

The Hindu Important News Articles For UPSC CSE

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Daily News Analysis

Page 05: GS III : Environment / Preliminary Examination

The India Meteorological Department (IMD) has forecast below-normal rainfall (less than 94% of the Long Period Average or LPA) for August and the second half of the southwest monsoon season (August–September). Coming on the heels of a near-normal July (101% of LPA) that partially erased June's deficits, this forecast highlights the spatial and temporal unevenness characteristic of Indian monsoons. Driven by a strengthening El Niño in the equatorial Pacific, the expected deficit carries critical implications for agricultural yields, rural demand, food inflation, and water resource management across the country.

Key Highlights of the Article

- **August & Seasonal Forecast:** Rainfall in August and the August–September period is expected to be below normal (<94% of LPA).
- **Regional Variability:** While overall rainfall will be suppressed, parts of peninsular India, central, eastern, northeastern, and extreme northern India may experience normal to above-normal precipitation.
- **Temperature Trends:** Maximum temperatures across most of India and minimum temperatures across many regions are projected to stay above normal.
- **Climatic Drivers:** Moderate El Niño conditions are expected to strengthen. However, a positive Indian Ocean Dipole (IOD) projected to develop by September could offset some negative impacts of El Niño.
- **July Performance:** July saw 101% of normal rainfall, defying earlier pessimistic forecasts, though distribution remained spatially uneven.

Core Issues & Analytical Perspectives

1. Climate Dynamics: El Niño vs. Positive IOD

- **The El Niño Factor:** El Niño—the abnormal warming of surface waters in the central and eastern equatorial Pacific—is traditionally associated with suppressed monsoon rainfall in India.
- **The Mitigation by Positive IOD:** A positive Indian Ocean Dipole (warmer western Indian Ocean relative to the eastern part) tends to enhance monsoon rains and can weaken the drying impact of El Niño, as observed during historical co-occurrence years (e.g., 1997).

2. Agricultural and Food Security Vulnerabilities

- **Kharif Sowing Window:** August is crucial for the flowering and grain-filling stages of Kharif crops (rice, pulses, oilseeds, cotton). Moisture stress during this phase directly impairs crop yields.
- **Regional Disparities:** Subdued rainfall in major agricultural tracts of northwest and central India could impact rainfed farming, which accounts for nearly 50% of India's net sown area.

India likely to receive below-normal rainfall this month, says IMD

It is predicted to be less than 94% of long period average; the maximum temperatures are expected to stay above normal across most of country

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

India is likely to receive below-normal rainfall during August, with precipitation expected to be less than 94% of the long period average, the India Meteorological Department said on Friday.

The forecast also projects below-normal rainfall during the second half of the southwest monsoon season (August–September), although some parts of peninsular India, central, eastern, and northeastern India, and the northern parts of the northwest could receive normal to above-normal rainfall.

Below-normal rainfall in August is likely in many parts of the country, except over much of eastern peninsular India, some parts of northwest and central India, and isolated areas of eastern and northeastern India, where normal to above-normal rainfall is possible.

Maximum temperatures during the month are expected to remain above normal across most of the



Some parts of peninsular India, central, eastern, and northeastern India may receive normal to above-normal rainfall. H. VISHU

country, while minimum temperatures are likely to be normal to above normal.

July rain near normal

The IMD also said moderate El Niño conditions over the equatorial Pacific are expected to strengthen through the remainder of the monsoon season, while neutral Indian Ocean Dipole (IOD) conditions are likely to persist before a positive IOD develops during September. The latter can help monsoon rain.

For the August–September period as well, the IMD forecast rainfall at below 94% of the long period average, indicating a weaker-

than-normal monsoon. The outlook follows a near-normal July at the all-India level, despite forecasts issued earlier in the season that had anticipated subdued rainfall because of the developing El Niño. On June 30, the IMD had forecast a minimum 6% deficit in July rainfall but India has so far got 101% of the usual amount of rainfall. July is the rainiest of the four monsoon months and critical to agriculture. According to the IMD, while July's rainfall helped erase much of the deficit that had built up during June, the distribution of rainfall remained uneven across regions.

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Daily News Analysis

- **Food Inflation:** A shortfall in pulses and oilseed yields risks triggering food supply shocks, potentially pushing up retail inflation (CPI).

3. Macroeconomic and Rural Economy Impacts

- **Rural Demand Strain:** Subdued farm incomes depress rural consumption, impacting fast-moving consumer goods (FMCG), two-wheelers, and agricultural input industries.
- **Reservoir Levels & Rabi Season:** Weak August–September rains reduce storage in major reservoirs, directly affecting water availability for winter-sown (Rabi) crops like wheat and mustard, as well as hydropower generation.

Related Static Dimensions (GS Paper I, II & III Syllabus Mapping)

Physical Geography (Climatology)

- **Mechanism of Southwest Monsoon:** The role of the Intertropical Convergence Zone (ITCZ), Tibetan Plateau heating, Somali Jet, and Mascarene High.
- **Global Climatic Phenomena:**
 - **ENSO (El Niño–Southern Oscillation):** Mechanisms of El Niño and La Niña and their global teleconnections.
 - **Indian Ocean Dipole (IOD):** Atmospheric-oceanic interactions in the Indian Ocean basin and their interplay with ENSO.
- **Long Period Average (LPA):** The benchmark rainfall calculated over a 50-year period (currently 868.6 mm for the 1971–2020 period).

Agriculture, Disaster Management & Economy

- **Rainfed vs. Irrigated Agriculture:** India's high reliance on monsoon precipitation for groundwater recharge and canal networks.
- **Crop Diversification & Climate Resilience:** The imperative to transition from water-intensive crops (paddy, sugarcane) to climate-resilient alternatives like millets (Shree Anna) and pulses.
- **Drought Management Framework:** Early warning systems, contingency crop planning, and emergency irrigation protocols under the National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA) guidelines.
- **Inflation Management:** Monetary policy implications when supply-side food shocks challenge central bank inflation targeting ($4\% \pm 2\%$).

Way Forward

- **Promote Micro-Irrigation & Water Harvesting:** Expand coverage under Pradhan Mantri Krishi Sinchayee Yojana (PMKSY), focusing on drip and sprinkler systems to optimize water efficiency during dry spells.

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- **Implement Contingency Agriculture Plans:** Agricultural universities and Krishi Vigyan Kendras (KVKs) must advise farmers on short-duration, drought-tolerant crop varieties and alternate sowing strategies.
- **Strengthen Micro-Level IMD Forecasting:** Enhance block-level and district-level agromet advisory services to help farmers make timely irrigation and harvesting decisions.
- **Proactive Food Stock Management:** Utilize central buffer stocks strategically and manage trade policy levers (export curbs/import duty adjustments) to pre-emptively manage food inflation in key staples.
- **Accelerate Crop Diversification:** Provide price incentives and procurement support for low-water crops (millets, pulses, oilseeds) to reduce structural dependence on water-intensive cropping patterns.

Conclusion

The IMD's forecast of a below-normal August–September monsoon underscores India's continued vulnerability to global climate drivers like El Niño. While the anticipated emergence of a positive Indian Ocean Dipole provides a potential buffer, the threat of spatial imbalances and thermal stress remains significant. Addressing these challenges requires a shift from reactive relief to proactive climate resilience—combining precision weather forecasting, water conservation, crop diversification, and agile food inventory management to safeguard both agrarian livelihoods and macroeconomic stability.

UPSC Prelims Practice Questions

Question: Which of the following is/are likely consequences of a positive Indian Ocean Dipole (IOD)?

1. Enhanced monsoon rainfall over parts of India.
2. Partial offsetting of El Niño's adverse impact on the Indian monsoon.
3. Cooling of the western Indian Ocean relative to the eastern Indian Ocean.

Select the correct answer using the code below.

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

Ans: a)

UPSC Mains Practice Questions

Question: Explain the influence of El Niño and the Indian Ocean Dipole (IOD) on the Indian Summer Monsoon. How does their interaction affect monsoon variability?(10 Marks, 150 Words)

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The Union Cabinet's approval of the **Pradhan Mantri Surya Sarovar Yojana (PM-SSY)** with a financial outlay of ₹5,070 crore marks a pivotal policy pivot in India's renewable energy roadmap. Aimed at adding 5,000 MW of Floating Solar Photovoltaic (FSPV) capacity integrated with 10,000 MWh of Battery Energy Storage Systems (BESS) by FY 2030–31, the scheme strategically targets inland water bodies like reservoirs, lakes, and industrial ponds. By leveraging water surfaces, the scheme seeks to overcome land acquisition bottlenecks, diversify regional solar generation, and enhance grid stability during peak hours.

Key Highlights of the Scheme

- **Financial Assistance:** Provides Central Financial Assistance (CFA) of **₹1 crore per MW** for eligible commissioned projects, alongside up to **₹50 lakh per project** for preparatory feasibility studies (bathymetry, hydrography, environmental assessments).
- **Capacity Targets:** Targets **5,000 MW** of floating solar capacity by 2030–31, unlocking a fraction of India's estimated 102.18 GWp floating solar potential assessed by the National Institute of Solar Energy (NISE).
- **Mandatory Battery Storage:** Requires every project to include at least **two hours of energy storage** (aggregating 10,000 MWh across the scheme) to reduce power curtailment and meet peak grid demand.
- **Implementation Agency:** Implemented through the **Solar Energy Corporation of India (SECI)** across all States and Union Territories.
- **Socio-Economic & Environmental Benefits:** Projected to reduce approximately **10 million tonnes of CO₂ emissions annually** and create 16,000–17,000 full-time direct and indirect jobs.

Core Issues & Analytical Perspectives

1. Bypassing the Land Acquisition Bottleneck

- **Land Scarcity Solutions:** Ground-mounted solar projects face severe gestation delays due to land litigation, Rehabilitation & Resettlement (R&R) issues, and high land costs. Floating solar eliminates land procurement expenses by utilizing publicly owned water reservoirs.
- **Preserving Agricultural & Forest Land:** Prevents the conversion of prime agricultural land or biodiversity-rich zones into solar parks, supporting land-neutral green transition strategies.

2. Geographical Diversification of Solar Power

Cabinet approves scheme to promote 'floating' solar plants

Jacob Koshy
NEW DELHI

The Union Cabinet on Friday approved the Pradhan Mantri Surya Sarovar Yojana, a ₹5,070-crore scheme aimed at accelerating floating solar power by providing central financial assistance of up to ₹1 crore per MW for projects installed on reservoirs and other water bodies.

The programme targets 5,000 MW of floating solar capacity by 2030-31.

The scheme, to be implemented by the Solar Energy Corporation of India, comes at a time when India has about 0.7 GW of installed floating solar capacity despite an estimated potential of 102 GW.

Projects receiving support under the scheme will have to include battery energy storage equivalent to at least two hours, amounting to 10,000 MWh across the programme, to help States meet peak demand and reduce the curtailment of renewable power during periods of excess generation.

India's flagship project, the Omkareshwar floating solar park, located on the Narmada in Madhya Pradesh's Khandwa district is the country's largest at 278 MW, with plans to scale to 600 MW output. However,



The programme targets 5,000 MW of floating solar capacity by 2030-31.

it doesn't have onsite battery storage.

Officials said the financial support was intended to "nudge" the industry to develop an alternative stream of solar capacity. Solar development in India has remained concentrated in Rajasthan and Gujarat because of their vast tracts of inexpensive land and high solar radiation.

Reservoir-based projects are expected to "diversify" installations, particularly in States with large water bodies but limited land availability.

The policy is also designed to address two of the biggest constraints facing ground-mounted solar projects: acquiring large contiguous parcels of land and the rising costs associated with rehabilitation and resettlement.

Daily News Analysis

- **Overcoming Geographic Concentration:** Utility-scale solar capacity in India is heavily concentrated in land-rich, high-radiation states like Rajasthan and Gujarat. Floating solar enables land-constrained eastern, southern, and north-eastern states with abundant water bodies to scale domestic solar generation.
- **Proximity to Demand Centers:** Reservoirs (especially near hydroelectric dams) are often closer to urban demand hubs and existing transmission corridors, lowering High Voltage Direct Current (HVDC) transmission losses.

3. Synergies with Hydro-Power and Water Conservation

- **Dual-Use Infrastructure:** Hydroelectric dams already possess grid-interconnection infrastructure, reducing civil capital expenditure for floating solar projects.
- **Evaporation Suppression:** Floating solar panels shade water surfaces, significantly reducing water evaporation losses in reservoirs—a critical co-benefit for drought-prone regions.
- **Water-Cooling Efficiency Gain:** The ambient cooling effect of underlying water bodies keeps PV module operating temperatures lower, increasing solar generation efficiency by 5–10% compared to land-based modules.

4. Technical and Environmental Challenges

- **Capital Cost Premium:** FSPV systems carry a 20–30% higher capital cost than ground-mounted installations due to specialized mooring systems, anchoring mechanisms, and floaters.
- **Ecological Impacts on Aquatic Ecosystems:** Long-term coverage of water surfaces limits sunlight penetration and dissolved oxygen levels, potentially harming aquatic flora and fauna (e.g., algal blooms or fish mortality).
- **Corrosion and Water-Level Fluctuations:** Exposure to constant moisture requires specialized corrosion-resistant components. Rapid water drawdown in multipurpose reservoirs presents structural anchoring challenges.

Related Static Dimensions

Infrastructure & Energy (Renewable Energy & Technology)

- **National Solar Mission & Net-Zero Target:** India's Panchamrit commitment of achieving 500 GW non-fossil energy capacity by 2030 and Net-Zero carbon emissions by 2070.
- **Energy Storage Systems (ESS):** The role of Battery Energy Storage Systems (BESS) and Pumped Storage Projects (PSP) in handling grid variability and renewable intermittency.
- **Aatmanirbhar Bharat in Solar Manufacturing:** Compliance with Domestic Content Requirement (DCR) and Approved List of Models and Manufacturers (ALMM) for solar PV modules and floating platforms.

Environment, Ecology & Climate Change

- **Climate Mitigation & NDC Targets:** Reducing emission intensity of GDP by 45% by 2030 compared to 2005 levels.

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- **Inland Water Resource Management:** Water conservation metrics, evaporation control, and the impact of artificial interventions on aquatic ecosystems.

GS Paper II: Governance & Government Policies

- **Cooperative Federalism:** Scheme implementation across States requiring coordination between State Irrigation Departments, Hydroelectric Corporations, and Central agencies like SECI.
- **Targeted Capital Subsidies:** Strategic use of Viability Gap Funding (VGF) and Central Financial Assistance (CFA) to de-risk nascent infrastructure sectors.

Way Forward

- **Rigorous Environmental Impact Assessments (EIA):** Mandatory ecological baselines and limnological studies should precede project approval to protect aquatic life and water quality.
- **Standardization & Localization of Floater Manufacturing:** Boost domestic manufacturing of high-density polyethylene (HDPE) floaters and anchoring technologies to lower equipment import dependency.
- **Hybrid Hydro-Floating Solar Operational Guidelines:** Formulate integrated operating procedures for dam operators to balance water release for power/irrigation alongside floating solar generation.
- **Flexible Mooring & Dynamic Anchoring Technologies:** Invest in adaptive engineering solutions capable of withstanding extreme water level fluctuations, high wind speeds, and wave actions during monsoons.
- **Standardized Tariff Frameworks:** SECI and state regulatory commissions must establish transparent power purchase agreements (PPAs) that reflect the true value of firm, dispatchable solar power paired with storage.

Conclusion

The **Pradhan Mantri Surya Sarovar Yojana** represents a strategic evolution in India's clean energy strategy, moving from pure capacity addition to spatial optimization and storage integration. By unlocking the untapped potential of inland water bodies, the policy solves the dual imperatives of land scarcity and grid instability. If supported by robust environmental safeguards and local supply chain maturity, floating solar can become a mainstream driver of India's green energy transition.

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UPSC Prelims Practice Questions

Question: With reference to the Pradhan Mantri Surya Sarovar Yojana (PM-SSY), consider the following statements:

1. The scheme aims to develop floating solar photovoltaic projects on inland water bodies.
2. Every project under the scheme must include Battery Energy Storage Systems (BESS).
3. The scheme is implemented by the National Institute of Solar Energy (NISE).

Which of the statements given above are correct?

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

Ans: a)

UPSC Mains Practice Questions

Question: Explain how Floating Solar Photovoltaic (FSPV) technology addresses the challenges associated with conventional ground-mounted solar projects in India. **(10 Marks, 150 Words)**

The Western Ghats, an internationally recognized biodiversity hotspot spanning six coastal Indian states, represents one of the world's most critical ecological ecosystems. Holding 39 UNESCO World Heritage Sites, its conservation has been a subject of policy deliberation, scientific assessment, and socio-political friction for over a decade. The debate centers on balancing stringent ecological protection with the livelihood security and socio-economic aspirations of millions of local residents. Achieving a sustainable framework requires bridging the gap between satellite-driven scientific modeling and ground-level participatory dialogue.

Western Ghats conservation with science and dialogue

The Western Ghats, spanning six coastal States of India, are internationally recognised for their rich biodiversity. They contain 39 biodiversity hotspot areas, including national parks, reserved forests, and wildlife sanctuaries declared World Heritage Sites (WHS) by UNESCO in 2012. To protect this natural heritage, the Western Ghats Ecology Expert Panel (WGEEP) was constituted in 2010 under the chairmanship of ecologist, academic, and writer Madhav Gadgil. Its report recommended declaring 142 talukas covering 44 districts in the entire Western Ghats into Ecologically Sensitive Area (ESA), while sub-dividing it into three Ecologically Sensitive Zones (ESZ). Such a declaration would regulate human activities to protect fragile ecosystems and, once notified under the Environment Protection Act, 1986, would provide legal protection.

The ESA journey

Following strong local and political opposition in the States concerned to the WGEEP recommendations, the central government constituted a high-level working group headed by Krishnaswamy Kasturirangan in 2012 to review them. The group limited restrictions on economic activities and livelihoods to ecologically sensitive natural landscapes, reducing the area covered to only 37% of the Western Ghats.

Based on this recalibrated report, the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change (MoEF&CC) issued the first draft notification in 2014. Since the matter remained unresolved, the Ministry constituted an expert panel headed by former Director General of Forests Sanjay Kumar in 2022 to examine the concerns raised by the stakeholder States. Following the expert panel's deliberations, Gujarat and Goa appear to have agreed to the finalisation of the ESA notification, while Maharashtra has sought a fresh review.

Discussions between the Centre and other States, including Karnataka, Kerala, and Tamil



Madhusudan Bandi

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Nadu, are ongoing. A "phased rollout" or "State-wise finalisation" is possible after the inclusion of this clause in the 2024 draft notification.

Between 2015 and 2026, five draft notifications were issued as the Centre and States did not reach a consensus. Following the expiry of the last notification, in July 2026, the Ministry has extended the expert panel's tenure by another year.

The case of Karnataka

Karnataka has 10 districts in the Western Ghats, with 23.4% of the State's population residing there. Around 20,668 square kilometres have been identified for ESA declaration. Regardless of the government's political affiliation, the State has consistently opposed the proposal, citing its potential impact on agriculture, plantations, mining, and infrastructure development.

A study by this writer covered villages located in the proximity of 10 WHS across four districts – Chikkamagaluru, Kodagu, Shivamogga, and Udupi – and three other important sites in Uttara Kannada and Udupi, including the Kali Tiger Reserve, Mundigekere Bird Sanctuary (five acres and a breeding ground for cattle egrets in Sirsi), and Mookambika Wildlife Sanctuary. The study highlighted local perspectives on livelihoods and conservation efforts.

In villages adjoining the Kali Tiger Reserve and Kudremukh National Park, some residents reported accepting or considering rehabilitation packages. Those opposing relocation felt that they might eventually have to follow due to declining village populations and the resulting threat to village life. Even villages with granted forest rights have faced challenges due to restrictions on minor forest produce collection and agricultural practices. Concerns were also raised over the rejection of forest rights claims by non-tribals with long-standing residence, including in a village (at least 150 years) near the

Balahalli Reserved Forest. Meanwhile, local officials and some communities supported regulating environmentally harmful activities such as stone quarrying and unplanned tourism projects, including proposals for forest ropeways.

With specific reference to the notifications, it must be noted that local communities faced similar restrictions whenever these areas were declared protected zones, even before the WGEEP was constituted. Many residents believe that buffer zones extend 10 kilometres from core areas and fear possible eviction from their lands. Stakeholders across the study districts unanimously expressed concerns that reliance on satellite imagery for identifying ESA areas was unfair, as they were convinced that it could not distinguish plantation crops such as arecanut, shade-grown coffee, rubber, and coconut from forest cover. They also raised concerns that no committees had physically visited their villages.

In this context, Karnataka's case requires an empathetic approach that addresses genuine stakeholder concerns before a final decision is taken.

Protecting indigenous communities

In the broader context, the Union government's decision to proceed with the ESA notification for the Western Ghats reflects political will to protect ecology and biodiversity. Conservation efforts cannot be indefinitely delayed as it will result in States losing their control in such areas; ecological systems transcend administrative boundaries.

More importantly, ESA should include indigenous communities living deep within forests, as they naturally follow conservation principles and maintain a sacred, sustainable relationship with the environment despite challenging conditions. Their presence serves as a bridge between forests and mainstream society, while their absence risks the loss of biocultural diversity.

The Ecologically Sensitive Area debate highlights the need for balanced, inclusive conservation approaches

Key Highlights of the Article

- **Ecological Significance:** The Western Ghats span six states and contain 39 UNESCO World Heritage biodiversity hotspot areas (national parks, sanctuaries, reserved forests).
- **Historical Evolution of ESA Notifications:**
 - **2010 (WGEEP / Gadgil Panel):** Recommended declaring 142 talukas (entire Western Ghats) as Ecologically Sensitive Area (ESA), categorized into three Ecologically Sensitive Zones (ESZs).

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- **2012 (Kasturirangan Working Group):** Reduced the proposed ESA coverage to **37%** of the Western Ghats to balance economic activities and livelihoods.
- **2022 (Sanjay Kumar Expert Panel):** Tasked with reviewing state-specific concerns; led to consensus with Gujarat and Goa, while Maharashtra requested a fresh review and discussions continue with Karnataka, Kerala, and Tamil Nadu.
- **Policy Status:** Between 2015 and 2026, five draft notifications expired due to lack of inter-state and Centre-State consensus. In July 2026, the expert panel's tenure was extended by another year.
- **The Case of Karnataka:** Karnataka covers 20,668 sq. km of proposed ESA across 10 districts (housing 23.4% of the state's population). Successive state governments have opposed the notification, fearing impacts on agriculture, plantations, mining, and infrastructure.
- **Ground Realities & Local Grievances:**
 - **Satellite vs. Ground Truth:** Local communities criticize reliance on satellite imagery, which fails to distinguish native forest canopy from commercial shade-grown coffee, arecanut, rubber, and coconut plantations.
 - **Insecurity over Rights:** Concerns persist over delayed/rejected Forest Rights Act (FRA) claims for non-tribal long-term forest dwellers, restrictions on minor forest produce, and fear of forced relocation or buffer zone restrictions.
 - **Local Support for Selective Regulation:** Communities favor regulating destructive activities (e.g., stone quarrying, commercial ropeways, unplanned tourism) while opposing broad restrictions on traditional agriculture.

Core Issues & Analytical Perspectives

1. The Dilemma of Conservation Governance: Top-Down vs. Bottom-Up

- **Top-Down Technocratic Approach:** Early recommendations relied heavily on broad spatial mapping and remote sensing. The lack of physical village visits and ground-truthing created a trust deficit among rural populations who feared blanket evictions.
- **Lack of Local Consultation:** Policy decisions drafted at central or state capitals often fail to differentiate between destructive commercial extraction (mining, quarrying) and eco-friendly traditional land use (shade-grown agriculture).

2. Socio-Economic and Livelihood Concerns

- **Agricultural Disruption:** Farmers fear that ESA classification will restrict normal agricultural practices, land conversion, and access to institutional credit or infrastructure development.
- **Forest Rights Act (FRA) Implementation Gaps:** Non-tribal traditional forest dwellers who have inhabited these areas for generations (some for over 150 years) face systemic claim rejections, driving insecurity and resistance to conservation labels.

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3. Inter-State and Federal Coordination Friction

- **Administrative Boundaries vs. Ecological Units:** Ecosystems do not follow state borders. Unilateral delays by individual states weaken the holistic protection of the contiguous mountain range.
- **Phased Rollout Potential:** The provision for "State-wise finalization" or a "phased rollout" introduced in recent draft notifications offers a pragmatic middle path to finalize consensus state-by-state rather than delaying the entire region indefinitely.

4. Bio-Cultural Diversity and Indigenous Guardianship

- **Forest Dwellers as Conservation Allies:** Indigenous and traditional communities deep within forest ecosystems hold deep-seated ecological knowledge and maintain sustainable relationships with their habitat. Excluding them risks losing traditional biocultural conservation ethics.

Related Static Dimensions (GS Paper I, II & III Syllabus Mapping)

Geography (Physical & Human)

- **Biodiversity Hotspots:** Definition, criteria (high endemism and significant degree of threat), and ecological significance of the Western Ghats as a major hydrological divide and carbon sink.
- **Spatial Mapping Techniques:** Role and limitations of Remote Sensing and Geographical Information Systems (GIS) in ecological zoning.

Governance & Federalism

- **Cooperative Federalism:** Centre-State dynamics in environmental policy formulation under the Environment Protection Act, 1986.
- **Implementation of the Forest Rights Act (FRA), 2006:** Legal rights of Scheduled Tribes (STs) and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (OTFDs); issues surrounding claim verification and community forest rights.

Environment, Disaster Management & Sustainable Development

- **Ecologically Sensitive Areas (ESAs):** Legal provisions under Section 3(3) of the Environment Protection Act, 1986; distinction between core, buffer, and transition zones.
- **Gadgil Panel vs. Kasturirangan Committee:** Comparative understanding of ecological preservation vs. sustainable development paradigms.
- **Eco-Tourism & Infrastructure vs. Ecology:** Managing land-use changes, slope stability, landslide mitigation, and disaster resilient infrastructure in hilly terrains.

Way Forward

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- **Ground-Truthing & Participatory Mapping:** Combine GIS/satellite data with physical village-level mapping and Gram Sabha consultations to accurately demarcate actual forest land from multi-generational agricultural plantations.
- **Differentiated Prohibition Rules:** Shift from blanket bans to a nuanced regulatory matrix that strictly prohibits high-impact activities (large-scale mining, polluting industries, major thermal plants) while permitting and supporting low-impact traditional practices (shade-grown coffee, organic farming, sustainable eco-tourism).
- **Strengthen Democratic Decentralization:** Empower local Panchayats and Gram Sabhas under PESA and FRA to participate in conservation planning, giving communities a stake in managing buffer zones.
- **Expedite FRA Land Titles:** Resolve pending and rejected claims of both tribal and long-term non-tribal forest dwellers to provide land security, removing fear of displacement.
- **Adopt a Phased Implementation Strategy:** Finalize ESA notifications for consenting states (such as Gujarat and Goa) while continuing structured, time-bound multi-stakeholder dialogues with states like Karnataka, Maharashtra, and Kerala.
- **Incentivize Ecological Services (PES):** Introduce "Payment for Ecosystem Services" to compensate local communities for maintaining forest cover and protecting watersheds, turning conservation into an economic opportunity.

Conclusion

Protecting the Western Ghats is not a zero-sum game between ecological preservation and human development. Indefinitely delaying the ESA notification weakens ecological security across political boundaries, leaving fragile slopes vulnerable to climate shocks and unplanned exploitation. However, conservation models that alienate local populations are inherently unsustainable. A successful framework must blend rigorous ground-verified science with empathetic stakeholder dialogue—recognizing local communities and indigenous dwellers not as obstacles to conservation, but as its primary guardians.

Daily News Analysis

UPSC Prelims Exam Study Questions

Question: With reference to the Western Ghats, consider the following statements:

1. It is recognized as one of the world's biodiversity hotspots.
2. It contains UNESCO World Heritage Sites.
3. It extends across six Indian States.

Which of the statements given above are correct?

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

Ans:d)

PSC Mains Exam Study Questions

Question: "Conservation efforts that exclude local communities are unlikely to achieve long-term ecological sustainability." Critically examine this statement in the context of the Western Ghats Ecologically Sensitive Area (ESA) debate. **(10 Marks, 150 Words)**

Daily News Analysis

Page 06 : GS II : Social Justice / Preliminary Examination

India is undergoing a dual burden of malnutrition: while undernutrition and stunting remain persistent historical challenges, **overnutrition**—manifesting as rapid rises in adult and childhood obesity, metabolic syndromes, and non-communicable diseases (NCDs)—has emerged as a major public health crisis.

Recent policy signals from a **Parliamentary Standing Committee** and the **ICMR-NIN led consortium (Let's Fix Our Food)** advocate for structural interventions: mandatory Front-of-Pack Nutrition Labelling (FOPNL), strict marketing/advertising regulations, and a **health tax on High Fat, Sugar, and Salt (HFSS) foods**.

Key Highlights & Core Arguments

- **The Shift in Malnutrition Dynamics:** National Family Health Survey (NFHS) data indicates a rapid surge in overweight/obesity among adults and children, requiring a pivot in India's public health policy beyond traditional undernutrition programs.
- **Parliamentary Standing Committee Recommendations:**
 - Mandatory **Front-of-Pack Nutrition Labelling (FOPNL)** to clearly indicate high sugar, salt, or fat levels.
 - Mandatory disclosure of **added sugar content in infant/baby foods** to curb sugar addiction at infancy.
- **ICMR-NIN Consortium (Let's Fix Our Food) Proposals:**
 - Imposition of a **health/excise tax** on ultra-processed and HFSS packaged products.
 - Creation of a **healthier school food environment** and strict curbs on junk food marketing targeting adolescents.
- **Rising Disease Burden:** According to ICMR-NIN, over **17 million children and adolescents in India are currently affected by obesity**, a number projected to cross **27 million by 2030** if unaddressed.

Global Precedents & Best Practices

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), over **133 countries** have implemented or increased health taxes on unhealthy foods and beverages since 2017.

Country / Region	Regulatory Mechanism	Impact / Design
Colombia (2023)	"Junk Food Law"	Progressive taxation on packaged foods starting at 10% , rising to 15% , and touching 20% .

A healthy tax

The government must act to tax foods high in fat, sugar, and salt

India, which has a long history of addressing the challenges of undernutrition, has to pivot to attack the curious phenomenon of over-nutrition that evolving lifestyles have now laid at its door. The recent National Family Health Survey data showed that in India, while stunting and undernutrition continue to be cause for concern, despite some gains, the sharp rise in adult overweight and obesity, besides diet-related metabolic conditions, cannot be ignored any more. Two unrelated developments have advanced the question of unhealthy diets in very pointed suggestions that would nudge consumers to make the right choices. First, a Parliamentary Standing Committee has recommended mandatory front-of-pack nutrition labelling indicating whether packaged food products are high in sugar, and second, a national consortium has advised the government to levy a health tax on high fat, salt and sugar foods, and enforce stricter regulations on their advertisements. The Standing Committee on Consumer Affairs, Food and Public Distribution also made a recommendation to include the sugar content in baby foods, attacking the excess sugar consumption issue right where it begins. The consortium on adolescent nutrition, which goes by the practical name Let's Fix Our Food, is led by the Indian Council of Medical Research-National Institute of Nutrition (ICMR-NIN), and comprising several other prominent institutions in India and abroad, has recommended that the government ensure a healthier school food environment, stricter regulation of marketing of unhealthy food, and front-of-pack nutrition labelling. These efforts will be among the steps to tackle the rising burden of obesity and diet-related non communicable diseases that require a comprehensive strategy helmed by the government.

According to the World Health Organization, since 2017, at least 133 countries have increased or introduced a new health tax. A "junk food law" came into force in Colombia in 2023, to tackle the high consumption of packaged foods. An additional tax on such foods began at 10%, rose to 15% the next year and touched 20% the subsequent year. Norway, Hungary, Denmark, Bermuda, Dominica, St. Vincent and the Grenadines, and the Navajo Nation (U.S.), have also specifically implemented taxes on unprocessed sugar and sugar-added foods. With the ICMR-NIN report indicating that over 17 million children and adolescents are affected by obesity, and that this number can cross 27 million by 2030, there cannot be a better time to act on these suggestions that will go a long way in educating the consumer to make healthy food choices.

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Country / Region	Regulatory Mechanism	Impact / Design
Norway, Denmark, Hungary	Unprocessed & Added Sugar Tax	Specific levies targeting sugar-sweetened beverages and high-sodium ultra-processed snacks.
Bermuda, Dominica, Navajo Nation (U.S.)	Target-based Sugar Taxes	Differential taxation discouraging consumption of HFSS items while subsidizing healthy options.

Static & Analytical Syllabus Mapping (UPSC Mains)

GS Paper II: Issues Relating to Development and Management of Social Sector/Services relating to Health, Education, Human Resources

- **Triple Burden of Malnutrition:** Coexistence of undernutrition, micronutrient deficiency, and overweight/obesity within the same population.
- **Regulatory Governance:** Role of the Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI) in establishing FOPNL, Indian Nutrition Ratings (INR), and enforcing infant food safety standards.

GS Paper III: Indian Economy and Public Finance / Agriculture & Public Health

- **Sin Tax / Health Tax Economics:** Using fiscal tools (Pigouvian tax) to internalize the negative externalities of NCDs (diabetes, hypertension, cardiovascular diseases) on national healthcare expenditures.
- **Impact on FMCG Sector & Food Processing:** Balancing the economic growth of the processed food industry with consumer protection and public health mandates.

Way Forward

1. **Expedite FOPNL Framework:** FSSAI must move from voluntary star-rating proposals to mandatory, easy-to-understand warning labels on HFSS products.
2. **Implement Differential GST/Health Surcharge:** Structure taxes so that unprocessed/healthy foods attract minimal tax while ultra-processed HFSS foods bear a dedicated health surcharge.
3. **Regulate Infant & School Food Environments:** Enforce strict bans on HFSS advertisements during children's programming and restrict the sale of ultra-processed foods within 100 meters of schools.
4. **Earmark Revenue for Public Health:** Channel revenues generated from health taxes into funding universal healthcare, strengthening primary health centers (PHCs), and subsidizing nutrient-dense foods (pulses, millets) under public distribution schemes.
- 5.

UPSC Prelims Practice Questions

Question: The term Pigouvian Tax refers to:

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- (a) A tax imposed on exports.
- (b) A tax imposed to discourage activities that generate negative externalities.
- (c) A tax levied only on luxury goods.
- (d) A tax imposed on agricultural income.

Ans: b)

UPSC Mains Practice Questions

Question: How can fiscal measures such as health taxes influence consumer behaviour and reduce the burden of non-communicable diseases? Explain. **(10 Marks, 150 Words)**



Page 11: GS III : Indian Economy / Preliminary Examination

The Union Cabinet's approval of the **National Offshore Exploration Scheme: Samudra Manthan**, with a central financial outlay of **₹84,084 crore** up to FY 2030–31, represents a transformative shift in India's upstream oil and gas strategy. At a time

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when India's crude oil import dependence has risen past 88%, this flagship scheme aims to de-risk high-cost offshore exploration, accelerate resource discovery in deep and ultra-deep waters, and build domestic manufacturing capabilities. By targeting a reserve accretion of over **600 Million Metric Tonnes of Oil Equivalent (MMTOE)**, the initiative serves as a cornerstone for enhancing national energy security and driving the Viksit Bharat vision.

Key Highlights of the Scheme

Financial Allocation & Core Pillars:

- Deepwater & Ultra-Deepwater Drilling (₹43,200 crore):** Direct financial support to drill 60 deepwater exploration wells, with central subsidy covering up to 50% of eligible drilling costs (up to ₹675 crore per well).
 - Offshore Seismic Data Acquisition (₹28,534 crore):** Large-scale gathering, processing, and interpretation of modern 2D/3D seismic data in unexplored frontier basins and former "no-go" offshore zones.
 - Common Offshore Infrastructure Hubs (₹10,000 crore):** Creation of shared evacuation pipelines and processing platforms to reduce capital expenditure and make marginal offshore discoveries commercially viable.
 - Oil and Gas Manufacturing & Services Zones (₹2,000 crore):** Establishment of specialized domestic industrial clusters for localization of high-tech offshore rigs, subsea equipment, and technical services under Make in India.
- Target Outcomes:**
 - Catalyze reserve additions exceeding **600 MMTOE**.
 - Boost domestic hydrocarbon production from ~62 MMTOE to **80 MMTOE annually**.
 - Potential crude import savings of nearly **₹1 lakh crore annually** upon commercial production.

Core Issues & Analytical Perspectives

1. De-risking Capital-Intensive Deepwater Exploration

- Overcoming Geological Uncertainty:** Offshore exploratory drilling—particularly in deep and ultra-deep waters—is characterized by astronomical capital expenditure and high risk of dry wells. By bearing up to 50% of the cost per well, the government absorbs early-stage geological risk, making private and international E&P (Exploration and Production) players more willing to participate.

Cabinet okays ₹84,084-cr. Samudra Manthan for offshore exploration

Saptaparno Ghosh
NEW DELHI

To boost India's offshore exploration efforts, the Union Cabinet approved an outlay of ₹84,084 crore to the Union Petroleum Ministry's National Offshore Exploration Scheme Samudra Manthan.

The corpus is to be utilised until FY2030-31. The overall outlay is categorised into four key components the most important of which relate to drilling 60 deepwater exploration wells for which the Cabinet has allocated ₹43,200 crore.

This is inclusive of the government of up to 50% of eligible drilling cost or ₹675 crore per well.

The other component relates to offshore data acquisition which carries an outlay of ₹28,534 crore.

Development of common offshore infrastruc-



Well oiled plan: The scheme aims at catalysing reserves of over 600 MMTOE. (For representational purpose only) GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCK

ture hubs to facilitate commercialisation of discoveries, which would be accounting for an outlay of ₹10,000 crore.

Finally, the establishment of oil and gas manufacturing and services zones - seeking to promote domestic manufacturing and localisation of critical equipment and services - tabulate an outlay of ₹2,000 crore.

Overall, the Union government's flagship scheme for offshore exploration aims at catalysing reserves of more than 600 million metric tonnes of oil equivalent (MMTOE).

Stimulating investments It envisages to "stimulate significant investments across the exploration and production value chain, creating long-term oppor-

tunities for industry, innovation and economic growth."

Essentially, with hydrocarbon exploration being a capital-intensive activity with long gestation period but essential for a country's domestic energy security, the scheme seeks to reorient growth into this sector (via offshore exploration) to overcome difficulties from ageing oil and gas fields.

Reflecting on the announcement, Rajnish Gupta, partner for tax and economic policy, EY India held, "Investments in large-scale seismic data acquisition and drilling of exploratory well in deep and ultra deep waters will reduce geological uncertainty and de-risk exploration and lay the foundation for future discoveries. Good results can catalyse greater private investments in the sector."

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2. Shared Infrastructure Model for Marginal Fields

- **Improving Commercial Viability:** Many small-to-medium offshore oil/gas discoveries remain unmonetized because building standalone pipeline and processing infrastructure is financially unviable. Setting up common infrastructure hubs lowers barrier costs, accelerating time-to-market for smaller operators.

3. Addressing Ageing Onshore Fields & Rising Import Bill

- **Offsetting Onshore Depletion:** India's legacy onshore basins (e.g., Cambay, Assam, Mumbai High) are experiencing natural declines in yield. Transitioning focus to high-potential offshore sedimentary basins (such as the Krishna-Godavari and Mahanadi offshore blocks) is imperative to arrest domestic production declines.
- **Macroeconomic Cushion:** Cutting energy import bills shields the Indian Rupee from global crude volatility, curbs current account deficits (CAD), and frees up fiscal space for socio-economic spending.

4. Technological Sovereignty and Ecosystem Building

- **Localizing High-Tech Equipment:** Offshore subsea engineering is dominated by foreign service giants. Dedicated manufacturing zones incentivize local production of specialized hardware, deep-sea survey equipment, and scientific data analytics tools.

Related Static Dimensions (GS Paper I, II & III Syllabus Mapping)

Indian Economy, Infrastructure & Energy

- **Energy Security & Import Substitution:** Strategies for transitioning from an import-dependent energy balance (~88% crude import reliance) toward domestic energy independence.
- **Upstream Petroleum Reforms:** History of exploration policies—from New Exploration Licensing Policy (NELP) to the Hydrocarbon Exploration and Licensing Policy (HELP) and Open Acreage Licensing Policy (OALP).
- **National Data Repository (NDR):** Open access to geoscientific data for E&P companies to bid effectively for acreage blocks.

Physical Geography (Oceanography & Resource Distribution)

- **Offshore Hydrocarbon Geology:** Distribution of sedimentary basins along India's East and West coasts (e.g., KG-Basin, Cauvery Offshore, Andaman Basin).
- **Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) & Continental Shelf:** Rights and legal frameworks under UNCLOS (United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea) regarding seabed resource extraction.

Environment & Ecology

- **Marine Ecology Safeguards:** Managing environmental risks associated with deepwater drilling (oil spills, subsea blowouts, coastal ecosystem disruption).

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- **Energy Transition Dual-Track Strategy:** Balancing short-to-medium term fossil fuel exploration needs with long-term Net-Zero targets (2070).

Way Forward

- **Streamline Environmental Clearances:** Establish single-window, time-bound environmental and regulatory clearances for offshore seismic surveys and exploratory drilling without compromising marine biodiversity safeguards.
- **Leverage Global Partnerships:** Encourage joint ventures between domestic players (ONGC, OIL, Reliance) and global deepwater experts (e.g., Shell, TotalEnergies, ExxonMobil) for advanced subsea drilling technology transfer.
- **Strengthen Geological Data Architecture:** Continuously feed newly acquired seismic data into the National Data Repository (NDR) using AI/ML tools for high-resolution subsurface mapping.
- **Strict Marine Safety and Disaster Response Protocols:** Mandate stringent blowout prevention mechanisms and real-time environmental monitoring systems across all subsidized exploration projects.
- **Dual-Use Offshore Assets:** Design shared offshore platforms with potential future compatibility for offshore wind energy or carbon capture, utilization, and storage (CCUS) infrastructure.

Conclusion

The **Samudra Manthan** scheme is a strategic intervention that bridges public policy support with high-risk E&P investments. By combining subsidised deepwater drilling, shared infrastructure hubs, and localized technology zones, the policy directly addresses the core bottlenecks that have restrained offshore oil and gas production. If executed efficiently alongside environmental safeguards, Samudra Manthan can significantly boost domestic energy output, lower import dependence, and fortify India's economic resilience.

UPSC Mains Exam Study Questions

Ques: Discuss the significance of the National Offshore Exploration Scheme: Samudra Manthan in strengthening India's energy security. **(10 Marks, 150 Words)**

Daily News Analysis

Gen Z's voice must lead to a humane education system

With the successful demonstration by the Cockroach Janta Party, a point has been made. A light has been shown in our national darkness. We can use that light, or we can continue to curse the darkness. The choice is always there. Gen Z has pronounced a fiat. It will be wise on our part to take heed. The education system needs not just an overhaul but also a complete change. A change in policy itself. We must now sit down and work out a system in which examinations are seen as fair, conducted professionally, and taken happily and voluntarily. Competitive examinations should no longer be associated with student suicides.

India's education system has produced extraordinary professional talent, yet its admission culture has also created a dangerous emotional environment in which marks, ranks, and single-shot competitive examinations are often treated as the sole measures of intelligence, worth, and future possibility. This must change.

Examinations need to become more inclusive, projecting students' worth and abilities even as they assess a candidate's competence for the chosen field of higher education. Gen Z is very aware of the competitive world it has inherited and is quite capable of making prudent choices for its future. It is up to us – parents, teachers, and policymakers – to consult with them and evolve a system that is fair, robust, and respected.

Assessing competence

A fair system of admission must adopt a multi-dimensional assessment of competence. Admissions should combine moderated school performance, discipline-specific aptitude, analytical writing, structured interviews where appropriate, practical or scenario-based tasks, and verifiable portfolios, projects, internships, community work and co-curricular achievement.

Such an approach would test not only memory and speed but also reasoning, persistence, communication, judgment, ethical orientation and suitability for a chosen field. Entry-level institutions themselves, with the involvement of competent schoolteachers, should design and administer these assessments with transparent criteria and proper safeguards. Examinations should be redesigned to assess application, interpretation and higher-order thinking rather than predictable patterns that feed the coaching industry. This would preserve standards while aligning admissions more closely with real ability, educational purpose and student potential.

Industry, parents, and students must together broaden the meaning of educational success beyond a few high-pressure professional courses. Regular industry interaction through career fairs, internships, mentorship programmes, workplace visits, and alumni engagement can make students aware, even at the school level, of emerging opportunities in newer sectors and reduce blind dependence on competitive examinations for



John Varghese
Former Principal of
St. Stephen's College

traditional career paths. Parents, especially those with limited access to reliable information and who often resort to unaffordable loans, need structured counselling in local languages on courses, careers, costs, scholarships, aptitude, mental-health risks, and the difference between a child's interests and parental ambitions. Students must be helped to assess their abilities, dispositions, and aspirations realistically through guidance and aptitude-based conversations rather than prestige-driven choices. When informed industry exposure, responsible parental support, and self-aware student decision-making come together, educational choices become more rational, humane, and less fear-driven. This is the groundwork on which a fair and effective entry-level assessment system can be built.

Role of elected representatives

The Constitution treats education as a public good, not a commercial race, and places a clear duty on the state to protect equality, dignity, and the right to education, especially for children and weaker sections. When the coaching ecosystem becomes exploitative – creating inequality, displacing formal schooling, and harming student well-being – Parliament and State legislatures must respond through law, regulation, and oversight. Members of Parliament and Members of the Legislative Assemblies may not be individually liable for a persistent social problem, but they remain institutionally responsible for creating and enforcing safeguards on fees, advertising, mental-health support, hostel standards, and fraudulent practices. In the face of evidence of student suicides and commercialisation, persistent inaction invites democratic and legal scrutiny, making urgent action a constitutional responsibility.

Does one size fit all? No. A centralised agency such as the National Testing Agency rests on the assumption that one examination model can fairly judge all students across disciplines, regions and social contexts; this assumption is flawed – especially in a country such as India, which is varied in every possible way. Institutions and professional bodies are better placed to define what they seek in candidates because they understand the intellectual and academic demands, skills, aptitude and ethical orientation required for specific courses leading to careers. A single national test also creates logistical overload and demographic unfairness: language, geography, school background, digital access, and local educational disadvantages all affect performance, making a "one-test-fits-all" model neither educationally sound nor socially just.

A decentralised system, with universities or clusters of institutions designing and conducting their own assessments within broad University Grant Commission norms, would allow for more relevant and balanced evaluation. Students, too, may be consulted through structured representation in identifying appropriate modes

of assessment, though access to live question papers or confidential content should be strictly avoided. To preserve sanctity and prevent paper leaks, these safeguards are essential: encrypted digital paper transmission; multi-layered question banks with algorithmic randomisation; strict vetting and rotation of paper setters; secure printing and sealed distribution protocols; independent audit and surveillance of examination centres. And severe penal consequences for any breach. Additional safeguards may include biometric candidate verification, time-staggered papers, and post-examination forensic review of anomalies.

Properly scheduled, decentralised examinations spread across the academic calendar would reduce stress, avoid nationwide disruption from a single failure, and permit institutions to test genuine competence and readiness rather than coaching-driven examination technique alone.

Entrance exams should help our students assess themselves for their abilities and competency in a chosen field. Students should undertake the exams willingly, with the clear understanding that it is indeed a competitive world, and that they have a self-worth even beyond the particular exam that they are sitting for. When alternate career choices are there, the pressure on the students is much less; and if they are passionate about a profession, then they will learn to work hard for it.

A humane direction for reform

India requires a shift from rank-based filtration to capacity-based recognition. A just admissions system should ask not only who scored highest under exam pressure, but who has the aptitude, motivation, ethical seriousness, resilience, and capacity to grow in a chosen field. Such a system would still value excellence, but it would define excellence more intelligently and more humanely. Over the past few days, Gen Z has brought us face-to-face with a dark secret we have long lived with: the overemphasis on certain professions. This generation has choices, and we must allow them to choose responsibly while understanding the consequences.

The constitutional promise of education cannot be fulfilled by a structure that rewards fear, debt, and psychological distress while calling the result merit. The alternative lies in holistic assessment, regulation of coaching commercialisation, institutionalised mental-health support, industry involvement, and sustained counselling for parents and students, keeping interests, abilities, and dignity at the centre of educational choices. This will help create happier and more confident young people who choose careers deliberately, not out of compulsion, paving the way for a better India and a better world. If these changes begin now, the suicides caused by entrance examination stress can come to an end.

The time has come to rethink merit, reform admissions, and restore dignity to every student's academic journey

GS Paper II: Governance and Social Justice

UPSC Mains Exam Practice Questions: "The centralization of entry-level assessments in higher education often conflicts with regional diversity and institutional autonomy." Critically analyze the challenges associated with single-shot national entrance examinations in India and suggest reforms for a more inclusive admission architecture. (10 Marks, 150 Words)

Context : India's higher education system is historically recognized for producing world-class professional talent. However, its entry-level admission ecosystem has evolved into a hyper-competitive, single-shot examination framework characterized by extreme pressure, commercialized coaching industries, and rising mental health crises among students. The call by Gen Z for

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systemic educational reform highlights an urgent imperative: transitioning from a high-stakes, rank-based filtration model to a multi-dimensional, decentralized, and student-centric admission architecture that preserves dignity, merit, and equity.

Key Highlights of the Article

- **The Crisis of the "Single-Shot" Exam Culture:** Over-reliance on marks, ranks, and high-pressure competitive tests creates a toxic emotional environment, treating single exams as the sole metric of human worth and intelligence.
- **Limitations of Centralized Testing (NTA Model):** A "one-size-fits-all" national testing agency ignores India's extreme regional, linguistic, socio-economic, and digital disparities, creating logistical overload and structural unfairness.
- **Multi-Dimensional Assessment Framework:** Admissions should evaluate candidates beyond speed and rote memory by combining school performance, aptitude tests, analytical writing, scenario-based tasks, interviews, and verifiable portfolios (projects, community work).
- **Decentralization and Institutional Autonomy:** Universities, professional bodies, and entry-level institutions—in coordination with schoolteachers—should design their own domain-specific assessments within broad UGC guidelines.
- **Regulation of the Coaching Ecosystem:** Commercialized coaching dislocates formal schooling, exacerbates social inequality, and places immense financial stress on parents. Legislators have a constitutional duty to regulate fees, advertising, and safety standards.
- **Multipronged Safeguards Against Paper Leaks:** Technical measures like encrypted paper transmission, multi-layered algorithmic question banks, biometric verification, forensic audits, and strict penal consequences are essential to maintain exam integrity.
- **Broadening Career Horizons:** Active industry-academia interaction, career fairs, and structured local-language counseling for parents can reduce blind reliance on a few prestige-driven professional streams (like engineering and medicine).

Core Issues & Analytical Perspectives

1. Structural Defects of Centralized High-Stakes Testing

- **Coaching-Driven Distortion:** Centralized, highly standardized tests reward coaching-driven exam techniques and memorization speed over genuine critical thinking, placing candidates from marginalized backgrounds who cannot afford coaching at a severe disadvantage.
- **Single-Point Failure Risk:** When a single exam determines the fate of millions, any administrative lapse (paper leaks, technical glitches, or venue mismanagement) causes nationwide disruption, acute psychological trauma, and long legal battles.

2. Federalism and Institutional Autonomy in Education

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- **Over-Centralization vs. Regional Context:** Education lies on the **Concurrent List (List III)**. A rigid, centralized admission protocol undermines state-level educational contexts and strips universities of their academic autonomy to select candidates best suited to their specific curricula.
- **Decentralized Model with Standardized Frameworks:** Allowing university clusters to hold staggered exams across the academic calendar lowers peak stress, spreads opportunity windows, and respects academic diversity.

3. The Constitutional & Ethical Duty of the State

- **Article 21 (Right to Life and Dignity):** Education policy cannot be considered meritocratic if its structural design systematically induces psychological distress, debt, and student suicides.
- **Coaching Regulation:** Exploitative commercial practices, misleading advertisements promising guaranteed ranks, and unsafe hostel infrastructures violate consumer rights and public health mandates.

Related Static Dimensions

Social Justice & Governance (Education and Human Resources)

- **Issues Relating to Development and Management of Social Sector:** Structural deficiencies in primary, secondary, and higher education; National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 vision for holistic and multi-disciplinary learning.
- **Federal Architecture in Education:** Division of powers between Centre and States regarding entrance testing and university regulation.
- **Regulatory Governance:** Role of UGC, AICTE, and the Ministry of Education in establishing national assessment norms without infringing on university autonomy.

Constitutional Foundations

- **Fundamental Rights & Directive Principles:** Article 21 (Right to Dignity), Article 14 (Equality before Law in educational access), and Article 41 (Right to Education).

GS Paper III: Mental Health, Youth & Socio-Economic Development

- **Demographic Dividend at Risk:** The economic cost of youth mental health crises, anxiety, and structural underemployment caused by narrow career pipelines.
- **Digital and Social Divide:** Differential access to online testing infrastructure, English-medium prep materials, and urban coaching centers.

Way Forward

- **Transition to Comprehensive Portfolio Evaluation:** Shift towards a composite scoring mechanism where national/state aptitude tests account for a fraction of the total score, complemented by school academic records, writing samples, and co-curricular achievements.

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- **Enact Strict Legislation for Coaching Institutions:** Enforce statutory regulations governing fee structures, mandatory mental health counselors, ban on misleading rank-based advertisements, and strict safety audits of coaching hubs.
- **Strengthen Technological Safeguards against Breaches:** Implement end-to-end digital encryption, dynamic algorithmic paper generation at the exam center level, real-time biometric tracking, and stringent criminal liability for paper-leak syndicates.
- **Institutionalize Structured Parent & Student Counseling:** Deploy bilingual career counselors in secondary schools to bridge information gaps, align parental expectations with student aptitudes, and highlight emerging opportunities in non-traditional sectors.
- **Decentralize Entrance Testing Schedules:** Stagger assessments across multiple attempts in a year (similar to international GRE/SAT frameworks), allowing candidates to submit their best score and removing the "do-or-die" atmosphere of single-day exams.

Conclusion

A truly meritocratic and progressive nation cannot measure the worth and future of its youth through high-pressure, single-shot entrance exams. Aligning higher education admissions with the vision of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 requires replacing rank-based filtration with capacity-based recognition. By integrating decentralized institutional autonomy, robust regulatory safeguards against commercial exploitation, and empathetic career guidance, India can build a fair, resilient, and humane educational system where competitive exams serve as tools of self-discovery rather than drivers of fear.
