots within Delhi and outskirts now rival or exceed traditional hotspots in toxicity levels.



KEY FINDINGS

Several NCR hotspots showed worse pollution levels compared to earlier years, indicating localized pollution intensification.

IMPLICATION

Local pollution control measures must be strengthened and targeted at emerging hotspots.

■ New hotspot ■ Traditional hotspot ■ Delhi

DELHI AIR POLLUTION AND BLAME ON FARMERS

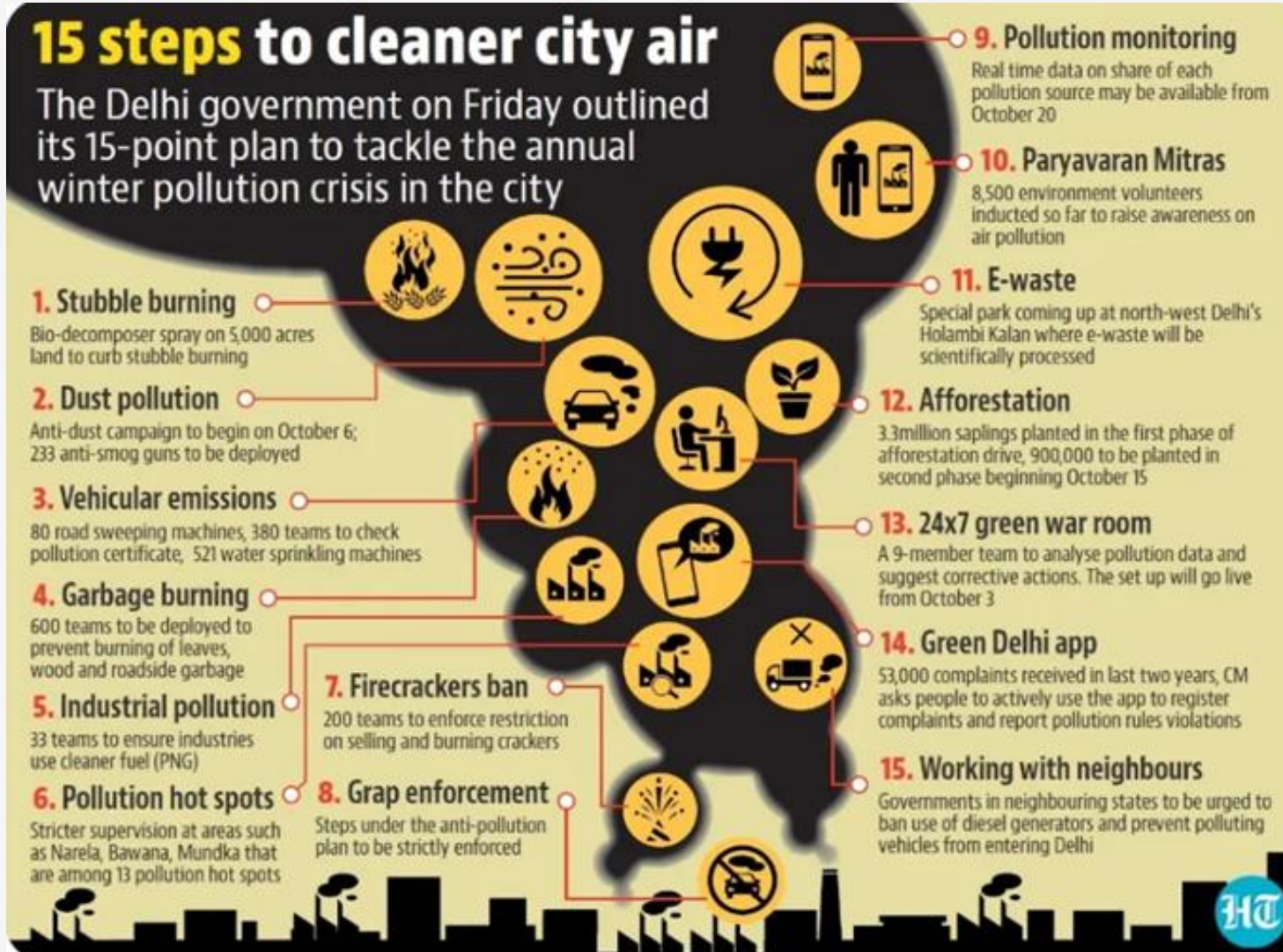
Delhi must shift focus from blaming farm fires to addressing local pollution sources through stricter emission controls.

Vehicle pollution, industrial emissions, and construction dust are the primary pollution drivers requiring immediate intervention

KEY TAKEAWAYS & POLICY IMPERATIVES

A multi-sector approach targeting local hotspots, traffic management, and industrial regulation is essential for sustainable air quality improvement

DELHI AIR POLLUTION AND BLAME ON FARMERS



INDEX FOR LEGISLATURES

Context: The article introduces the National Legislative Index (NLI), a new annual system to benchmark the productivity, transparency, and innovation of India's State Legislatures.

For democracy's sake, an index for legislatures



VIJENDER
GUPTA

IN THE past decade, the scope and complexity of governance in India have expanded at an unprecedented pace. This demands both political commitment and deep technical understanding. State legislatures need to evolve into robust, research-driven and high-performing institutions capable of sustained scrutiny, meaningful debate and accountable lawmaking. Instead of being platforms for informed discussion and consensus-building, assemblies often find themselves paralysed by ideological divides.

This culture of disruption diminishes productivity and weakens public faith in legislative institutions. Recent reviews of state legislatures show that assemblies, on average, meet for 20-25 days a year. If our legislative assemblies are to remain temples of democracy, they must restore a sense of discipline, dialogue and dignity. Strengthening functioning is essential to ensuring that governance keeps pace with the aspirations of a rapidly changing India.

Legislative quality influences law-making, oversight of the executive, public engagement and delivery of development outcomes. Currently, there are limited ways, mostly through RTIs, by which the state legislature's quality and innovation can be measured. There is a need for an institutional mechanism through which state legislatures can assess their functioning, identify gaps, and strengthen their institutional performance. Measuring, tracking and comparing state-level legislative performance is necessary to evaluate democratic performance within India's federal structure. Recognising this need, the National Legislative Index (NLI) seeks to provide a systematic, data-driven means of evaluating legislatures.

The NLI, to be published annually, proposes India's first state-wise benchmarking system to measure the productivity, transparency, and innovation of state assemblies and legislative councils. The NLI will incentivise healthy competition among states

form corrective reforms; to foster peer learning by highlighting inter-state disparities; to strengthen the role of the Speaker's office as a driver of institutional excellence, and to encourage institutional reforms, digital and participatory practices. The NLI will broadly look at indicators such as the number of sitting days and duration of each session; the percentage of bills referred to committees; the average time taken to pass bills; the hours devoted to question-hour and floor debate. It shall also evaluate transparency, digitisation, technological integration, and institutional efforts for knowledge preservation. These are concrete, transparent measures that convert process into public information, without prescribing substance or policy stances.

By promoting longer, better-informed, and more inclusive debates, it can encourage states to increase sittings, reduce disruptions, and build effective research and reference systems in collaboration with Parliament. Strengthening the dignity and productivity of our legislative assemblies is not a matter of partisanship; it is a shared national responsibility. When Houses function efficiently, with greater use of technology and wider participation of women and youth, they reaffirm the faith of citizens in democratic institutions. Through the NLI, India has the opportunity to make its legislatures not only temples of democracy in name, but also in spirit — combining decorum, deliberation, and digital readiness to meet the challenges of a changing era.

Over the past few years, India's legislatures have made notable progress in adopting modern practices such as paperless proceedings, live streaming, and digitisation of records. However, this progress remains uneven across states and UTs, underlining the need for a common benchmarking framework. The NLI aligns closely with the vision of "One Nation, One Legislative Platform", which seeks to digitally integrate legislative bodies across the country. Together, these initiatives will not only promote procedural uniformity and information sharing but also enable citizens, researchers, and lawmakers to access data, debates, and committee reports on a single digital interface, making the functioning of legislatures more transparent, connected, and participatory.

The writer is Speaker, Delhi Legislative Assembly

Syllabus Integration:

- **GS 1:** Role of institutions in societal change, evolution of political culture, regional governance structures.
- **GS 2:** State legislatures, accountability mechanisms, transparency, inter-state comparisons, parliamentary reforms, e-governance in legislatures, cooperative federalism.
- **GS 3:** Governance reforms, institutional innovation, data-driven policymaking, technology adoption in public institutions.
- **GS 4:** Ethical governance, public accountability, institutional integrity, professionalism in legislative conduct.
- **Prelims** - Parliamentary and State Legislature basics, legislative procedures, committees, RTI framework, good governance concepts, federal institutions.

The NLI, to be published annually, proposes India's first state-wise benchmarking system to measure the productivity, transparency, and innovation of state assemblies and legislative councils. The NLI will incentivise healthy competition among states

National Legislative Index (NLI)

is a proposed annual, state-wise benchmarking system

to measure productivity, transparency and innovation of state legislative assemblies and councils



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INDEX FOR LEGISLATURES

Definition & Scope

Annual, state-wise benchmarking system to measure productivity, transparency, and innovation of state legislatures and councils

Will provide a transparent annual score (0–100 scale) for each House

Promotes healthy competition, accelerates adoption of best practices

Objective

Create a common benchmarking framework across legislatures nationally

Ensure procedural uniformity and information sharing through
“One Nation, One Legislature Platform”

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KEY PERFORMANCE INDICATORS (KPIs)

Measurement Indicators:



Productivity Metrics

- Sitting days
- Session duration
- Bills passed



Procedure & Process

- Percentage of bills sent to committees
- Time taken to pass bills



Transparency & Digitisation

- Digital record-keeping
- Paperless proceedings
- Technical integration



Institutional Reforms

- Strengthening Speaker's office
- Encouraging institutional reforms

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EXPECTED OUTCOMES & BENEFITS

Impact on Democratic Governance:

Accelerate adoption of
best practices and peer
learning among legislatures

Promote transparency,
digitisation, technological
integration

Encourage institutional
reforms and strengthen
role of Speaker's office

Identify gaps and
challenges for targeted
improvements

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Increased sittings
and reduced
disruption



Better legislative
research and
bill effectiveness

BENEFITS



Knowledge
preservation
through institutional
mechanisms



Enhanced public
participation and
informed democratic
debate

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Current Challenges:



State legislatures show wide variation in assembly, meet for 20–25 days/year on average



High disruption and limited effectiveness research



Inconsistent state-level legislative practices and transparency standards

WAY FORWARD: NLI Approach

- Provides systemic, data-driven framework to measure performance
- Serves as tool for building national comparison database
- Supports informed policy decisions and democratic reform agenda