

The Hindu Important News Articles & Editorial For UPSC CSE

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Quality education

India's goods trade deficit has reached a 42-month low of \$14.05 billion in February 2025 due to a decline in imports of gold, silver, and crude oil, as per data from the Ministry of Commerce and Industry.

- ➔ This marks a significant reduction compared to \$22.9 billion in January 2025 and \$19.5 billion in February 2024.

India's goods trade deficit at 42-month low following dip in gold, crude imports

Ashokamithran T.
MUMBAI

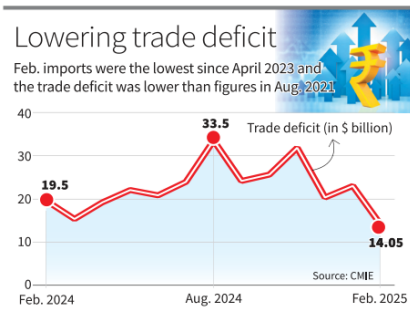
India's goods trade deficit was down to a 42-month low of \$14.05 billion as imports of gold, silver and crude dipped in February, show data from the Commerce and Industries Ministry.

The difference between import and export of goods was \$22.9 billion in January. In February 2024, the merchandise trade deficit stood at \$19.5 billion.

India's gold and silver imports were at \$2.7 billion, which is the lowest since June 2024, when the value was \$2.5 billion.

As for crude and petroleum, imports were at \$11.89 billion, which was the lowest since July 2023, when the value was at \$11.81 billion.

India exported goods worth \$36.9 billion in February 2025. Imports, however, slipped to a 22-month low of \$50.9 billion.



On a year-on-year basis, exports dipped 10.84% in February 2025.

Leap year effect

"A portion of the YoY decline in merchandise exports can be attributed to the base year effect related to the leap month," Aditi Nayar, chief economist at the credit rating agency ICRA, wrote in a statement.

Imports however shrunk 16.3% in the report-

ing month as against the corresponding period last year.

"The trade deficit was significantly lower than the average of over \$23 billion during the first 10 months of FY2025," Ms. Nayar said.

"Given this, we now expect the current account to witness a surplus of around \$5 billion in Q4 of FY2025, equivalent to around 0.5% of the GDP, in the ongoing quarter."
(With inputs from Reuters)

Key Highlights

1. Trade Deficit Trends

- ➔ February 2025: \$14.05 billion (42-month low).
- ➔ January 2025: \$22.9 billion.
- ➔ February 2024: \$19.5 billion.
- ➔ Average trade deficit (April 2024 – January 2025): Over \$23 billion.

2. Decline in Imports

- ➔ Gold and silver imports: \$2.7 billion (lowest since June 2024 - \$2.5 billion).
- ➔ Crude and petroleum imports: \$11.89 billion (lowest since July 2023 - \$11.81 billion).
- ➔ Total imports: \$50.9 billion (22-month low).
- ➔ Year-on-year decline in imports: 16.3 percent.

3. Exports Performance

- ➔ Exports in February 2025: \$36.9 billion.
- ➔ Year-on-year decline in exports: 10.84 percent.

4. Impact of the Leap Year

- ➔ The leap year effect (an additional day in February 2024) has influenced the year-on-year comparison, as highlighted by ICRA Chief Economist Aditi Nayar.

5. Current Account Surplus Projections

- ➔ The fourth quarter of FY2025 Current Account is expected to see a surplus of around \$5 billion (0.5 percent of GDP) due to the lower trade deficit.

Reasons Behind the Decline in Trade Deficit

1. Fall in Crude Oil Prices

- ➔ Lower global crude prices have reduced India's crude oil import bill, easing pressure on the trade deficit.

2. Lower Demand for Gold and Silver

- ➔ Decline in demand due to high domestic prices and government policies such as import duties.

3. Sluggish Global Demand

- ➔ Global economic slowdown impacting export demand for Indian goods.

4. Policy Measures

- ➔ The Indian government has promoted export diversification and import substitution, leading to controlled imports.

Implications for India's Economy

1. Positive Impact on Current Account Balance

- ➔ A lower trade deficit reduces pressure on India's foreign exchange reserves and currency stability.

2. Inflationary Impacts

- ➔ Lower crude imports could help contain inflation by reducing input costs in industries.

3. Challenges in Export Growth

- ➔ A 10.84 percent dip in exports suggests a slowdown in global trade, affecting India's industrial and manufacturing sectors.

4. Monetary and Fiscal Policy Considerations

- ➔ The Reserve Bank of India may adjust monetary policies considering the trends in trade and capital flows.

Conclusion

- ➔ The decline in India's trade deficit to a 42-month low is a positive development for the economy. However, the drop in exports signals global demand concerns. The government and policymakers need to focus on boosting exports through diversification, free trade agreements, and infrastructure improvements while maintaining sustainable import policies to ensure long-term economic stability.

UPSC Mains Practice Question

Ques:Examine the factors contributing to the recent decline in India's trade deficit. How can India sustain this trend while ensuring export growth?(250 words)

The Supreme Court has agreed to hear a plea challenging the current process of appointing the Comptroller and Auditor General of India, which is solely under the control of the Union government.

- ▶ The petition argues that this system compromises the independence of the CAG, a constitutional authority responsible for financial oversight of the Union and State governments.

SC to examine petition on CAG appointment process

The Hindu Bureau

NEW DELHI

The Supreme Court on Monday decided to examine a plea challenging the sole prerogative of the Centre, acting through the President, to appoint the Comptroller and Auditor General of India.

Appearing before a Bench headed by Justice Surya Kant, advocate Prashant Bhushan said absolute control by the Centre over the appointment process of a Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) would gravely affect the independence of a Constitutional authority, which was a watchdog over the financial expenditure and accountability of the Union and State governments and even the Panchayati Raj institutions.

The petition said the CAG must be appointed by the President in consulta-



tion with a non-partisan selection committee comprising the Prime Minister, the Leader of the Opposition and the Chief Justice of India.

The petitioner, Centre for Public Interest Litigation, also represented by advocate Cheryl D'Souza, referred to recent "deviations" in the CAG's work, including reports on the "pause" in Maharashtra audits, a steady decline on audits on the Union go-

vernment, among others.

Mr. Bhushan said Article 148(1) of the Constitution equates the CAG with a Supreme Court judge. A CAG can be removed only for the same reasons and in the same manner as an apex court judge.

Issuing notice to the Union government, Justice Kant, however, asked whether a judicial intervention would amount to re-writing Article 148, which deals with the appointment of a CAG. Article 148, like in the case of Supreme Court judges, is silent about the procedure of appointment. Justice Kant also remarked that one should be able to "trust institutions".

Mr. Bhushan argued that giving exclusive control to the Executive over appointments to key Constitutional bodies would be a sure recipe for loss of independence.

Key Issues Raised in the Petition

➔ **Lack of a Transparent Selection Process**

- The petition, filed by the Centre for Public Interest Litigation, seeks the formation of a non-partisan selection committee comprising the Prime Minister, the Leader of the Opposition, and the Chief Justice of India.
- This would ensure a fair and independent appointment process, reducing executive control.

➔ **CAG's Role and Independence**

- CAG is a watchdog of financial accountability and audits government expenditures, including Panchayati Raj institutions.
- The absolute control of the executive in its appointment process raises concerns over potential bias and reduced scrutiny of government finances.

➔ **Legal and Constitutional Standpoint**

- Article 148(1) of the Constitution provides for the appointment of the CAG by the President but does not specify the procedure.
- The CAG's removal process is the same as that of a Supreme Court judge, ensuring security of tenure. However, lack of a proper appointment mechanism could affect its functional independence.

➔ **Judicial Intervention and Separation of Powers**

- The Supreme Court questioned whether interfering in the appointment process would amount to rewriting Article 148.
- Justice Surya Kant emphasized the need to trust institutions, suggesting that judicial intervention in appointments must be carefully considered.

Concerns Over Recent Deviations in CAG's Work

➔ **Decline in Audits of the Union Government**

- The petition refers to a reduction in audit scrutiny of central government expenditures.

➔ **"Pause" in Maharashtra Audits**

- Allegations of political interference affecting the transparency of state financial audits.
- These concerns highlight the need for greater independence and accountability in the functioning of the CAG.

Implications for Indian Polity and Governance

➔ **Strengthening Institutional Autonomy**

- If the Supreme Court mandates a selection committee, it would reduce executive dominance and enhance the credibility of CAG reports.

➔ **Judicial Overreach vs. Institutional Trust**

- The case raises a constitutional dilemma—whether the judiciary should intervene in executive appointments or rely on institutional safeguards to ensure independence.

➔ Impact on Financial Oversight

- A more independent CAG could improve transparency in public spending and reduce corruption in government financial management.

➔ Precedent for Other Constitutional Appointments

- This case could influence the appointment process of other constitutional bodies like the Election Commission and the Central Vigilance Commission.

Conclusion

- ➔ The Supreme Court's examination of the CAG appointment process is a crucial constitutional development. Ensuring independence in appointments can enhance public trust in institutions and improve financial accountability. The outcome of this case could set a precedent for reforms in the appointment processes of other constitutional authorities.

UPSC Mains Practice Question

Ques :The independence of constitutional bodies is essential for maintaining financial accountability in governance. Discuss the need for reforms in the appointment process of the Comptroller and Auditor General of India. **(250 words)**



Wheat is India's second-most consumed staple crop after rice, primarily grown in the Indo-Gangetic plains. However, climate change, particularly rising temperatures and shifts in monsoon patterns, is disrupting its production cycle.

How climate change is affecting India's wheat production cycle

The Indian Ocean is warming at an accelerated rate, which in turn is affecting India's monsoon, on which most of the country's agriculture depends. The kharif or summer crop season is starting and ending late, which delays the beginning of the rabi season. And wheat is a rabi crop

Privali Prakash

India recorded its warmest February in 124 years this year. The India Meteorological Department has already raised an alarm for March, saying that the month will experience above normal temperatures and more than the usual number of days with heat waves. The period coincides with the beginning of India's wheat harvest season, and extreme heat poses a grave threat for the country's second-most consumed crop, after rice.

Wheat in India

In India, wheat is primarily grown in the northwestern parts of the Indo-Gangetic plains. Primary producers include the states of Uttar Pradesh, Punjab, Haryana, and Madhya Pradesh. Wheat needs a cooler season to grow, and the crop is usually sown between October and December. It is harvested between February and April in the rabi crop season.

The Indian government set a wheat procurement target of 30 million tonnes for the 2025-2026 rabi marketing season, news agency PTI reported in January. The lower procurement target comes despite the agriculture ministry aiming for a record wheat production of 115 million tonnes in the 2024-2025 crop year (July-June), the report added.

In 2024-2025, government wheat procurement was recorded at 26.6 million tonnes. While this exceeded the 26.2 million tonnes procured in 2023-2024, it fell short of the 34.15 million tonne target for the year.

In May 2022, India had prohibited wheat exports. This was shortly after Russia invaded Ukraine, a major wheat-producing country, which disrupted international availability of the food grain and triggered a global price hike.

Heat and wheat

Climate variability itself is not a new phenomenon, but it catches our attention when the crop growth season overlaps with heat wave conditions, Sandeep Mahato of the M.S. Swaminathan Research Foundation (MSSRF), Chennai, told *The Hindu*.

A 2022 study in the *International Journal of Molecular Sciences* noted that increasing global warming is causing heat stress that "triggers significant changes in the biological and developmental process of wheat, leading to a reduction in grain production and grain quality."

According to the paper's authors, heat stress is known to affect the growth and development of wheat by altering "physio-bio-chemical processes such as photosynthesis, respiration, oxidative damage, activity of stress-induced hormones, proteins and anti-oxidative enzymes, water and nutrient relations, and yield-forming attributes (biomass, tiller count, grain number, and size) upon exposure to temperatures above the optimum range."

Stages of wheat growth

According to the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation, stages of wheat growth are defined based on how different organs of the plant develop. This can be broadly grouped into four stages:



In India, wheat is primarily grown in the Indo-Gangetic plains. Producer states include Uttar Pradesh, Punjab, Haryana, and Madhya Pradesh. ANI

Optimal temperature required for growing wheat	Stages	Optimum temperature	Minimum temperature	Maximum temperature
	Seed germination	20-25 ± 1.2	3.5- 5.5 ± 0.44	35 ± 1.02
	Root growth	17.2 ± 0.87	3.5 ± 0.73	24.0 ± 1.21
	Shoot growth	18.5 ± 1.90	4.5 ± 0.76	20.1 ± 0.64
	Leaf initiation	20.5 ± 1.25	1.5 ± 0.52	23.5 ± 0.95
	Terminal spikelet	16.0 ± 1.30	2.5 ± 0.49	20.0 ± 1.60
	Anthesis	23.0 ± 1.75	10.0 ± 1.12	26.0 ± 1.01
	Grain filling duration	26.0 ± 1.53	13.0 ± 1.45	30.0 ± 2.13

(i) Germination to emergence: This includes the growth of the seed until the seedling breaks through the soil surface and the first leaf emerges.

(ii) Growth stage 1: Steps from emergence to double ridge. Shoots appear, and the plant growth shifts focus from producing primordial leaves to flowering structures called spikelets.

(iii) Growth stage 2: This stage lasts from the vegetative to the reproductive stage. This is also one of the stages where the plant is comparatively more susceptible to heat stress.

(iv) Growth stage 3: This stage includes the grain-filling period, from anthesis to maturity. According to experts, the real problem starts with the oceans. The Indian Ocean is warming at an accelerated rate. A 2024 study conducted by scientists at the Indian Institute of Tropical Meteorology, Pune, noted that the water body will likely be in a "near-permanent heat wave state" mainly as a result of global warming by the end of the century.

The frequency of marine heat waves is expected to increase tenfold, from the current average of 20 days per year to 220-250 days per year, the study added. A warming Indian Ocean will in turn alter India's monsoon, on which most of the country's agriculture depends. For example, the kharif or summer crop season is starting and ending late, which inevitably delays the beginning of the rabi season.

Wheat is a rabi crop. If its sowing starts late, the later stages of plant growth will coincide with early heat waves in India. February 2025 was warmer than usual,

and similar trends have been predicted for March. This is also the peak season for wheat harvest, and the ideal temperature in the later stages of the plant's growth should not cross 30°C.

"High temperatures cause early flowering and faster ripening, shortening the grain-filling period. This results in lighter grains with lower starch accumulation, reducing the total wheat output," Prakash Jha, assistant professor of agricultural climatology at Mississippi State University, told *The Hindu*.

"Extreme heat causes wheat to develop higher protein content but lower starch, making the grain harder and affecting milling quality. Farmers may face lower market prices due to reduced grain weight and quality issues," he added.

Low crop yield also tends to make farmers desperate and result in overuse of fertilizers, fungicides, etc. Nikhil Goveas, lead climate advisor with the Environmental Defense Fund, told *The Hindu*. "Higher but inefficient use of resources is another cascading effect of heat-stress challenges in crops."

Adaptation and mitigation

Food security is central to the adaptation and mitigation strategies officials use to lower the heat stress on wheat crops.

"Wheat is... important for farmers because it can be consumed immediately, so part of the produce is always saved for household consumption," Goveas said.

Farmers rely on older varieties of the crop because accessibility is a challenge, with problems related to the supply chain, costs, etc. Climate-resilient varieties are important, but they are not a silver bullet solution to the challenge, Goveas added, "The problem is a deeper

challenge of the climate crisis on our food systems. The earth is getting warmer. We need to think about not just one crop but all crops: get timings right, have our information and weather systems updated with the knowledge of what to expect, and undertake mitigation efforts against the challenges."

"The larger question here is to be able to guarantee food security," Mahato of MSSRF Chennai said. "We have to focus on addressing yield gaps. This ties into the issue of management of resources like fertilizers, pest control, etc."

According to Mahato, immediate policy support to farmers to deal with heat stress effects on wheat can be in the form of compensation, but there are more long term solutions that need to be incorporated into our agricultural practices.

"Changes in agricultural management strategies to support early sowing of crops in areas that are likely to see early heat waves, or introducing improved yield varieties with shorter growth duration, are some policy changes that can alleviate heat stress on wheat," he added. "There is no compromise that can be done on improving production, and that should be the central goal to the adaptation question."

"Policymakers must take a multi-pronged approach, combining scientific research, financial support, technological solutions, and farmer education to protect wheat crops from rising heat stress," according to Jha. "This includes promoting heat-resistant wheat varieties, adjusting sowing dates, financial support and crop insurance, and weather monitoring and advisories."

privali.prakash@thehindu.co.in

- ➔ The Indian Ocean's accelerated warming has altered agricultural seasons, leading to delayed sowing and early heat stress, significantly affecting wheat yield and quality.

Key Issues

➔ Impact of Climate Change on Wheat Production

- **Delayed Sowing:** Rising temperatures cause the kharif season to extend longer, pushing back the sowing of rabi crops like wheat.
- **Heat Waves During Harvest:** The Indian Meteorological Department recorded February 2025 as the warmest in 124 years, with predictions of high temperatures in March, directly affecting wheat harvest.
- **Shortened Grain-Filling Period:** Extreme heat accelerates flowering and ripening, leading to lighter grains, lower starch content, and reduced yields.
- **Reduced Milling Quality:** Heat stress results in higher protein but lower starch, making wheat harder and less suitable for milling.

➔ Indian Ocean Warming and Monsoon Variability

- **Accelerated Warming:** The Indian Ocean is experiencing a rapid increase in temperature, affecting monsoon patterns.
- **Frequent Marine Heat Waves:** A study by the Indian Institute of Tropical Meteorology predicts a tenfold rise in marine heat wave days, leading to irregular rainfall.
- **Delayed Monsoons:** Changes in the monsoon cycle delay kharif harvesting, which further affects rabi crop sowing.

➔ Economic and Agricultural Consequences

- **Lower Crop Yields:** In 2024-2025, wheat procurement stood at 26.6 million tonnes, falling short of the 34.15 million tonne target.
- **Reduced Farmer Incomes:** Lower yields lead to financial distress among farmers, pushing them to overuse fertilizers and pesticides, which further degrades soil health.
- **Export Restrictions:** In May 2022, India banned wheat exports due to global shortages following the Russia-Ukraine war, showcasing the vulnerability of food security.

Adaptation and Mitigation Strategies

➔ Climate-Resilient Wheat Varieties

- Developing and promoting heat-resistant wheat varieties with shorter growth cycles.
- Ensuring better access to improved seeds for farmers.

➔ Policy Interventions

- **Shifting Sowing Periods:** Encouraging early sowing in areas prone to early heat waves.
- **Financial Support and Crop Insurance:** Offering compensation for crop losses and expanding insurance schemes.
- **Resource Management:** Improving the management of fertilizers, pest control, and irrigation to optimize yields.

➔ Technological and Scientific Solutions

- **Weather Monitoring Systems:** Strengthening early warning systems for heat waves.
- **Farmer Education:** Training farmers on climate-smart agriculture practices.
- **Efficient Water Use:** Encouraging drip irrigation and water conservation techniques to sustain production under rising temperatures.

Conclusion

- ➔ Climate change is a major threat to India's wheat production. With rising temperatures, shifting monsoons, and increasing heat waves, wheat yields and quality are deteriorating. Policymakers must adopt a multi-pronged strategy, combining scientific research, financial support, and technological solutions, to protect food security and sustain wheat production in the long run.

UPSC Mains Practice Question

Ques : Discuss the impact of climate change on India's wheat production. What adaptation measures can be taken to ensure food security? (250 words)

Free and fair elections are essential to a functioning democracy. In India, electoral reforms are necessary to address concerns regarding the voting process, campaign expenditures, and the criminalization of politics.

Why are electoral reforms necessary?

Since when have votes been registered solely through Electronic Voting Machines? Why have certain Opposition parties accused the EC of electoral roll manipulation? Should criminal cases of politicians standing for elections be given wide publicity?

EXPLAINER

Rangarajan R.

The story so far:

The Election Commission (EC) has invited political parties to discuss strengthening the election process. This is in wake of the allegations of manipulation of electoral rolls during the recently concluded assembly elections and issues raised with respect to duplicate Electoral Photo Identity Card (EPIC) numbers in different States.

What are the legal provisions?

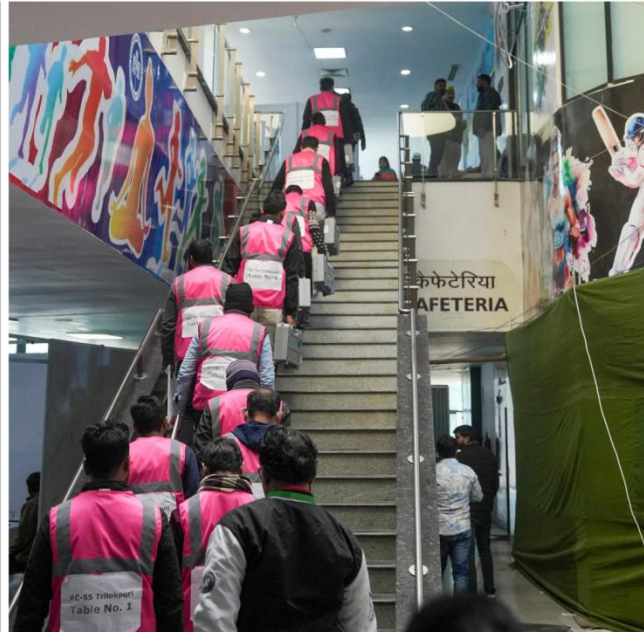
Article 324 of the Constitution provides that the superintendence, direction and control of the preparation of electoral rolls for, and the conduct of, all elections to the Parliament and State legislature shall be vested in the EC. The preparation of electoral rolls is governed by the provisions of the Representation of the People Act, 1950 and related rules, including Registration of Electors Rules, 1960.

The voting process has undergone tectonic changes since the first general election in 1952. In the first two general elections of 1952 and 1957, a separate box was placed for each candidate with their election symbol. Voters had to drop a blank ballot paper into the box of the candidate whom they wanted to vote for. It is only from the third general election in 1962 that ballot papers with names and symbols of candidates was introduced. Subsequently, since the 2004 general elections to the Lok Sabha, Electronic Voting Machines (EVM) have been used in all constituencies. Since 2019, EVMs have been backed by 100% Voter Verifiable Paper Audit Trail (VVPAT) slips in all constituencies.

What are the issues?

There have been a series of issues raised in the past with respect to the voting and counting process. First, there were demands through a Public Interest Litigation (PIL) for reverting to paper ballot papers which was dismissed by the Supreme Court in April 2024. Second, the same PIL demanded 100% matching of VVPAT with EVM count, which at present is carried out for five machines per assembly constituency/segment. The Supreme court, while dismissing this demand as well, had directed that the burnt memory of microcontrollers of 5% of EVMs, which includes that of control units, ballot units, VVPATs, in every assembly segment can be checked and verified by a team of engineers of the EVM manufacturers in case of any suspicion of tampering. The exercise needs to be initiated via a written request from candidates who are placed second or third in a constituency, within seven days of the declaration of election results.

Third, there were allegations of manipulation of electoral rolls in the run up to the Maharashtra and Delhi Assembly elections. The Opposition parties alleged that large number of bogus/fake voters were added to the electoral roll to benefit the ruling party at the Centre. The fourth and current issue relates to identical EPIC numbers for voters belonging to different States like West Bengal, Gujarat, Haryana and Punjab. Opposition parties such as the Trinamool Congress allege that it vindicates their claim of bogus voters being included in the voters' list. The EC has explained that election may have arisen because of the earlier decentralised system for allotting EPIC



Need for a revamp: Poll officials carrying EVMs enter the Patparganj counting centre for the Delhi Assembly polls, in New Delhi, on February 8. PTI

numbers before shifting to the centralised database on the ERONET platform. It clarified that irrespective of the EPIC number, an elector can cast his/her vote only in their designated polling station in their State or Union Territory.

Apart from the above issues in the election process, there are significant issues related to the campaign process that have to be addressed. First, 'Star Campaigners' of most parties have been guilty of using inappropriate and abusive words against leaders of other political parties, appealing to caste/communal feelings of electors, and making unsubstantiated allegations. Second, candidates of all major political parties breach the election expenditure limit by a wide margin. Further, there are no limits on political party spending during elections. The Centre for Media Studies has estimated that the expenditure during the 2024 Lok Sabha elections was close to ₹1,00,000 crore by various political parties. Such inflated election expenditure fuels corruption resulting in a vicious cycle. Third, as per the report of the Association of Democratic Reformers, the issue of criminalisation of politics has almost reached its nadir with 251 (46%) of the 543 elected MPs in 2024, having criminal cases against them. Of them 170 (31%) face serious criminal charges including rape, murder, attempt to murder and kidnapping.

What are the required reforms?

Free and fair elections is part of the basic structure of our Constitution as declared by the Supreme Court in various cases.

With respect to the electoral process of voting and counting, the following reforms need to be considered and implemented. First, as regards the EVM and VVPAT related aspects, the sample size for the matching of EVM count and VVPAT slips should be decided in a scientific manner by dividing each State into large regions. In case of even a single error, VVPAT slips should be counted fully for the concerned region. This would instil statistically significant confidence in the counting process. Further, as recommended by the EC in 2016, in order to provide a degree of cover for voters at the booth level, 'totaliser' machines can be introduced that would aggregate votes in 14 EVMs before revealing the candidate-wise count. The candidates placed second or third should also utilise the direction of the Supreme Court to demand the verification of 5% of EVMs in each assembly segment in case of any suspected tampering. If any issue is identified, it should be suitably addressed and if there are none, it would put to rest the political speculation.

Second, to address the apprehension of inclusion of fake voters and duplicate EPIC cards, the process of linking citizens' Aadhaar number with EPIC cards may be considered after detailed discussions with all stakeholders and dispelling concerns around right to privacy. Meanwhile, the EC should remove any duplicate voter ID numbers in the electoral roll across States and ensure unique EPIC numbers. Equally important, if not more, are the reforms needed in the campaign process. First, the EC should be authorised to

revoke the 'Star Campaigner' status of a leader, in case of any serious violation of the Model Code of Conduct (MCC), thereby depriving the party candidates of expenditure relief for their campaigns. Under Paragraph 16A of the Symbols order, the EC has the power to suspend or withdraw the recognition of a recognised political party for its failure to observe MCC or follow lawful directions of the Commission. Strict action under this provision against bigger parties would have a salutary effect in ensuring adherence to the MCC. Second, with respect to election expenditure, the law must be amended to explicitly provide that 'financial assistance' by a political party to its candidate should also be within the limits of election expenditure prescribed for a candidate. There should also be a ceiling on expenditure by political parties. Third, the Supreme Court direction to candidates as well as political parties to issue declarations about criminal antecedents, at least three times before election, in a widely circulated newspaper in the locality and in electronic media, should be strictly enforced. This would enable a discerning voter in exercising a well-informed choice.

The EC and various political parties should engage in a meaningful discussion on all these aspects so that the campaign and electoral processes instil confidence in voters at large.

Rangarajan R is a former IAS officer and author of 'Polity Simplified'. He currently trains civil service aspirants at Officers IAS Academy. Views expressed are personal.

THE GIST

Article 324 of the Constitution provides that the superintendence, direction and control of the preparation of electoral rolls for, and the conduct of, all elections to the Parliament and State legislature shall be vested in the EC.

Apart from the above issues in the election process, there are significant issues related to the campaign process that have to be addressed. First, 'Star Campaigners' of most parties have been guilty of using inappropriate and abusive words against leaders of other political parties, appealing to caste/communal feelings of electors, and making unsubstantiated allegations.

As regards the EVM and VVPAT related aspects, the sample size for the matching of EVM count and VVPAT slips should be decided in a scientific manner by dividing each State into large regions. In case of even a single error, VVPAT slips should be counted fully for the concerned region. This would instil statistically significant confidence in the counting process.

Recent controversies, including allegations of electoral roll manipulation and duplicate voter ID cards, highlight the need for stronger safeguards to maintain public confidence in elections.

Key Legal Provisions

- Article 324 of the Constitution grants the Election Commission (EC) authority over the preparation of electoral rolls and the conduct of elections. The Representation of the People Act, 1950, along with the Registration of Electors Rules, 1960, governs voter registration and electoral rolls. The introduction of Electronic Voting Machines (EVMs) in 2004 and the addition of Voter Verifiable Paper Audit Trail (VVPAT) in 2019 were steps towards improving transparency in the voting process.

Major Issues in Electoral Processes

➤ Voting and Counting Concerns

- Demands to return to paper ballots were dismissed by the Supreme Court in April 2024.
- A petition for 100% VVPAT verification was also dismissed, but the court allowed verification of the burnt memory of 5% of EVMs in cases of suspected tampering.
- Allegations of manipulation of electoral rolls before the Maharashtra and Delhi Assembly elections, with claims of fake voters benefiting the ruling party.
- Identical Electoral Photo Identity Card (EPIC) numbers appearing in different states like West Bengal, Gujarat, Haryana, and Punjab, raising concerns about duplicate voters.

➤ Campaign Issues

- Political leaders frequently use inappropriate language, appeal to caste or communal sentiments, and make unverified allegations.
- Election expenditure limits are regularly exceeded, with no cap on party spending. The 2024 Lok Sabha elections saw an estimated ₹1,00,000 crore spent by various political parties.
- Criminalization of politics remains a pressing issue, with 46% of MPs in 2024 having criminal cases against them, including serious charges like murder and rape.

Required Reforms

➤ Voting and Counting Reforms

- The sample size for VVPAT verification should be determined scientifically, with full verification in case of discrepancies.
- 'Totaliser' machines should be introduced to aggregate votes from multiple EVMs, maintaining voter secrecy while improving transparency.
- Candidates who finish second or third in an election should actively request verification of 5% of EVMs, as permitted by the Supreme Court.

Electoral Roll and Voter ID Reforms

- ▶ Linking Aadhaar with EPIC cards should be considered after addressing privacy concerns.
- ▶ The EC must ensure unique EPIC numbers across states to prevent duplication and fraudulent voting.

Campaign and Political Financing Reforms

- ▶ The EC should be empowered to revoke 'Star Campaigner' status for serious violations of the Model Code of Conduct.
- ▶ The EC should enforce stricter penalties, including suspending party recognition under Paragraph 16A of the Symbols Order.
- ▶ Laws should be amended to include financial assistance from political parties within candidate expenditure limits.
- ▶ A ceiling should be imposed on party election expenditures.

Criminalization of Politics

- ▶ The Supreme Court's directive for candidates and parties to declare criminal records in newspapers and electronic media three times before elections must be strictly enforced.
- ▶ Voters should have access to clear information about candidates' criminal records to make informed choices.

Conclusion

- ▶ Electoral reforms are necessary to restore public confidence in India's democratic process. Strengthening voting procedures, reducing campaign malpractices, and addressing the criminalization of politics will ensure free and fair elections. The EC and political parties must engage in meaningful discussions to implement these reforms effectively.

UPSC Mains Practice Question

Ques :Discuss the major issues affecting free and fair elections in India. Suggest reforms to improve the electoral process. **(250 words)**

- ➔ India's wholesale price index (WPI) inflation accelerated to 2.38% in February 2025, driven by rising prices of manufactured products and non-food primary goods. The increase comes despite food price inflation slowing to a four-month low and continued deflation in the fuel and power sector.

Manufactured items hasten Feb. WPI inflation to 2.38%

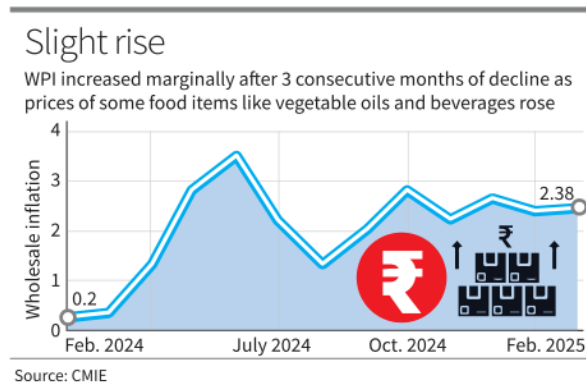
Prices of manufactured products rose to a two-year high of 2.86% in February; non-food primary inflation hastened to 4.84% in the reporting month as against 2.85% in the previous month

Ashokamithran T.
MUMBAI

Wholesale price inflation hastened to 2.38% as cost of manufactured food products, among others, increased in February, from 2.31% in the previous month, according to data from Ministry of Commerce and Industry.

Prices of manufactured products rose to a two-year high of 2.86% in the reporting month.

"Excluding food, core manufactured WPI inflation rose to 1.3% y-o-y from 1% in January. We think



core WPI inflation may rise gradually over the coming months, reflecting the rise in international metal prices in February," said Aashta Gudwani, India Chief

Economist at Barclays Research. Primary articles continued to dis-inflate for six consecutive months coming in at 2.81% in February 2025. Food price in-

flation was at a four-month low of 3.38% in February 2025. "Expectedly, the correction is now tapering," Ms. Gudwani wrote in the research note. Non-food primary inflation rose to 4.84% in the reporting month as against 2.85% in the previous month. The increase was however on account of a lower base, Ms. Gudwani wrote.

Fuel and power sector experienced a deflation of 0.71%, slowing from a fall in prices by 2.78% in January 2025. Price change in the sector has been in the negative territory for seven months.

Key Trends in WPI Inflation

➔ Manufactured Products Inflation

- Prices of manufactured products increased to a two-year high of 2.86% in February.
- Core manufactured WPI inflation (excluding food) rose to 1.3% year-on-year, up from 1% in January.
- Experts anticipate a gradual rise in core WPI inflation, influenced by increasing international metal prices.

➔ Primary Articles and Food Inflation

- Primary articles continued to experience disinflation for the sixth consecutive month, coming in at 2.81%.
- Food price inflation eased to 3.38%, marking a four-month low.
- The correction in food inflation is slowing, indicating a potential stabilization in prices.
- ➔ **Non-Food Primary Inflation**
 - Inflation for non-food primary articles surged to 4.84% in February, compared to 2.85% in January.
 - This rise is attributed to a lower base effect, which magnifies the percentage increase in prices.
- ➔ **Fuel and Power Sector Deflation**
 - The sector witnessed a deflation of 0.71%, an improvement from the 2.78% decline in January.
 - Prices in this sector have remained in negative territory for seven consecutive months, suggesting continued downward pressure on energy costs.

Implications for the Economy

- ➔ **Manufacturing Sector:** Rising costs of manufactured goods could contribute to higher retail inflation in the coming months.
- ➔ **Metal Prices:** The expected increase in international metal prices may lead to further cost pressures in core manufacturing.
- ➔ **Policy Considerations:** The government and Reserve Bank of India (RBI) may need to monitor these inflationary trends while formulating policies related to price stability and economic growth.

Conclusion

- ➔ February's WPI inflation rise to 2.38% highlights increasing cost pressures in the manufacturing sector, even as food price inflation moderates. While fuel and power remain in deflation, the rising trend in non-food primary inflation and core manufacturing prices could influence inflation expectations in the coming months.

UPSC Mains Practice Question

Ques:How does air pollution impact solar energy generation? Discuss India's strategies to mitigate the effects of climate change on renewable energy production. **(250 words)**

A land where ambition grows minus an outbound ticket

The recent drama over the unceremonious repatriation of Indians who attempted illegally to enter the United States of America, and who ended up handcuffed and manacled in an American military aircraft that dumped them on the tarmac in Amritsar, raises a whole series of issues. Migration, after all, is not merely a policy issue. It is a human story, woven into our collective memories and dreams.

Immigration has long been an integral part of human history, shaping civilisations, economies, and societies across the globe. India, with its rich tradition of global engagement, has long seen its people traverse continents in pursuit of opportunity, new lives, better futures. Every year, millions of Indians embark on this journey, making India the country with the highest number of emigrants in the world. Today, Indians are no longer just workers abroad; they are leaders, shaping global industries. With Sundar Pichai at Google, Satya Nadella at Microsoft, and a host of others born and raised in India heading Fortune 500 companies, Indian migrants drive innovation and economic power in the West. History proves that migration has always been a force multiplier, enriching both migrants and host nations. Yet, in an era of rising walls, both physical and political, migration faces unprecedented scrutiny.

A paradox that is painful

For decades, the lure of the American Dream has beckoned young Indians with the promise of economic opportunity, social mobility, and the prospect of a better future. While the IT engineers in Silicon Valley went on scholarships or work visas and stayed on, the Sikh cab drivers navigating the streets of New York may have found less conventional means of entry. But these illegal migrants are not fugitives but opportunity-seekers wanting a fair shot at prosperity. With remittances to India crossing \$120 billion in 2023, migration fuels a cycle where families seek to replicate the success of relatives abroad. It is the vast expanse of opportunity in major U.S. cities, the promise of work under the radar, and the prospect of eventual amnesty (like so many before them) that draws them in. An estimated 7,25,000 undocumented Indian migrants – nearly one in four of all Indians in the U.S. – live and work clandestinely in the U.S.

There is a painful paradox at the heart of India's illegal migration story. We celebrate tech billionaires while youth unemployment soars, showcase gleaming infrastructure while millions struggle for dignified work. India's growth story features booming statistics, shrinking opportunities, and a rising economy still unable to assure its own people that their future lies at home.

The lure of foreign shores is sometimes about



Shashi Tharoor

is a fourth-term Member of Parliament (Congress), Lok Sabha, for Thiruvananthapuram, Chairman of the Parliamentary Standing Committee on External Affairs, and the Sahitya Akademi Award-winning author of 26 books, including 'Pax Indica: India and the World of the 21st Century' (2012)

The unceremonious repatriation of Indians must awaken those who govern the country – India must become a nation where migration is an option, not a necessity

ambition, sometimes about survival. This has birthed a thriving network of unscrupulous agents weaving fantasies of western riches, convincing even people from India's most prosperous States to leave. Gujarat – a State championed as an economic success story, the launch-pad of the Prime Minister's rise – sees thousands risking everything to migrate. Punjab, too, is revered as India's breadbasket; it feeds the nation, yet its youth are leaving in droves. Rising unemployment, dwindling agricultural returns, and an insidious drug crisis have eroded hope, leaving many with little choice but to seek their fortunes abroad, legally or otherwise.

In their desperation, many Indians turn to shadowy networks, paying staggering sums to be smuggled across borders. What was once the path of young, single men now sees entire middle-class families – the bedrock of India's ambitions – risking everything for a fresh start abroad. The Gujarati family that froze to death trapped in a snowdrift on the Canadian-U.S. border in January 2022 was upper middle-class at home. Some of those who were sent back by the U.S. had paid a crore of rupees to get there. Who would have imagined that people with a crore of rupees would not thrive in India? Why is India, one of the world's fastest-growing economies, a rising geopolitical force, and a nation with unparalleled human capital, still unable to provide enough opportunities for its own people? Why has the pursuit of dignity, stability, and economic security led millions of Indians to distant shores, even where they are not welcome? These are uncomfortable questions – ones we can no longer ignore.

More mirage than dream

There is also the question of what they find when they get there. The American Dream, once seen as a golden ticket, is increasingly a mirage. Many find themselves trapped in an endless cycle of uncertainty – living in fear of deportation, working in jobs that barely sustain them, struggling to integrate into societies that, at times, view them with racist suspicion. And for many who leave, the struggle does not end when they cross the border – it follows them, sometimes in the most tragic ways. We hear of migrants working endless hours in exploitative conditions, of families back home waiting for news that never comes. And now, for many, the journey merely ends in humiliating deportation.

The United States is well within its legal authority to return those who have entered its territory unlawfully. They have been doing so: the Biden administration deported 1,100 Indians in the last fiscal year. Since October 2020, nearly 1,70,000 Indian migrants have been detained by U.S. Customs and Border Protection while attempting to cross the border illegally, largely from Canada or Mexico; they are all subject to

deportation. However, the manner in which this process is conducted has been dismaying. Deportation must be carried out with dignity and a respect for human rights. The recent images of shackled and handcuffed migrants being loaded onto military aircraft, suggesting more a criminal extradition of felons than an immigration enforcement measure, have understandably agitated Indians. Colombia and Mexico have rejected such treatment of their citizens, rightly arguing that deportation is an administrative process, not a punitive spectacle. Humiliating individuals to deter others serves no just purpose – it merely erodes dignity and distorts perceptions.

Issues to ponder over

We must ask: should a democracy treat another's citizens this way? Does border enforcement justify undermining the very values the deporting nation upholds? Diplomacy is not just policy but also a reflection of national character. While India does not, and should not, endorse illegal immigration, we cannot be silent spectators to the mistreatment of our citizens. A nation's stature is not just economic clout or international reach but the respect its passport commands. True global engagement is not just about alliances and trade deals; it is about setting an unwavering standard – wherever an Indian stands, their nation stands with them.

Another paradox: We hail the aspirational young Indian, but he prefers to fulfil his aspirations abroad. India must not be a place migrants are forced to return to, but one they want to return to. Those coming back are not just deportees but skilled, ambitious individuals whose aspirations can drive India's growth. We must make opportunities accessible to all, not concentrated among the privileged. Inclusive growth, innovation, and investments in infrastructure, education, and entrepreneurship must be national imperatives. More than just jobs, India must offer careers that inspire people to stay, build, and invest in their future here.

As the world builds walls, India must build bridges – to opportunity, prosperity, and a future where migration is an option, not a necessity. If India is to truly rise, it must become a nation where people do not feel compelled to leave, but empowered to stay. India must not just be the world's largest exporter of talent but a magnet for it – a place where ambition flourishes without an outbound ticket, where success is celebrated at home, and where prosperity is not a foreign fantasy but a reality shaped on our own soil.

Let us make India, once again, a land of hope. Not because the world is rejecting our people, but because, if we do the right things, they will have no need to look elsewhere.

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GS Paper 01 Indian and World Geography

UPSC Mains Practice Question: Despite being one of the fastest-growing economies, India witnesses a high rate of emigration, including illegal migration. Analyze the reasons behind this paradox and suggest measures to address the issue.

Context :

- Migration has always been a defining element of human civilization. It shapes societies, economies, and cultural landscapes across the globe.
- The recent controversy surrounding the deportation of Indian migrants from the United States sheds light on a complex and painful reality.
- While India celebrates its global achievers, a large portion of its population continues to seek opportunities elsewhere, legally or otherwise.
- Now it becomes crucial to explore the paradox of Indian migration, the factors driving it, the challenges faced by migrants, and the need for a national introspection on creating a future where migration is a choice rather than a necessity.

The Indian Diaspora: Success and Struggles

- India has the highest number of emigrants in the world.
- Many Indians have thrived abroad, with leaders such as Sundar Pichai (CEO of Google) and Satya Nadella (CEO of Microsoft) showcasing India's intellectual prowess.
- These individuals symbolise a success story that India proudly claims. However, the Indian migration story is not uniform.
- At the other end of the spectrum are thousands of undocumented migrants, many of whom embark on perilous journeys to the United States, often via illegal routes through Canada or Mexico.
- Unlike the tech entrepreneurs and skilled professionals, these migrants are not fleeing war or persecution but are seeking economic security and stability that they believe their home country cannot provide.
- Their plight raises a critical question: why do so many Indians, despite belonging to a fast-growing economy, feel the need to risk everything for an uncertain future abroad?

The Paradox of India's Economic Growth and Migration

- A painful contradiction lies at the heart of India's migration crisis. India boasts impressive economic growth, yet rising youth unemployment and economic disparity drive people away.
- While urban centres showcase world-class infrastructure, many citizens still struggle for dignified work.

- States like Gujarat and Punjab, considered economically prosperous, have high rates of illegal migration.
- The desperation of even well-off families, such as the Gujarati family that tragically froze to death at the Canada-U.S. border, suggests that the problem is not just economic but also one of aspiration and social mobility.
- This contradiction raises an uncomfortable question: if India is truly progressing, why do so many of its people feel compelled to leave?

Factors Driving the Migration

- **Booming Economy, Shrinking Opportunities**
 - At first glance, India's economy appears to be thriving.
 - The country boasts a GDP growth rate that outpaces many developed nations, an increasing middle class, and a rapidly expanding digital economy.
 - It is home to some of the world's most valuable startups, a powerful IT sector, and an increasing presence in global manufacturing.
 - Yet, beneath these statistics lies a harsh reality: economic growth has not translated into widespread, inclusive opportunities.
 - Despite India's strong economic indicators, job creation has not kept pace with the millions of young Indians entering the workforce each year.
- **The Middle-Class Exodus: Why Even the Affluent Are Leaving**
 - Traditionally, migration was driven by economic necessity, with poorer individuals seeking low-skilled jobs abroad to support their families.
 - However, in recent years, a surprising trend has emerged, upper-middle-class families and even wealthy individuals are choosing to migrate.
 - States like Gujarat and Punjab, which are often cited as economic success stories, see thousands of people leaving every year.
 - Many middle-class families leave not just for better wages but for improved healthcare, education, and social security.
 - Many parents see foreign education as a gateway to better job prospects and a superior quality of life for their children.
 - While India's startup culture is thriving, the bureaucratic hurdles, inconsistent regulations, and corruption make it difficult for businesses to scale efficiently.
- **Failure of Inclusive Growth**
 - India's migration paradox is ultimately a failure of inclusive growth.
 - While the country celebrates its economic progress, wealth and opportunities remain concentrated in specific industries and among certain sections of society.
 - The rapid urbanisation of India has led to development in metropolitan cities, but rural and semi-urban areas continue to lag in terms of employment generation and infrastructure.

- Additionally, sectors like agriculture, which still employ a large portion of India's workforce, face declining productivity and profitability.
- Many farmers' children see no future in agriculture and look toward migration as a means of escaping economic hardship.
- The drug crisis in Punjab, for instance, is partly linked to youth disillusionment due to diminishing opportunities in farming.

The Illusion of the American Dream

- ➔ The United States, long seen as the land of opportunity, has increasingly become a difficult place for migrants, especially undocumented ones.
- ➔ Many Indians who reach the U.S. illegally find themselves trapped in low-paying jobs, constantly living in fear of deportation.
- ➔ The American Dream, once considered a golden ticket, often turns into an endless struggle for survival in a society that does not always welcome outsiders.
- ➔ The recent deportations highlight the harsh reality of illegal migration.
- ➔ While the U.S. has the legal right to deport undocumented individuals, the manner in which it is done, shackling and handcuffing migrants, raises questions about human dignity.
- ➔ Other countries, like Colombia and Mexico, have condemned such treatment of their citizens, recognising that deportation is an administrative process, not a criminal punishment.
- ➔ India, too, must take a firm stand against the mistreatment of its people, ensuring that its citizens are treated with dignity and respect.

The Way Forward: The Need for Change; Creating Opportunities at Home

- ➔ **Job Creation and Economic Reforms**
 - India must focus on policies that create meaningful employment, particularly for the youth.
 - While the economy grows, job opportunities have not kept pace with the rising population.
 - Investments in industries such as manufacturing, technology, and services can help absorb the workforce.
- ➔ **Improving Education and Skill Development**
 - Many Indian migrants take low-wage jobs abroad despite having higher education qualifications.
 - There is a need to align India's education system with industry demands and provide vocational training that equips young people with skills relevant to today's job market.
- ➔ **Strengthening Infrastructure and Entrepreneurship**
 - If India wants to retain its talent, it must make entrepreneurship and innovation easier. Many Indians who succeed abroad do so because they find better ecosystems for growth.
 - Encouraging startups, reducing bureaucratic hurdles, and providing financial support can create an environment where young Indians can thrive at home.

Conclusion

Daily News Analysis

- The true measure of India's progress should not be its economic growth alone but its ability to retain its talent and provide opportunities for all its citizens.
- Migration should be an option, not a compulsion driven by desperation.
- India must transform from being a country that exports talent to one that attracts and nurtures it.
- A rising India must be a place where ambition is fulfilled without the need for an outbound ticket, where success stories are written not just in Silicon Valley but in Indian cities and villages alike.

