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The ₹92,000-crore "Holistic Development of Great Nicobar Island" project is a multi-sectoral initiative spearheaded by NITI Aayog. Situated at the southern tip of the Andaman and Nicobar archipelago, the project is framed as a "strategic imperative" to counter regional geopolitical shifts and establish India as a dominant maritime player in the Indo-Pacific.

NGT gives clearance to Great Nicobar project

The ₹92,000-crore mega project is of 'strategic, defence and national importance', says Centre

Tribunal disposes batch of applications over environmental clearance for the infra project

'Adequate safeguards' provided in EC norms, no good ground to interfere, finds Bench

Abhinay Lakshman
NEW DELHI

A Bench of the National Green Tribunal (NGT) on Monday cleared the way for the ₹92,000-crore Great Nicobar Island mega-infrastructure project, noting that "considering the strategic importance" of it and "other relevant considerations", "we do not find any good ground to interfere".

It disposed of applications related to the environment clearance (EC) for the project, with a direction to authorities "to ensure full and strict compliance of EC conditions".

The project includes a transshipment port, an airport, a power plant, and a township.

The Bench was hearing a batch of applications related to the EC, which was granted in 2022. An earlier NGT Bench had in 2023 called for the formation of a high-powered committee (HPC) to address certain issues concerning the protection of coral reef colonies, nesting sites of leatherback turtles, and the allegation that parts of the project are located in ecologically protected zones.

The applicants argued that the government had erred in limiting the terms of reference for the HPC to three issues and that the terms were "factually incorrect". They said the issues had not been properly examined.

The NGT said "adequate safeguards" had been provided in the conditions specified in the EC, which the Tribunal had already refused to interfere with in its 2023 order. It said the remaining issues had "been dealt with" by the HPC.

'Balanced move'

"A balanced approach is required to be adopted while considering the issue of allowing development of the port on a strategic location and taking adequate steps to carry out the activity strictly in terms of the ICRZ Notification, 2019 instead of prohibiting the activity if the objection is based on apprehension," the NGT said in its order.

The NGT Bench, headed by its Chairperson Justice Prakash Shrivastava, noted that it found no error in the drafting of the terms of reference for the HPC, adding that the applicants did not point out "any other substantial issue" that should have been examined by the HPC.

Further, noting the Union government's stance against public disclosure of the HPC report, given that it is "of strategic, defence and national importance and has confidential and privileged information", the NGT said, "The above disclosures reveal that the project is very important for India."

The NGT order said that to ensure "full and effective" compliance with the EC conditions, the Environment Ministry "will undertake all measures to protect the coral reefs along the coastal stretch and will also ensure coral regeneration through proved scientific method for regeneration of coral in appropriate identified areas abutting the project areas".

On erosion of shorelines of the Great Nicobar Island, the NGT said it "will be the responsibility" of the Environment Ministry to "ensure that on account of proposed constructions which includes foreshore development, there is no erosion/shoreline change abutting the project area and all along the islands".

"The shoreline of the island will be protected ensuring no loss of sandy beaches as these beaches provide nesting sites for turtles, bird nesting site apart from protecting the islands," the NGT said.

The applicants had also submitted that the Environmental Impact Assessment for the project was conducted for just one season, as opposed to three seasons as mandated by regulations.

On this, the NGT noted the government's submissions that "since there is no high erosion site in Andaman & Nicobar, therefore, three-season data is not required".

Further, on the issue that parts of the project enter the Coastal Regulation Zone-IA, the NGT took note of submissions that ground truthing of the project areas had been conducted and that the "High Powered Committee, after due verification, has found that no part of the Project area is in CRZ-IA area". The NGT also ruled that the "doubt" expressed by the applicant is "expelled" by the conditions already present in the EC.

While the project's environmental clearance was under challenge before the NGT, aspects of the project's forest clearance are currently under challenge before the Calcutta High Court.

Local opposition

The locals – the Nicobarese and the Shompen (both Scheduled Tribes) – have alleged that their rights on forest lands which are supposed to be used for the project had not been settled., and have more recently accused the Andaman and Nicobar Islands administration of "coercing" them to surrender their ancestral lands.

Referring to the proceedings underway before the Calcutta High Court, Mr. Jairam Ramesh said, "that now is the only beacon of hope".

Key Components of the Project

The project covers approximately 166 sq. km. and comprises four primary pillars:

International Container Transshipment Terminal (ICTT): A deep-sea port at Galathea Bay designed to rival hubs like Singapore and Colombo.

Greenfield International Airport: A dual-use facility for both civilian tourism and long-range military aircraft.

Gas and Solar-based Power Plant: A 450-MVA plant to ensure energy self-sufficiency for the island.

Integrated Township: A planned "smart city" to support a projected population of over 3 lakh people.

The NGT Ruling (February 2026)

The NGT Bench, led by Chairperson Justice Prakash Shrivastava, cleared the project based on several critical findings:

Strategic Importance: The tribunal accepted the Centre's argument that the project is vital for national defense and maritime security.

Adequate Safeguards: It ruled that the conditions stipulated in the 2022 Environmental Clearance—such as coral translocation and turtle nesting site protection—provide sufficient mitigation.

High-Powered Committee (HPC) Findings: The NGT noted that the HPC (constituted in 2023) had addressed gaps in data and confirmed that the project does not encroach upon the prohibited Coastal Regulation Zone (CRZ)-IA.

Transparency vs. Security: The tribunal upheld the government's decision to keep certain parts of the HPC report confidential due to national security sensitivities.

Key Concerns and Challenges

Despite the clearance, the project remains at the center of a "Development vs. Conservation" debate:

Dimension	Primary Concerns
Ecological	Felling of nearly 1 million trees; threat to endemic species like the Nicobar Megapode and Leatherback Turtles.
Geological	The island is in Seismic Zone V (high risk) and suffered significant subsidence during the 2004 Tsunami.
Tribal Rights	Impact on the Shompen (a Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group) and the Nicobarese; allegations of improper settlement of Forest Rights.
Legal	While NGT cleared the EC, the Forest Clearance is still under challenge at the Calcutta High Court.

UPSC Perspectives: Strategic and Economic Significance

For the UPSC Mains, this project is a case study in Blue Economy and Geopolitics:

Indo-Pacific Strategy: The island is just 160 km from the Strait of Malacca, through which a massive volume of global trade and energy passes. It acts as a "stationary aircraft carrier" for India.

Maritime India Vision 2030: By building a transshipment hub, India aims to save millions in foreign exchange currently paid to foreign ports like Colombo for handling Indian cargo.

Countering "String of Pearls": The presence of a robust dual-use base helps balance the growing Chinese naval footprint in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR).

Conclusion

The NGT's clearance marks a "green signal" for India's maritime ambitions, emphasizing that strategic necessity can occasionally outweigh local environmental objections provided "adequate safeguards" are implemented. However, the path ahead remains complex. The final outcome of the Calcutta High Court proceedings and the actual implementation of scientific coral

regeneration will determine if India can truly achieve a "Balanced Approach"—securing its borders without sacrificing one of the world's most pristine biodiversity hotspots.

UPSC Prelims Exam Practice Question

Ques: The Galathea Bay, recently seen in news, is significant because:

(a) It hosts India's first floating solar park

(b) It is the proposed site for an International Container Transshipment Terminal

(c) It is a notified Ramsar Wetland

(d) It is India's only coral atoll

Ans : b)

UPSC Mains Exam Practice Question

Ques: The Great Nicobar Development Project represents a classic "Development vs Conservation" dilemma. Critically examine in light of ecological fragility and India's maritime security imperatives. **(250 words)**

Page 07 : GS III : Science and Tech / Prelims Exam

A collaborative study by the Broad Institute, Harvard, and the University of Minnesota has introduced a novel genome-editing strategy called PERT (Prime-Editing-mediated Readthrough of premature Termination codons). This "gene-agnostic" therapy targets nonsense mutations—genetic "typos" that account for ~25% of all inherited diseases, including Cystic Fibrosis, Hemophilia, and Tay-Sachs.

Single genome-editing strategy can help treat multiple disorders

Nonsense mutations account for about a quarter of all known disease-causing genetic changes; each one halts a different protein at a different point, creating a range of disorders; developing a separate treatment for each is a slow and expensive process; a new study has found a way around this

Manjeera Gowravaram

Genetic disorders often stem from small errors in the DNA sequence with major consequences. Many diseases like cystic fibrosis and Batten disease can be traced to changes disrupting the cell's ability to build a complete, functional protein. One particularly common culprit is the nonsense mutation, where a single incorrect DNA letter inserts a premature stop signal. When the cell encounters it, protein production ends too early, leaving the body without important enzymes, transporters or structural components.

Nonsense mutations account for about a quarter of all known disease-causing genetic changes. Each one halts a different protein at a different point, creating a wide range of disorders that, at present, require separate treatments. Each therapy needs to be designed, tested and approved on its own. This is a slow and expensive process.

A study in *Nature* recently revealed a way around this challenge. Instead of crafting a therapy for every mutation, researchers from the Broad Institute, Harvard University, and the University of Minnesota have developed a method to address many nonsense mutation diseases using a single genome-editing strategy. Their approach, called Prime-Editing-mediated Readthrough of premature Termination codons (PERT), reprogrammes one of the cell's own genes into a tool to override premature stop signals, allowing the cell to ignore the faulty instruction and complete the protein.

"This study offers an intriguing proof-of-concept for a gene-agnostic therapy that could, in principle, benefit many rare diseases caused by nonsense mutations," Debojyoti Chakraborty, senior principal scientist at CSIR-Institute of Genomics and Integrative Biology, New Delhi, and who wasn't involved in the study, said.

Repurposing genes

Cells make proteins by transcribing the DNA into mRNA, written in a sequence of three nucleotides at a time; each set of three is called a codon. Then tRNA acts like a translator: each one recognises a specific codon and transports the matching amino acid, like making a photograph from its negative. Finally, a cellular machine called the ribosome strings these amino acids together, one by one, to make proteins.

The tRNA genes number in the hundreds. Many of them are redundant because they perform overlapping functions, so the loss or alteration of one of them is often harmless.

The researchers used this redundancy to test whether a non-essential tRNA gene could be edited into a suppressor tRNA – a molecule that reads through premature stop signals and inserts an amino acid there instead. Laboratories have used natural suppressor tRNAs for decades but they have been unsuitable for therapies thus far due to concerns about their safety and durability.

Using a precise genome-editing approach called prime editing, the team showed that a human tRNA gene can be rewritten to permanently operate as a suppressor tRNA while also producing tRNA at safe, natural levels. This allowed the edited cell to override premature stop codons and make full-length proteins without disrupting global protein production.

Nonsense mutations account for about a quarter of all known disease-causing genetic changes. GETTY IMAGES

Finding effective candidates

Human cells contain 418 tRNA genes. With the help of prime editing, the researchers found that four tRNAs – called leucine, arginine, tyrosine, and serine – showed promise to suppress a premature stop codon called *TAG*. However, the natural versions of these tRNAs weren't good enough for therapeutic use.

To increase their effectiveness, the researchers engineered thousands of variants of the four tRNA by adjusting their DNA sequences and by making small changes to the tRNA structure itself. These improvements made the tRNAs more stable and better at decoding premature stop signals. This multi-step engineering effort produced several optimised suppressor tRNAs.

The next challenge was to install them efficiently into the genome. However, editing a tRNA gene is difficult because that part of the DNA is often compact and tightly folded, making it harder for genome-editing enzymes to access it.

To overcome this, the researchers turned to the specifics of prime editing. This technique uses a specialised molecule called a prime-editing guide RNA, or pegRNA, to lead the editing machinery to the correct spot on the DNA and hold the template needed to write the new genetic code.

Because the success of this process depends heavily on the precise design of the pegRNA, the team created a library of more than 17,000 different ones and tested various configurations to identify the ones that could successfully access the tightly folded DNA and rewrite the native tRNA gene into its optimised suppressor form. Based on the results of this screen, the team identified a prime-editing enzyme that they named PE6c. It proved especially effective at rewriting the targeted DNA sequence, and became more efficient when paired with a strategy called PE3 – which uses an additional guide RNA to steer the cell's repair machinery to adopt the edited sequence.

> The authors present strong laboratory evidence showing that their engineered tRNA approach can restore protein function in multiple models, which is an important advance
>
> **DEBOJYOTI CHAKRABORTY**
> Senior principal scientist at CSIR-Institute of Genomics and Integrative Biology

In cultured human cells, this combination had 60-80% editing efficiency, which is unusually high for multi-base genomic edits. To compare the standard method for precise gene insertion, called homology-directed repair, is typically 10-20% efficient, or below, in similar contexts.

Safety tests indicated the process didn't accidentally alter unrelated parts of the DNA, didn't disturb the cell's overall activity or normal protein production, and it distinguished between faulty and correct instructions. In particular, it ignored the premature stop signals causing the disease while still respecting the natural stop signals that mark the actual end of a protein.

The researchers called this complete package PERT. To evaluate its therapeutic potential, they tested the method in cell models of Batten disease, Tay-Sachs disease, and Niemann-Pick C1 disease, all caused by premature stop codons.

After installing the engineered suppressor tRNA, enzyme activity in the Batten and Tay-Sachs models rose to 17-70% of their normal levels. In Niemann-Pick C1 models, cells produced measurable amounts of full-length NPC1 protein, which is otherwise absent when there's a nonsense mutation.

Results in mice

To evaluate PERT in a living organism, the team used AAV9 to deliver the prime-editing components into newborn mice. AAV9 is a common gene-therapy vector, a harmless virus repurposed as a microscopic delivery vehicle to ferry genetic cargo into cells. The goal was to use it to convert a natural mouse tRNA gene into a suppressor tRNA *in vivo* and assess its ability to restore protein production.

In the Hurler syndrome mouse model, PERT restored 1.7-7% of normal enzyme activity in the brain, heart, and liver. While modest, these levels are known to meaningfully reduce disease severity. Treated mice also showed better cellular pathology and no signs of toxicity.

"The authors present strong laboratory evidence showing that their engineered tRNA approach can restore protein function in multiple models, which is an important advance," Dr. Chakraborty said. But he also emphasised the practical limitations: "Key challenges remain, particularly around delivery, long-term safety, and performance across different tissues, before this strategy can realistically move toward patients."

Yet these early successes have offered some momentum. The first clinical use of base editing in an individual reported earlier this year involved a *TAG* stop codon. The case showed that established delivery methods like viral vectors can carry gene-editing tools into the necessary tissues. This means PERT has a viable path to the clinic.

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The Science: Understanding the "Stop" Signal

To understand PERT, one must understand how cells build proteins:

Codons: DNA is read in three-letter "words" called codons. Each codon tells the cell which amino acid to add next.

The Error: A nonsense mutation changes a regular codon into a Premature Termination Codon (PTC) or "Stop" signal.

The Result: The ribosome (the cell's protein factory) stops building prematurely, resulting in a stunted, non-functional protein.

The Innovation: PERT & Suppressor tRNAs

The researchers did not try to fix the broken gene itself. Instead, they "reprogrammed" the cell's translation machinery.

A. Repurposing Redundant tRNAs

The human genome has 418 tRNA (transfer RNA) genes. Many are redundant. The team used Prime Editing to rewrite one of these redundant tRNA genes into a "Suppressor tRNA."

B. How it Works

The edited Suppressor tRNA is designed to:

Recognize the faulty stop signal (PTC).

Ignore the "stop" command and insert an amino acid instead.

Allow the ribosome to continue building the protein to its full length.

Key Technologies Involved

Prime Editing: Often called a "search-and-replace" tool, it is more precise than CRISPR-Cas9 because it doesn't break both strands of DNA, reducing the risk of "off-target" mutations.

PE6c & PE3: Advanced versions of prime-editing enzymes and strategies used to increase the efficiency of the edit to 60-80% (vs. 10-20% in older methods).

AAV9 Vectors: Harmless viral vehicles used to deliver the editing machinery into living subjects (mice).

Significance and Advantages

Efficiency: Achieved high protein restoration (17-70% in lab models). Even 1-5% restoration is often enough to alleviate symptoms in many rare diseases.

Safety: The system is "smart"—it ignores the premature stop signals but still respects the natural stop signals at the end of healthy genes.

Cost-Effective: One "platform" (the suppressor tRNA) can treat multiple different diseases, drastically reducing the cost of developing individual therapies.

Challenges and Limitations

While a "proof-of-concept" success, several hurdles remain:

Delivery: Getting the gene-editing tool into the right tissues (e.g., crossing the blood-brain barrier) is difficult.

Long-term Safety: Scientists must ensure the suppressor tRNA doesn't accidentally interfere with normal protein termination over many years.

Tissue Performance: Effectiveness varies across different organs (brain vs. liver).

Conclusion

The PERT strategy marks a transition from personalized medicine to platform-based medicine. By fixing the "translator" (tRNA) rather than the "instruction manual" (DNA), science has found a way to bypass the slow and expensive process of individual drug approval. For India, which has a significant burden of rare genetic disorders, such "gene-agnostic" therapies could eventually provide a more affordable and scalable path to treatment.

UPSC Prelims Exam Practice Question

Ques: Nonsense mutations are characterized by:

(a) Deletion of entire chromosomes

(b) Early termination of protein synthesis

(c) Duplication of genes

(d) Increased protein length

Ans: (b)

UPSC Mains Exam Practice Question

Ques: Explain the mechanism of Prime-Editing-mediated Readthrough of Premature Termination Codons (PERT). How does it differ from conventional CRISPR-based gene editing? **(250 words)**

Page 08 : GS II : Indian Polity

The Union Cabinet's approval of the ₹1 lakh crore Urban Challenge Fund (UCF) on February 13, 2026, marks a pivotal shift in India's urban governance—moving from a grant-based dependency model to a market-linked, reform-driven approach.

While the fund aims to catalyze an investment of ₹4 lakh crore by 2031, it raises critical questions about the "bankability" of Indian cities and their administrative readiness.

Cities of debt

ULBs need more administrative capacity before they can tap the market

The government's updated 'Urban Challenge Fund' has rendered the attention of urban local bodies (ULB) an even more precious resource as they struggle to complete unfinished work under other schemes, including AMRUT, Swachh Bharat Mission Urban 2.0, 'Smart Cities', and Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana, which also suffer from chronic underutilisation. The government has pitched the fund as a move towards "market-linked, reform-driven and outcome-oriented" urban infrastructure, with the Centre covering 25% of project cost if cities raise at least 50% through bonds, loans, and PPPs. This is an attempt to incorporate fiscal discipline in a system that has never properly devolved fiscal powers to ULBs. Many Indian cities cannot credibly borrow without first fixing the political economy of local taxes and transfers, which are shaped by State-level issues and under-investment in municipal capacity. Requiring cities to "earn" their growth risks sidelining weaker ones and shifting the focus from services such as formalising settlements to developing monetisable assets. The ₹5,000 crore guarantee may ease borrowing for smaller cities, but proper accounting and administrative capacity are essential. When a Parliamentary Standing Committee asked about the Fund's eligibility criteria and application process, the Housing and Urban Affairs Ministry said that it was still "under examination", a possible recipe for politically coloured spending.

Across sectors, the Centre has, since 2014, increasingly reduced the share of public support while asking public systems to fill the gap using private finance. The CSIR was among the first casualties and urban development could be the latest. In higher education, the move towards infrastructure loans turned public universities into debt-laden entities that were expected to recover costs by increasing fees, affecting poor students. Studies of the National Health Mission's financial management have documented long delays to move funds through treasuries to implementing agencies, so in practice, hospitals have been asked to maintain services first and receive money later. Audits under the Ujwal DISCOM Assurance Yojana have exposed significant non-adherence and implementation gaps in the power sector. Private capital is not illegitimate and public systems should sometimes raise revenues; the issue is that the Centre increasingly conditions public support on market access instead of ensuring minimum service guarantees first. Thus, while the Fund's instruments are legitimate, it will increase the risk of becoming insubordinate to "bankability" if land records are a mishmash, ULBs routinely violate 'master plans', and renters and low-income households do not receive additional protections.

1. The Urban Challenge Fund (UCF) at a Glance

The UCF is designed to incentivize fiscal discipline by conditioning Central support on the ability of cities to leverage private capital.

Feature	Details
Total Central Assistance	₹1 lakh crore (spread over FY 2025–26 to FY 2030–31).
Financing Ratio	25% Central Grant : 50% Market Finance (Bonds/Loans/PPP) : 25% State/ULB share.
Target Infrastructure	Water/Sanitation, Cities as Growth Hubs, Creative Redevelopment.
Credit Support	₹5,000 crore guarantee for smaller ULBs (<1 lakh pop) and Hilly/NE States.
Operational Window	Operational until 2031; extendable to 2034 for completion.

2. The Core Challenge: Administrative Capacity

The article argues that cities are "cities of debt" because they lack the structural backbone to handle sophisticated market instruments.

Financial Mishmash: Most Urban Local Bodies (ULBs) lack proper double-entry accounting and independent audits. Without transparent financial statements, municipal bonds remain unattractive to investors.

The "Bankability" Trap: The fund prioritizes "monetizable assets." Critics argue this could divert focus from essential but non-profitable services like slum formalization or low-income housing toward revenue-generating high-end infrastructure.

Political Economy: ULBs have limited power to hike local taxes (like property tax) due to State-level political interference. In India, ULBs raise only ~10% of their potential property tax revenue, compared to ~22% in peers like China.

3. Structural Risks: "Bankability" vs. Service Guarantees

The shift toward private finance across public sectors (CSIR, Higher Education, Health) has shown mixed results, often leading to:

Debt Burdens: Just as public universities faced debt when moving to infrastructure loans, ULBs risk becoming insolvent if project returns don't match market interest rates.

Implementation Gaps: As seen in UDAY (power sector) and AMRUT, schemes often suffer from chronic underutilization and long delays in moving funds through state treasuries.

Insubordination to Markets: If a city's land records are faulty or its "Master Plan" is routinely violated, market capital becomes a high-risk gamble rather than a stable growth engine.

4. Path Forward

To make the UCF successful, the "reform-linked" aspect must address the 74th Constitutional Amendment gaps:

Devolution of 3Fs: Real power over Functions, Funds, and Functionaries must move from the State to the City level.

Municipal Capacity Building: Investing in urban planners, financial experts, and digital land-record systems is a prerequisite, not a byproduct.

Credit Enhancement: The ₹5,000 crore guarantee is a start, but states must create "Sinking Funds" to reassure bondholders.

Social Safeguards: Ensuring that the drive for "monetizable assets" does not bypass the urban poor and renters who lack legal protections.

Conclusion

The Urban Challenge Fund is a bold experiment in "fiscal federalism" that demands cities "earn" their growth. However, forcing market-linked discipline on administratively hollow bodies is like asking a runner to finish a marathon before they can walk. Success hinges on whether the government prioritizes institutional strengthening alongside financial engineering.

UPSC Mains Exam Practice Question

Ques: Discuss the concept of "bankability of cities." How can Indian Urban Local Bodies be strengthened to effectively leverage municipal bonds and private finance? **(150 Words)**

Page 10 : GS II : Indian Polity / Prelims Exam

The demand for a separate classification for Denotified Tribes (DNTs) is rooted in a history of state-sanctioned criminalization that began in the 19th century. Today, these communities argue that being subsumed within existing SC, ST, and OBC lists has made them "statistically invisible" and excluded them from targeted welfare.

A separate classification for denotified tribes

Why were Denotified, Nomadic, and Semi-Nomadic Tribes classified as 'criminal' groups in the colonial era? What did the Idate Commission recommend? What was the problem with the SEED scheme rolled out by the Social Justice Ministry? Why do community leaders demand a separate classification for DNTs?

EXPLAINER

Abhinay Lakshman

The story so far:

On January 30, the Union government assured community leaders from Denotified, Nomadic, and Semi-Nomadic Tribes (DNTs) that the Office of the Registrar General and Census Commissioner of India had agreed to enumerate these communities in the upcoming second phase of the Census due in 2027. However, with no clarity on how this enumeration will be conducted, leaders of these communities are organising to push for their demand for a "separate column" for DNTs in the Census form. This demand has found support from academics and scholars, who have noted that the demand for a Census count of DNTs has been reiterated time and again by successive Commissions that have been set up to examine their condition in society.

Who are the DNTs?

The communities referred to as denotified, nomadic, and semi-nomadic tribes were, at one point, classified as "criminal" by colonial administrators, who had concluded that there were certain communities "addicted" to committing crimes. This was codified in the Criminal Tribes Act (CTA), first introduced in 1871, the same year that synchronous Censuses began in India.

The CTA, 1871, was introduced for the "registration, surveillance and control of certain criminal tribes and eunuchs", describing "criminal tribes" as a "tribe, gang, or class of persons" that are "addicted" to committing non-bailable offences. While introducing the legislation, then Member of Law and Order, T.V. Stephens had said that, "the special feature of India is the caste system... Keeping this in mind, the meaning of professional criminal is clear. It means a tribe whose ancestors were criminals from times immemorial, who are themselves destined by the usages of caste to commit crime and whose descendants will be offenders against law..."

It was only in 1952, that the Government of India officially repealed the CTA, which had by that time been amended a couple of times. The repeal of the Act had led to the denotification of communities classified as "criminal" under the CTA, leading to these groups becoming known as the DNTs.

However, in the same year, India saw the introduction of various habitual offender laws throughout the States, which, while doing away with the hereditary definition of people being compelled to commit crimes, classified certain people as "habitual offenders", leading to the continued targeting of these communities – this time not as "criminal" but as "habitual offenders".

What is the history of their enumeration?

While both the CTA and synchronous Censuses in India began in 1871, it was from 1911 onwards that Census reports started discussing "criminal tribes" specifically. Provincial Census reports from 1911 and 1931 provide an insight into the enumeration of these communities, where they were specifically classified as such. The 1931 Census was, however, the last time these communities were accounted for in the Census exercise. Since the repeal of the CTA and the denotification of the communities, specific enumeration of these communities was done away with in subsequent Censuses, given the Republic's conclusions at the time that it was not necessary to enumerate castes (apart from Scheduled Castes (SC) and Scheduled Tribes (ST)) in Censuses.

But the state's effort to account for these communities had begun even before their official denotification, with the establishment of the Ayyangar Commission in 1949. Since 1952, by which time the concept of backward classes apart from SCs and STs had been introduced, several of the denotified communities were accommodated in these lists as "*Vimukt Jatis*". Eventually, the decades after India's Independence saw a majority of the denotified communities being assimilated into the SC, ST, or the Other Backward Classes (OBC) lists.

In 1998, author Mahasweta Devi and scholar G.N. Devy constituted the Denotified, Nomadic, and Semi-Nomadic Tribes-Rights Action Group (DNT-RAG), the work of which had led to a technical advisory group on DNTs, and the eventual formation of the first National Commission for DNTs, headed by B.S. Renke. The Commission submitted its report on recommendations to uplift DNTs in 2008. Following this, another national Commission was set up under the leadership of Bhiku Ramji Idate, which submitted its report in 2017. All Commission reports on the subject of DNTs began with the question of identifying and classifying them, before noting that a full, accurate classification and identification exercise was not possible until a Census count was conducted for these communities.

The latest assessment of the communities in the Idate Commission's report had identified close to 1,200 communities that were DNTs, noting that all of these communities had been assimilated into the existing classifications of SCs, STs, and OBCs. Apart from this, the Commission had identified about 268 other denotified communities that had not been classified at all. A NITI Aayog-commissioned study conducted by the Anthropological Survey of India on these 268 communities had recommended their classifications. But this report has gone into cold storage.

What is their status now?

While in many States, DNTs have been incorporated into backward classes lists, and in SC and ST lists, where certain benefits of policies like reservations may have trickled down to them owing to selective application of sub-classification, State governments have formulated policies specifically targeting them as well. However, community leaders have argued that despite this, the stigma they had been subjected to continued even after their denotification, through the operation of laws like the Habitual Offenders Act. They argue that this led to their continued discrimination, and that they remained largely socially, economically, educationally, and politically backward, except for a few denotified communities that were settled and had used available resources to uplift themselves to a certain extent.

Even though the Idate Commission report had recommended a permanent National Commission for the DNTs, the first Narendra Modi-led government had decided that, since most of these communities had already been included in SC, ST, and OBC lists, a Welfare Board would be sufficient to address their concerns.

The Social Justice Ministry, eventually, also rolled out the SEED scheme for livelihood, education, housing, and health interventions for DNTs. But the government has been able to spend only a fraction of its intended ₹200 crore spending over the last five years. A principal problem with implementing this scheme was that it required an identification of a beneficiary as a DNT, which required them to have a DNT certification that need not be exclusive of the SC, ST, or OBC identities (if they were already included in these lists). The loudest complaint of the community across States has been that they are not being issued DNT certificates despite continuous reminders and letters from the Central government, with government data showing that only select districts in about half a dozen States issue these certificates.

This has only fed the movement of DNTs across many parts of India seeking a separate Constitutional classification for themselves on par with the SC, ST, and OBC categorisations, arguing that this would then lead to uniform issuance of DNT certificates. Further, this movement has also called for sub-classification within the specific DNT list to recognise uneven backwardness of communities within this grouping.

Moreover, community leaders and associations like the All India Denotified Nomadic Tribes Development Council have been framing their struggle for a separate classification as the need to have their specific discrimination and stigmatisation recognised by the State. In doing so, they have argued that the only reason colonial administrators labelled them "criminal" was because of their insistence on resisting foreign aggressors. Many community leaders have also noted that they had been the first line of defence even before colonialism, and had histories of resisting Islamic rulers as well.

What now?

Apart from assurances to community leaders that they will be counted, there has been no indication as to how this enumeration will take place.

DNT associations have made their demand clear that they want a specific column or question in the Census forms to classify people as DNTs. This demand has found support from scholars like Mr. Devy, who have consistently argued for a separate Census for the DNTs.

However, so far, the Union Government's public statements have indicated that it is not considering any proposal for a separate classification for the DNTs.

New group: A demonstration demanding de-notified tribes community certificate in Dindigul, Tamil Nadu, in 2025. G. KARTHIKEYAN

THE GIST

- The communities referred to as denotified, nomadic, and semi-nomadic tribes were, at one point, classified as "criminal" by colonial administrators, who had concluded that there were certain communities "addicted" to committing crimes.
- In 1998, author Mahasweta Devi and scholar G.N. Devy constituted the Denotified, Nomadic, and Semi-Nomadic Tribes-Rights Action Group (DNT-RAG), the work of which had led to a technical advisory group on DNTs, and the eventual formation of the first National Commission for DNTs.
- The Social Justice Ministry, eventually, also rolled out the SEED scheme for livelihood, education, housing, and health interventions for DNTs. But the government has been able to spend only a fraction of its intended ₹200 crore spending over the last five years.

1. Colonial Classification: Why "Criminal"?

In the 1870s, colonial administrators used the Criminal Tribes Act (CTA), 1871, to brand entire communities as "criminal by birth." The reasons were a mix of administrative convenience and deep-seated prejudice:

Administrative Control: Nomadic groups were difficult to monitor and tax. By branding them "criminal," the British could force them into settlements, restrict their movement, and use them as cheap labor for mines and railways.

The Theory of Hereditary Criminality: British officials believed that in India's caste system, profession was hereditary. If a father was a thief, the son was destined to be one. T.V. Stephens, a colonial official, famously stated that these tribes were "destined by the usages of caste to commit crime."

Punishment for Resistance: Many nomadic groups had participated in the 1857 Revolt. Labeling them as "criminal" was a way to suppress further rebellion.

The Idate Commission (2017)

Headed by Bhiku Ramji Idate, this commission was tasked with identifying DNT communities and recommending welfare measures. Key findings and recommendations included:

Permanent Status: It recommended a Permanent National Commission for DNTs with statutory powers (similar to the NCST or NCSC).

Separate Schedule: It suggested that DNTs not currently in any SC/ST/OBC list should be included in the OBC list, but eventually, a separate constitutional classification should be explored.

Caste Census: It emphasized that an accurate count via a caste-based census is the only way to design effective policies, as there is currently no reliable population data.

Atrocities Act: It recommended extending the protection of the SC/ST (Prevention of Atrocities) Act to DNTs to combat ongoing social stigma.

3. The SEED Scheme and Its Problems

The Scheme for Economic Empowerment of DNTs (SEED) was launched in 2022 by the Social Justice Ministry with a budget of ₹200 crore for coaching, health insurance, and housing. However, it has faced significant hurdles:

The Certification Trap: To benefit, an individual needs a DNT Certificate. Since DNT is not a separate constitutional category, most states do not have a standardized process to issue these certificates.

Underutilization of Funds: Due to the lack of documentation, only a tiny fraction of the intended budget has been spent. Many DNTs are already in SC/ST/OBC lists and find it difficult to prove their "DNT identity" separately.

Invisibility in Lists: Because DNTs are spread across various categories, they often lose out on benefits to more politically and socially dominant groups within the SC/ST/OBC buckets.

Why Demand a Separate Classification?

Community leaders and scholars argue that the current system fails them for several reasons:

Historical Specificity: Their backwardness is unique; it stems from criminalization and stigma, not just social hierarchy (like SCs) or geographical isolation (like STs). A separate classification would acknowledge this specific historical wrong.

Uniformity: Currently, a tribe might be an ST in one state, an OBC in another, and unclassified in a third. A separate "DNT Schedule" would provide national uniformity.

Targeted Budgeting: Without a separate category, there is no dedicated "DNT sub-plan" in the budget, leading to the "statistical erasure" mentioned by community leaders.

Sub-classification: Leaders want to recognize the "graded backwardness" within DNTs, distinguishing between settled DNTs and those who are still nomadic.

Conclusion

While the Criminal Tribes Act was repealed in 1952 (hence the term "Denotified"), the Habitual Offenders Act, 1952, effectively continued the surveillance and stigma under a new name. The movement for a "separate column" in the 2027 Census is not just about numbers—it is a struggle for legal identity and dignity, aiming to move these communities from the margins of "criminality" to the center of social justice.

UPSC Prelims Exam Practice Question

Ques: The Scheme for Economic Empowerment of DNTs (SEED) primarily aims to provide:

(a) Land redistribution

(b) Political reservation

(c) Coaching, health insurance and housing support

(d) Exclusive constitutional status

Ans: c)

UPSC Mains Exam Practice Question

Ques: Evaluate the need for a separate constitutional classification for Denotified Tribes. What are the administrative and legal challenges involved? **(150 Words)**

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District cooling (DC) is emerging as a critical urban infrastructure solution for India, which faces a projected eightfold rise in cooling demand by 2038. By shifting from individual, building-level air conditioners to centralized utility-scale systems, India can address the "triple challenge" of energy security, climate change, and rapid urbanization.

CITY

How district cooling can ease India's climate and urban planning troubles

District cooling is a centralised system that supplies air-conditioning to a cluster of buildings. Instead of every building running its own chillers, one large plant makes chilled water and sends it through insulated underground pipes to many buildings

Manish Dubey
Prasad Vaidya

With rising temperatures, longer heatwaves, and a rapidly growing urban economy, cooling in India is rapidly shifting from a lifestyle choice to a basic need, driving up air-conditioner use in homes and workplaces. This surge is now a major part of cities' power demand, in turn raising concerns about blackouts and higher emissions and about keeping urban areas livable. In this context, planners and experts are looking at district cooling as a way to keep people comfortable while using less electricity and emitting less carbon.

A central cooler

District cooling is a centralised system that supplies air conditioning to a cluster of buildings, like a shared air-conditioner for an entire neighbourhood or campus. Instead of every building running its own chillers or rooftop units, one large plant makes chilled water and sends it through insulated underground pipes to many buildings, much like a public utility such as piped natural gas or electricity.

Inside each building, this water passes through heat exchangers, cools the indoor air by absorbing heat, then returns slightly warmer to the central plant, where it's cooled again and sent back into the network. Buildings therefore don't need to install or operate large cooling systems. They simply draw 'cooling as a service' from the network.

Like other utilities, district cooling usually follows a multi-part tariff: a one-time connection charge to join the network, a fixed demand charge based on the maximum cooling capacity, and a consumption charge based on actual cooling energy used.

Efficiency gains

District cooling plants use large, high-efficiency chillers and cooling towers to deliver more cooling from each unit of electricity than individual building systems. They typically supply chilled water at about 6-7°C and receive it back at around 12-14°C, after it has absorbed heat. Many systems use thermal storage so that 20-40% of the cooling can be produced at night, when demand and tariffs are lower.

Together, these choices allow well-run systems to operate roughly twice as efficiently as many stand-alone building chillers, cutting electricity use for cooling by 30-50% and reducing peak demand on the grid by 20-30%. These efficiency gains translate into important environmental benefits. Lower electricity use means greenhouse gas emissions can fall by roughly 15-40% while concentrating equipment in a one unified plant can cut refrigerant volumes in buildings by up to 80%, reducing leak risks. At the street level, fewer small outdoor units spewing hot air outside can also mitigate the urban heat-island effect.Some districts abroad have already reported local temperature drops of 1-2°C where such systems operate.

Water use is often raised as a concern, especially in water-stressed cities. In district cooling systems, the chilled water circulating between the plant and buildings runs in a closed loop and consumes very little water. A district cooling plant of about 10,000 tonnes of capacity typically requires a little over one kilolitre of make-up water during cooling tower operation. Because these systems are built at scale and centrally managed, they can also be designed to use treated sewage or wastewater.

Making sense

All of this connects directly to India's National Cooling Action Plan. Using less power for cooling and shifting part of the load to the night eases pressure on the grid, improving energy security and reducing the risk of outages during heatwaves, when people most need cooling.

Lower emissions and easier use of low/zero global warming potential refrigerants in central plants support India's climate goals and its Kigali commitments to phase down hydrofluorocarbons while reliable, high-quality cooling underpins the growth of services, IT, hospitals and data centres in dense urban areas. By freeing up rooftops and indoor space otherwise taken up by cooling equipment, district cooling can also help cities use urban land better, making it a tool of comfort as much as climate action and smarter urbanisation.

District cooling works best where cooling demand is high, dense, and predictable. This makes it suitable for commercial districts, transit-oriented corridors, airports and aerocities, hospitals, universities, and IT parks. In India, Navi Mumbai, Hyderabad's financial districts, Ahmedabad's GIFT City, and parts of Bengaluru are often cited as strong candidates because they combine new development, dense commercial loads, and planned infrastructure.

Business case

For operators, district cooling is a utility-style business with revenue typically coming from a one-time connection charge, a fixed demand charge, and a variable consumption charge. The model can be financially attractive if there are enough long-term customers and city planning offers certainty about future demand.

For customers, cooling can account for 20-50% of electricity use in many commercial buildings, and by using energy more efficiently and sharing infrastructure, district cooling can cut operating costs by about 20-40% over the life of a project.

Not having to install separate chillers and cooling towers in each building can also save developers 5-10% of project cost and unlock 1-2% extra usable or saleable space. Utility-grade reliability (often above 99.9%) is also a major plus for hospitals and data centres.

The main concern is the fixed demand charge: customers pay for reserved capacity even if the building is partly empty.

If they over-estimate their needs or have inefficient internal systems that waste chilled water, bills can feel high, making good building design and right sizing of contracts crucial.

For electricity utilities, the primary benefit is lower peak load from air-conditioning during hot afternoons. District systems use large, efficient chillers, benefit from diversity where different buildings peak at different times, and often include thermal storage to shift 20-40% of cooling production to the night, helping flatten daytime peaks. This allows utilities to avoid or defer new peak load plants and reduce purchases of expensive peak power.

Economy of scale

To move to a real network of district cooling systems, many players need to work together. Urban authorities should demarcate district cooling zones in master plans, set aside land for plants and pipe corridors, and coordinate underground utilities.

Municipal bodies need to be empowered and strengthened to introduce clear concession rules, service standards, and long-term frameworks so private players know how they will recover investments.

Likewise, state electricity regulators and DISCOMs can consider shifting loads from day to night as a formal demand-side resource, link it to tariff design, and recognise the value of avoided peak capacity. Central agencies can also issue standard technical guidelines and model PPP contracts while developers design new buildings with ready connection points and compatible internal piping.

GIFT City in Gujarat has already demonstrated district cooling. Studies here have suggested full deployment could reduce power demand by around 6,100 MW, save about 7,880 GWh annually, and avoid roughly 6.6 million tonnes of CO2 emissions each year.

With effective coordination and clear governance frameworks, Indian cities can replicate and expand such examples, transforming cooling from a climate vulnerability into a cornerstone of sustainable, resilient urban infrastructure.

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1. How District Cooling Works

A District Cooling System operates like a public utility (such as water or gas). Instead of each building having its own air-conditioning plant, cooling is produced at a central location and distributed.

- Central Cooling Plant: Large, high-efficiency industrial chillers produce chilled water (typically at 6–7°C).
- Distribution Network: Chilled water is circulated through a network of insulated underground pipes to multiple buildings.
- Energy Transfer Station (ETS): Inside each building, a heat exchanger transfers the "coolth" to the building's internal air-handling units. The water, now slightly warmer (12–14°C), returns to the central plant to be re-chilled.

2. Strategic Benefits for India

A. Energy Security and Grid Stability

- Peak Load Shifting: Traditional ACs account for 50–70% of peak electricity demand in Indian cities. DC systems use Thermal Energy Storage (TES)—large tanks of chilled water or ice—to produce cooling at night (when power is cheaper and greener) and distribute it during the hot afternoon.
- Efficiency: DC systems can be 30–50% more efficient than standalone units, potentially reducing India's peak power demand by 22 GW by 2038.

B. Urban Climate and Livability

- Mitigating Urban Heat Island (UHI) Effect: Individual AC units spew hot air directly into the streets, raising local temperatures. Centralized plants reject heat more efficiently, often using treated sewage water or deep-water sources, which can lower street-level temperatures by 1–2°C.
- Refrigerant Management: Centralized systems can use "green" refrigerants with low Global Warming Potential (GWP) and reduce refrigerant leakage by up to 80%.

C. Urban Planning and Economics

Space Optimization: Removing chillers and cooling towers from rooftops can free up 1–2% of usable area, allowing for "green roofs" or solar panels.

Cost Savings: Developers save 5–10% in capital costs by not installing separate systems, while occupants benefit from lower maintenance and high reliability (99.9%+ uptime).

3. Case Study: GIFT City, Gujarat

GIFT City is home to India's first operational district cooling system.

Scale: Planned for 180,000 TR (Tons of Refrigeration) to cool 62 million sq. ft. of built-up area.

Impact: It has successfully reduced peak electrical demand from 240 MW to 135 MW through the use of thermal storage and high-efficiency chillers.

Sustainability: It utilizes treated wastewater for its cooling towers, significantly reducing the burden on freshwater resources.

4. Challenges to Scaling in India

High Upfront Cost: Building underground pipe networks is capital-intensive and requires long-term commitment.

Regulatory Gaps: Unlike electricity or water, cooling is not yet classified as a "public utility" in most Indian states, making it difficult to set tariffs and secure rights-of-way for pipes.

Speculative Demand: Developers are often hesitant to commit to 20-year cooling contracts for buildings that may not be fully occupied for years.

Conclusion

For India, district cooling is no longer a luxury but a "climate necessity." Moving forward, the success of the India Cooling Action Plan (ICAP) will depend on integrating district cooling into the Master Plans of upcoming Smart Cities and transit-oriented corridors (like Metro stations). By treating "cooling as a service," India can keep its citizens comfortable without overloading the planet.

UPSC Prelims Exam Practice Question

Ques: The primary objective of the India Cooling Action Plan (ICAP) is to:

(a) Eliminate fossil fuel-based cooling

(b) Reduce cooling demand and refrigerant emissions

(c) Ban air conditioners in urban areas

(d) Promote nuclear-powered cooling plants

Ans: b)

UPSC Mains Exam Practice Question

Ques: District Cooling Systems can significantly reduce urban peak electricity demand. Examine their potential in the context of India's energy transition. **(150 Words)**

India's federalism is in need of a structural reset

M.K. Stalin

is the Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu

There is a need for balanced federalism in the form of autonomous States, an efficient Union, and accountable governance

The Constitution of India, while federal in structure, was designed with a pronounced centralising bias. Drawing heavily from the Government of India Act, 1935, it concentrated significant authority in New Delhi while assigning a comparatively modest sphere to the States. This architecture was shaped by the circumstances of its birth – the trauma of Partition, the integration of 14 provinces and over 500 princely States, and the pervasive fear that centrifugal forces might threaten national unity. In that climate, centralisation appeared not merely prudent but also indispensable.

Yet, even in those anxious deliberations, there were voices of rare clarity. K. Santhanam cautioned the Constituent Assembly that the Union's strength lies not in the indiscriminate accumulation of functions, but in the disciplined refusal of responsibilities that do not properly belong at the national level. "It is in this positive as well as negative delimitation of powers that a real federal system rests…," he observed.

In that single formulation lay two enduring principles: first, authority is most effective when exercised closest to knowledge and accountability; and second, excessive centralisation breeds fragility by overburdening a single authority with tasks that it cannot efficiently discharge. A government that attempts to supervise everything – from space exploration to rural sanitation – may expand in reach but this inevitably diminishes its effectiveness.

Reinforcement of dominance

History demonstrates that power assumed in the name of necessity rarely retreats when necessity fades. In the decades that followed, centralising tendencies were reinforced by the dominance of a single national party at the Union and State levels, fostering a "high command" culture that attenuated the autonomy of State leadership. Later, the emergence of coalition governments at the Union and the rise of regional parties in States led to a more balanced federal order without endangering unity. One may reasonably surmise that had today's politically mature and linguistically consolidated States existed in 1950, the constitutional design might have evolved along a more decentralised path.

Just as an individual cannot remain perpetually captive to the neuroses of childhood, so too a nation cannot forever labour under the anxieties of its formative years. India's unity is no longer fragile, and the idea of India now rests on firm and enduring foundations. Yet, 76 years later, constitutional practice continues to reflect the reflexes of the late 1940s. Centralisation, once defended as a necessity, has hardened into habit.

Through successive constitutional amendments, expansive Union legislation in Concurrent List subjects, conditional Finance Commission transfers, and centrally sponsored schemes with rigid templates, the balance of power has tilted even further toward the Union. Large ministries exist in New Delhi that duplicate State functions and often attempt to steer State priorities through micromanagement and procedural oversight. In an inversion of democratic hierarchy, the Union Executive is attempting to override plenary State laws in Concurrent List subjects through subordinate legislation.

It is a principle

Such a drift sits uneasily with constitutional doctrine. In *S.R. Bommai vs Union of India* (1994), the Supreme Court of India declared federalism part of the Constitution's Basic Structure and affirmed that States are not mere appendages of the Centre but are supreme within their allotted spheres. Federalism, the Court held, is a principle rooted in India's history and diversity; not a matter of administrative convenience. Despite this judicial affirmation, State autonomy has continued to erode – through legislative expansion, executive overreach, and certain other judicial interpretations that privilege uniform national solutions over contextual diversity.

Underlying this trajectory is a persistent illusion – that the Union becomes stronger by diminishing the States. In truth, the Union and the States are not competitors in a zero-sum contest; they are partners in a shared constitutional enterprise. India's size and heterogeneity render centralised policy design inherently limited. No authority in New Delhi, however enlightened, can tailor policy with equal sensitivity to every linguistic region, agricultural ecology, industrial cluster, or labour market.

Decentralisation addresses this limitation by enabling parallel experimentation. States can design and test policies at manageable scale, contain failures without national disruption, and allow successful innovations to diffuse horizontally or be adopted nationally. Many of India's most effective programmes followed precisely this path. Tamil Nadu's noon meal scheme, Kerala's achievements in public health and literacy, and Maharashtra's employment guarantee initiative all began as State experiments before informing national policy. Over-centralisation suppresses the very diversity of strategies from which innovation and discovery arise.

Centralists often argue that States lack administrative or technical capacity and, therefore, require Union intervention. Yet, such intervention stunts the very capacity it claims to remedy, creating a self-perpetuating cycle of dependence. Parents who do not entrust their children with responsibility, and leaders who refuse to delegate authority, inevitably breed dependence. Governments are no exception.

Capacity arises from responsibility, accountability, and the freedom to make, and correct, mistakes. To suggest that India's States – many comparable in scale to sovereign nations – are inherently incapable and must, therefore, be subjected to intrusive central control is incompatible with national self-respect.

Centralisation might still be defended if it had delivered superior outcomes. But by comparison with decentralised federations, global benchmarks, or India's own aspirations, the record is unpersuasive. The centralised model has struggled to deliver universal access, sustained quality, genuine equity, or global competitiveness. Instead, it has produced regulatory complexity, chronic underfunding as resources are stretched across expanding mandates, blurred accountability, and gradual erosion of State capacity.

Tamil Nadu recognised these dangers at an early stage. In 1967, C.N. Annadurai observed that the Union must indeed be strong enough to maintain the sovereignty and integrity of India. But that did not mean that it should assume control over every subject, such as health or education, which bore no direct nexus to national defence.

His successor, Kalaignar M. Karunanidhi, advanced this philosophy through the maxim, "Autonomy to the States, Federalism at the Centre", and in 1969 established the first independent Committee on Union-State Relations under Justice P.V. Rajamannar. The Committee's 1971 Report became a landmark in India's federal debate. Later national commissions – the Sarkaria (1983-88) and Punchhi (2007-10) – acknowledged the need for rebalancing, though they stopped short of recommending fundamental structural reform.

Time to right-size

India now stands at a constitutional juncture that calls for recalibration rather than complacency. The objective is not to weaken the Union but to right-size it, allowing it to concentrate on genuinely national responsibilities while restoring to States the autonomy essential for effective governance. Such recalibration would not diminish national unity; it would deepen it by aligning authority with responsibility.

In this spirit, the Government of Tamil Nadu constituted a High-Level Committee on Union-State Relations in April 2025 under the chairmanship of Justice Kurian Joseph (a retired Supreme Court judge), with K. Ashok Vardhan Shetty (a retired IAS officer) and Dr. M. Naganathan (former State Planning Commission vice-chairman) as members. Thought of as a non-partisan exercise, the Committee undertook a comprehensive review of contemporary federal challenges.

Part I of its Report, which was submitted on February 16, 2026, addresses issues that range from the role of Governors and language policy to delimitation, elections, education, health, and Goods and Services Tax.

The Government of Tamil Nadu presents this report to the public in the hope that it will stimulate informed debate, restore balance to the Union-State relationship, and contribute to a constitutional settlement in which the Union is strong because it is focused, and the States are strong because they are trusted.

GS Paper II : Indian Polity

UPSC Mains Practice Question: India's centralizing bias, once a post-Partition necessity, now requires recalibration. Critically examine this view in light of recent debates on Union–State relations. **(250 Words)**

Context :

In a significant intervention on Indian federalism, Tamil Nadu Chief Minister M.K. Stalin has called for a "structural reset" of Union-State relations. His arguments coincide with the submission of Part I of the Justice Kurian Joseph Committee Report, which outlines a roadmap for decentralization.

Stalin argues that while India's centralizing bias was a "trauma-informed" necessity in 1947, it has now become a "stunting habit" that hampers innovation and democratic accountability.

1. Key Arguments for a Structural Reset

Stalin highlights several areas where the federal balance has tilted excessively toward New Delhi:

- Subsidiarity vs. Centralization: He invokes the principle of Subsidiarity—the idea that authority is most effective when exercised closest to the people. He argues a government supervising "everything from space exploration to rural sanitation" inevitably loses effectiveness.
- The "States as Laboratories" Model: He points out that India's most successful national policies—like the Noon Meal Scheme (Tamil Nadu) and Public Health (Kerala)—began as state-level experiments. Over-centralization suppresses the diversity needed for such innovations.
- Capacity Cycle: He challenges the "centralist" view that States lack technical capacity, arguing that capacity is built through responsibility. Treating States as "incapable" creates a self-perpetuating cycle of dependence.

2. Contemporary Friction Points

The analysis identifies specific modern mechanisms used to bypass State autonomy:

- Financial Squeeze: Use of cesses and surcharges (which aren't shared with States) and "conditional" transfers from Finance Commissions.
- Concurrent List Encroachment: The Union Executive using subordinate legislation to override plenary State laws (e.g., in Education and Health).
- Executive Overreach: The role of the Governor and the micromanagement of State priorities through rigid Central schemes.

3. The Justice Kurian Joseph Committee (2025–26)

To provide a non-partisan framework for this reset, the Tamil Nadu government formed this high-level committee in April 2025.

Member	Background
Justice Kurian Joseph	Retired Supreme Court Judge (Chairperson)
K. Ashok Vardhan Shetty	Retired IAS Officer
Dr. M. Naganathan	Economist & Former Vice-Chairman, State Planning Commission

Key Focus Areas of Part I (Submitted Feb 2026):

The first part of the report covers 10 chapters, focusing on "Immediate Federal Challenges":

The Role of the Governor: Setting timelines for Bill assent and limiting discretionary powers.

Delimitation (2026): Ensuring "performing states" (who controlled population) aren't penalized with fewer parliamentary seats.

Linguistic Autonomy: Opposing the "Hindi imposition" and promoting regional languages in central administration.

Fiscal Federalism: Reforms to the GST framework and inclusion of cesses in the divisible tax pool.

Education & Health: Restoring the primary role of States in these sectors, particularly concerning NEET and the NEP.

Conclusion: "Right-sizing" the Union

Stalin clarifies that his demand is not for a "weaker Union" but for a "right-sized" one. By devolving power, the Union can focus on truly national mandates (Defense, Foreign Policy, Currency) while States handle regional development. He revives the maxim of his predecessor, M. Karunanidhi: "Autonomy to the States, Federalism at the Centre."