

**The Hindu Important News Articles & Editorial For UPSC
CSE**

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The global fight against child mortality has reached a historic milestone, with under-five deaths falling by more than half since 2000. However, the 2025 UNIGME report warns of a 60% slowdown in the pace of this progress since 2015. Amidst this global deceleration, India emerges as a standout performer, demonstrating a steady and sharp decline in child deaths through targeted public health interventions and a robust "continuum of care" approach.

India showing steady progress in reducing child deaths amid slowing global gains: report

Bindu Shajan Perappadan
 NEW DELHI

An estimated 4.9 million children died before their fifth birthday in 2024 worldwide, including 2.3 million newborns, according to the latest estimates released by a UN report on child mortality. The report, released on Wednesday, said that most of these deaths were preventable with proven, low-cost interventions, and access to quality healthcare.

The report titled "Levels and Trends in Child Mortality" added that under-five deaths globally have fallen by more than half since 2000. However, since 2015, this pace has slowed by more than 60%.

However, India is among the countries demonstrating steady progress in reducing child

mortality through sustained public health efforts. The latest United Nations Inter-Agency Group for Child Mortality Estimation (UNIGME) Report, 2025 states that the status of neonatal mortality rate reduction in India has shown progress.

The Union Health Ministry added that India, over the past two decades, has played a pivotal role in reducing child mortality in the South Asia region.

The Ministry, in its release, said that the Neonatal Mortality Rate (NMR) recorded a decline since 1990. In 1990, India had an NMR of 57 per 1,000 live births, which fell to 17 in 2024.

Also, the Under-5 Mortality Rate (U5MR) witnessed a sharp fall – in 1990, the U5MR stood at 127 per 1,000 live births,



Under-5 deaths dropped from 127 per 1,000 live births in 1990 to 27 in 2024.

while in 2024, it declined to 27.

"This sharp reduction is due to targeted public health interventions, improved institutional delivery systems, and expanded immunisation coverage," the Ministry said.

The UN report found that an estimated 2.1 million children, adolescents,

and youth - in the age group of 5-24 - died in 2024. Infectious diseases and injuries remain leading causes among younger children, while self-harm is the leading cause among girls aged 15 to 19, and road traffic injuries among boys.

"This year's report for the first time estimates deaths directly caused by severe acute malnutrition. It found more than 1,00,000 children aged 1-59 months – or 5% – died from it in 2024. The toll is far greater when indirect effects are considered, as malnutrition weakens children's immunity and increases their risk of dying from common childhood diseases," the report by the UNIGME states.

Mortality data also frequently fail to capture severe acute malnutrition as an underlying cause of

death, suggesting the burden is likely substantially underestimated. Some of the countries with the highest numbers of direct deaths from severe acute malnutrition include Pakistan, Somalia, and Sudan.

Newborn deaths account for nearly half of all under-five deaths. Leading causes of newborn deaths were complications from preterm birth (36%), and complications during labour and delivery (21%).

Beyond the first month, infectious diseases, including malaria, diarrhoea, and pneumonia were major killers. Malaria remained the single largest killer in this age group (17%), with most deaths occurring in endemic areas of sub-Saharan Africa.

In 2024, sub-Saharan Africa accounted for 58% of all under-five deaths.

Key Highlights of the Report

1. Global Status

Total Deaths: An estimated 4.9 million children died before age 5 in 2024.

The Neonatal Burden: Newborns (first 28 days) account for 2.3 million (nearly 47%) of these deaths.

Regional Disparity: Sub-Saharan Africa remains the most vulnerable, accounting for 58% of all under-five deaths.

Leading Causes: Complications from preterm birth (36%) and labor/delivery (21%) dominate neonatal deaths. Beyond the first month, pneumonia, diarrhoea, and malaria are the primary killers.

2. India's Performance: A Comparative Look

India has successfully outpaced global reduction averages in several key indicators:

Indicator	1990 Value	2024 Value	Progress Status
Under-5 Mortality (U5MR)	127	27	Surpassed global reduction rates.
Neonatal Mortality (NMR)	57	17	Sharp decline due to institutional births.
Infant Mortality (IMR)	80+	~25	Historic lows reached in 2023-24.

Static Linkages: India's Policy Framework

The "India model" for reducing child mortality is built on several pillars that are essential for UPSC GS-II (Government Policies):

A. Key Government Initiatives

National Health Mission (NHM): The umbrella scheme focusing on reproductive, maternal, newborn, child, and adolescent health (RMNCH+A).

Universal Immunization Programme (UIP): One of the world's largest, covering 12 vaccine-preventable diseases. Mission Indradhanush specifically targets "zero-dose" and partially vaccinated children.

Janani Suraksha Yojana (JSY) & JSSK: Cash incentives and entitlements to ensure Institutional Delivery, which is the single biggest factor in reducing neonatal deaths.

India Newborn Action Plan (INAP): Launched in 2014 with the specific goal of "Single Digit Neonatal Mortality" and "Single Digit Stillbirth Rate" by 2030.

SAANS Initiative: Specifically aimed at neutralizing childhood pneumonia, a leading post-neonatal killer.

B. The Malnutrition Nexus

The 2025 report highlights Severe Acute Malnutrition (SAM) as a direct cause of 5% of child deaths.

POSHAN Abhiyaan: India's flagship program to improve nutritional outcomes.

NRCs (Nutrition Rehabilitation Centres): Facility-based care for children with SAM and medical complications.

Critical Analysis: Challenges and Way Forward

While the numbers are encouraging, India faces several structural hurdles:

Regional Variation: States like Kerala and Tamil Nadu have already reached SDG targets, while high-burden states (MP, UP, Chhattisgarh) still record IMRs as high as 37 per 1,000 live births.

The "Zero-Dose" Challenge: Reaching children in remote tribal and urban slum areas remains difficult.

Quality of Care: While institutional deliveries have increased, the quality of neonatal intensive care in rural primary health centers (PHCs) needs standardization (e.g., through the LaQshya program).

Adolescent Risks: The report identifies self-harm (girls) and road injuries (boys) as leading causes for the 15–19 age group, signaling a need for mental health and safety-focused policies.

Conclusion

India's progress is a testament to the power of political will and sustained investment in primary healthcare. However, to meet the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 3.2—reducing U5MR to 25 and NMR to 12 by 2030—India must pivot from "access" to "quality." Addressing regional inequities and the underlying burden of malnutrition will be the final frontier in ensuring that no child's survival depends on the luck of their birthplace.

UPSC Prelims Exam Practice Question

Ques: Which of the following best explains the term "continuum of care" in public health?

- A. Integration of preventive and curative services across life stages
- B. Exclusive focus on hospital-based healthcare
- C. Providing free medicines at PHCs
- D. Digital monitoring of health records

Ans: A)

UPSC Mains Exam Practice Question

Ques: "India's success in reducing child mortality is rooted in its continuum of care approach." Discuss the key policy interventions and evaluate the remaining challenges. **(150 Words)**

Amphibians, particularly frogs, serve as critical ecological "bridge" species, linking aquatic and terrestrial ecosystems. Despite their vital role in pest control and the food chain, they are the most threatened vertebrate group globally. In India, home to over 450 species, the narrative is shifting from a lack of data to active conservation through sanctuaries, breeding programs, and public participation.

The Ecological Role of Frogs

Frogs act as a vital energy transformer in nature:

Pest Control: They consume vast quantities of insects, preventing booms in pests that damage crops and forest flora.

Biomass Conversion: By eating insects and being eaten by larger vertebrates (birds, reptiles, mammals), they convert "insect biomass" into "vertebrate biomass."

Bio-indicators: Their permeable skin makes them highly sensitive to environmental changes, acting as an "early warning system" for ecosystem health.

Key Threats to Amphibians

1. Disease: The Fungal Menace

Chytridiomycosis: Caused by the fungi *B. dendrobatidis* and *B. salamandrivorans*.

Impact: It attacks the skin, disrupting respiration and electrolyte balance. While it has caused mass die-offs in the Americas and Australia, Indian species appear to have a higher resilience, though the burden remains substantial.

2. Climate Change & Habitat Loss

Breeding Mismatch: Frogs rely on precise monsoon cues. False starts (early rain followed by dry spells) lead to catastrophic breeding failures.

Habitat Fragmentation: Agriculture and urban expansion destroy the specific micro-habitats (streams, puddles, leaf litter) required for survival.

3. Data Deficiency

India's frogs find allies from citizen science to sanctuaries

India is home to over 450 amphibian species and roughly a quarter of them are categorised as 'threatened' and one-fifth as 'data deficient'; many species are threatened by climate change and habitat loss, but conservation programmes are turning the tide, and citizens can now join the effort

Karthikeyan Vasudevan

World Frog Day on March 20 celebrates the role of frogs, the world's most numerous amphibians. They live at the interface between freshwater and terrestrial ecosystems, eat insects and in turn get eaten by other vertebrates, and are thus crucial in converting insect biomass into vertebrate biomass.

Losing them can mean a boom in insects that prey on plants as well as a depleted food base for many terrestrial vertebrates, which in turn can irreparably damage both freshwater and terrestrial ecosystems. Unfortunately for the earth, since the 1980s, frog and other amphibian populations have been on the decline worldwide. In 2023, the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN)'s Global Amphibian Assessment Report said 27 species have become extinct and continue to decline, making them the most threatened vertebrate group.

The most prominent historical driver of amphibian decline has been chytridiomycosis, a fungal disease caused by *Batrachochytrium dendrobatidis* and *Blastobatrachium salamandrorans* in frogs and salamanders, respectively. This disease affects their skin — an organ that protects them as well as allows respiration and exchange of ions to maintain electrolyte balance. In the last two decades, more than 60% of amphibians globally have been affected by it — although intensive monitoring and conservation efforts have reduced the extinction risk of 63 species, halving the impact.

Today, however, the most important drivers of extinction are habitat loss for 27%.

The Indian scene
India is home to more than 450 amphibian species, and roughly a quarter of them are categorised as 'threatened' and one-fifth as 'data deficient'. The burden of *B. dendrobatidis* and *B. salamandrivorans* fungi in India is substantial but it has not caused mass mortality the way it has for frogs in the Americas and Australia.

B. dendrobatidis and *B. salamandrivorans* both had their roots in Asia and spread worldwide through the trade on frog legs and salamanders as pets. In 1987, after Humayun Abdul All from Bombay Natural History Society published a scientific report highlighting their role in controlling agricultural pests, this trade was banned. However, by then, frog and salamander populations had been significantly affected as *B. dendrobatidis* had spread from Asia to Europe, the Americas, and Australia.

The situation in India itself is rather unique. Until 2015, scientists were unsure of the status of *B. dendrobatidis*; a diagnostic test emerged only in 2023. That said, while scientists in the country have not documented mass die-offs, they also haven't found the status of amphibians to have improved in the last two decades. Since they lack long-term monitoring data for any species, it is difficult to pinpoint the causes.

In fact, India hosts a significant share of the world's 'data deficient' amphibian



A Malabar gliding frog seen in Anbil, Maharaashtra. GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCKPHOTO

species. And of the 157 threatened species in India, only six are protected under the Wildlife Protection Act 1972.

Climate change in India also presents a serious challenge. One well-known consequence is the mismatch between seasons and the natural rhythms of plants and animals. A false cue of an early monsoon followed by a prolonged dry period can result in catastrophic breeding outcomes. At the same time, thanks to the lack of long-term datasets on surface-water availability and amphibian populations in the region, scientists are also unable to predict the effects of climate change on them.

A time to care
The monsoons arrive at India's shores predictably every year and are synonymous with the frog's chorus, when the adult males call out for mates. The females mate with several males and deposit their eggs in the water. The intensity of breeding frenzy wanes rapidly thereafter, when some lizards and first-time breeders might take a shot at breeding. While not all adult amphibians successfully breed every year, the intensity enhances the population's chances of survival.

The breeding activity is focused on producing many tadpoles, which then engage themselves on the luxuriant growth of algae in water bodies and grow quickly. They metamorphose into small frogs and hop on the land. In this

Climate change presents a serious challenge and a well-known consequence is the mismatch between seasons and the natural rhythms of plants and animals. A false cue of an early monsoon followed by a prolonged dry period can result in catastrophic breeding outcomes

prey to animals. Because of their short lifespan, the timing of their complex breeding behaviours with rain, and the availability of surface water in streams and puddles, is critical.

Other important conservation efforts include the creation of the salamander sanctuary in Jorepokli in West Bengal in 1985 (although it does not support a breeding population at present), the University Grants Commission funding the dissection of frogs for educational purposes in 2011, and the ongoing conservation breeding programme for Himalayan salamanders at the Padmaja Naidu Zoo in Darjeeling.

Avenues to participate
There have also been more success stories of late. These include the Mapping Malabar Tree Toad Project, a citizen science project, coordinated by K.V. Gururaja in the Western Ghats, the Amphibian Recovery Project by S. Hariharan of the Wildlife Trust of India in Munger, Kerala, with the Kanam Devan

Hills Plantations Company Pvt. Ltd.; and the Himalayan Salamander Conservation Project led by Barkha Sukla, in which she has involved the locals in protecting habitats. The CSIR Centre for Cellular and Molecular Biology (where the authors are employed) has also been running a long-term programme to monitor stream frogs, in collaboration with the Maharashtra State Forest Department in 'Tilal Conservation Reserve'.

The Padmaja Naidu Himalayan Zoo and the Nehru Zoological Park in Hyderabad also prominently display amphibians in their collections of animals and spread awareness to visitors. There is also a growing number of young professionals implementing conservation programmes.

For a nation that embeds its conservation values in its Constitution, citizens have many avenues to participate. For instance, one can take a few minutes of their time to record their calls or take photographs of both healthy and sick frogs following ethical guidelines and share them on citizen science portals like iNaturalist.

Such efforts will help us move beyond a few charismatic species such as tigers and pandas.

The monsoon will arrive in a few months and we should play our role in amphibian conservation.

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One-fifth of Indian amphibian species are "Data Deficient."

Without long-term monitoring, scientists cannot accurately pinpoint extinction drivers or measure the success of interventions.

The Indian Conservation Landscape

Legislative & Institutional Actions

Wildlife Protection Act (1972): Currently, only six amphibian species are protected under this act, highlighting a policy gap.

Dissection Ban (2011): The UGC banned frog dissection in education to prevent mass harvesting from the wild.

Breeding Centers: The Padmaja Naidu Zoo (Darjeeling) runs a specialized program for the **Himalayan Salamander**.

Citizen Science & Community Projects

Modern conservation in India is moving toward a decentralized, participatory model:

Mapping Malabar Tree Toad: A citizen-led effort to document this Western Ghats endemic.

Munnar Amphibian Recovery Project: A collaboration between conservationists and tea plantation companies.

Tillari Conservation Reserve: Long-term monitoring of stream frogs involving the Maharashtra Forest Department.

Static Linkages for UPSC

Concept	Details
IUCN Status	Amphibians are the most threatened vertebrates; 1/4 of Indian species are 'Threatened'.
Indicator Species	Species whose presence/absence reflects a specific environmental condition.
Zoonotic Trade	The global trade in frog legs and pets (banned in India in 1987) spread the Chytrid fungus.
Art. 51A(g)	Fundamental Duty to protect and improve the natural environment including forests, lakes, rivers, and wildlife.

Conclusion

The conservation of frogs in India is transitioning from "charismatic megafauna" centricity (Tigers/Elephants) to a more holistic ecosystem approach. While climate change and disease remain formidable foes, the rise of citizen science portals (like

iNaturalist) and local habitat protection projects offer a blueprint for success. Protecting the "monsoon chorus" is not just about saving a species; it is about preserving the equilibrium of India's freshwater and terrestrial landscapes.

UPSC Prelims Exam Practice Question

Ques: Which of the following best explains the term "Indicator Species"?

- A. Species that dominate the food chain
- B. Species used to measure biodiversity quantitatively
- C. Species whose presence or absence reflects environmental conditions
- D. Species that migrate seasonally

Ans: (C)

UPSC Mains Exam Practice Question

Ques: "Conservation in India is shifting from charismatic megafauna to ecosystem-based approaches." Discuss with reference to amphibian conservation. **(150 Words)**



Page 08 : GS II : International Relations

The geopolitical landscape of South Asia is currently witnessing a significant shift as the historical "strategic depth" policy of Pakistan in Afghanistan has collapsed into open hostility. The escalation follows Operation Ghazab Lil Haq (Righteous Fury), launched by the Pakistan Air Force (PAF) in February 2026, targeting alleged militant sanctuaries in Afghanistan. The conflict reached a critical point on March 16, 2026, when an airstrike destroyed the Omid Rehabilitation Facility in Kabul, reportedly killing over 400 people. This escalation occurs against the backdrop of a broader transnational war involving the U.S., Israel, and Iran, which has diverted global attention and created a vacuum of regional oversight.

Contextual Background

The Durand Line Dispute: The 2,640-km border, a colonial-era legacy, remains unrecognized by the Taliban administration, leading to frequent "unprovoked" firing and border fencing disputes.

Rise of the TTP: Since 2021, the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) has used Afghan soil as a sanctuary. Major attacks in early 2026, including an Islamabad mosque bombing (killing 32) and strikes in Bajaur, prompted Pakistan's military response.

The "Indian Colony" Accusation: Islamabad has accused the Taliban of turning Afghanistan into an "Indian colony," reflecting its anxiety over New Delhi's growing diplomatic engagement and humanitarian aid to Kabul.

Key Issues and Concerns

Humanitarian Crisis: The targeting of the Omid Rehabilitation Facility—a center for drug addicts—marks a "crime against humanity." Civilian casualties have soared, with UNAMA reporting hundreds of deaths.

Strategic Failure: Pakistan's previous support for the Taliban's 2021 takeover has backfired. The "ideological contagion" of the Taliban has empowered domestic militants (TTP) instead of providing Pakistan with a friendly neighbor.

The Two-Front Dilemma: Pakistan's military is now stretched across its western (Afghanistan) and eastern (India) borders, compounded by internal instability in Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

Global Distraction: The U.S.-Israel-Iran war has allowed regional actors to act with a sense of "impunity." The U.S. statement supporting Pakistan's "right to self-defense" is seen by Kabul as an endorsement of Pakistani aggression.

India's Position and Role

India has taken a stern diplomatic stance:

No end to suffering

India must enlist more support against Pakistan's bombing of Afghanistan

As the U.S.-Israel war against Iran rages, India's western frontiers have flared up, intensified by recent clashes between Pakistan and Afghanistan forces on the Durand Line. On Tuesday, Pakistani airstrikes tragically killed at least 400 Afghans at a drug treatment and rehabilitation centre. Pakistan, which has accused the Taliban administration of harbouring the Tehreek e Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and supporting its terror attacks on Pakistan, denied Afghanistan's accusations, claiming that its strikes had only targeted "military installations". Despite the denial, it is clear from visuals that the Omid Rehabilitation Facility in Kabul was destroyed. In an extremely strong statement, India condemned what it called Pakistan's "cowardly" targeting of a hospital, rejecting its denial as a cover-up for a "massacre", and called for an international inquiry. The Pakistan-Afghanistan conflict, which has been simmering for over a year, escalated in February when the Pakistan Air Force struck Taliban bases in Kabul, Kandahar, and Paktia in what it called Operation Ghazab Lil Haq (Righteous Fury). Tensions have also risen after TTP attacks killed 11 soldiers and a child in Bajaur and 32 people in an Islamabad mosque following a suicide bombing. Pakistan has also been angered by closer India-Afghanistan ties and New Delhi's hosting of Taliban ministers, accusing the Taliban of turning Afghanistan into an "Indian colony" – a turnaround from its support in 2021, for the Taliban's rise to power in Kabul. Apart from its continued tensions and hatred of India, and now Afghanistan, Pakistan possibly benefits from the global focus on the U.S.-Israel war with Iran. The U.S.'s actions here and its statement expressing support for Pakistan's "right to defend itself against Taliban attacks", has also imbued Pakistan's generals with a sense of impunity to strike targets in Afghanistan at will.

New Delhi could be permitted some sense of 'payback' as Islamabad's fight against cross-border terrorism from Afghanistan mirrors India's problems with Pakistan. The constraints on Pakistan's military in a two-front situation with India and Afghanistan, compounded by a transnational war on the third front, may also be the source of some relief for India. With no dialogue with Pakistan, and the limited dialogue with a Taliban regime it deals with but does not formally recognise, India's diplomatic role in the conflict is limited. However, it must enlist other SCO members that have been concerned over the outbreak of an "open war" between Pakistan and Afghanistan, to intervene. The region is already suffering from trade, energy and travel restrictions as a result of the West Asia war, to risk more volatility and loss of lives, particularly in Afghanistan, where the vulnerable, especially women, have suffered the most.

Condemnation: New Delhi called the Kabul hospital strike a "cowardly" act and a "massacre," demanding an international inquiry.

Sovereignty: India emphasizes the need to respect Afghanistan's territorial integrity, moving beyond its traditional "wait and watch" policy to active diplomatic criticism of Pakistan.

Multilateral Engagement: India is pushing for a collective response through the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), urging members like Russia and China to intervene to prevent a full-scale regional war.

Conclusion

The "open war" on the Durand Line is no longer a localized border issue; it is a centrifuge for regional radicalization and volatility. For India, while Pakistan's two-front engagement offers some tactical "payback," the long-term risk of a destabilized Afghanistan—potentially becoming a hub for transnational terror groups like ISKP—is a direct threat to national security. De-escalation through multilateral platforms like the SCO is imperative to prevent the "Fire of Khorasan" from spreading across the Radcliffe Line.

UPSC Prelims Exam Practice Question

Ques: The term "strategic depth", often seen in news, is associated with:

- A. India's maritime doctrine in the Indian Ocean
- B. Pakistan's policy of using Afghanistan for geopolitical leverage
- C. China's Belt and Road Initiative
- D. NATO's expansion strategy

Ans: b)

UPSC Mains Exam Practice Question

Ques: Analyze India's diplomatic response to the Af-Pak conflict. How should India balance strategic opportunity vs regional stability? (150 Words)

Quality education

India is moving past its phase of rapid population expansion into an era of slower growth and structural aging. Projections indicate the population will reach 1,590.1 million by 2051, with an average annual increase of only 0.5%. This shift marks the end of "population explosion" fears but introduces "demographic risks" related to a shrinking workforce and a burgeoning elderly population.

India's future demographic challenges

A new report by the International Institute of Migration and Development and the Population Foundation of India titled 'Unravelling India's Demographic Future: Population Projections for States and Union Territories, 2021-2051', underscores the demographic risks that are beginning to surface nationwide. India's population is projected to increase from 1,355.8 million in 2021 to 1,590.1 million in 2051, with an average annual increase of 0.5%, suggesting a prolonged period of slower population expansion. These figures fall below earlier estimates, strengthening the case that India is unlikely to face the threat of population explosion that once dominated political and academic debates. These projections point to a turning point, where India is poised to move beyond a youth-led, fast-expanding population into an era of a more urban, steadily ageing, and balanced demographic structure.

A problem for schools
The projections point out that the pre-primary school-going population (0-4 years) is expected to dwindle from 113.5 million in 2021 to 8.6 million by the middle of this century. Since most regions in the country are now close to universal primary school enrolments, the demand for new schooling facilities could ease out, especially in the government sector. A sustained drop in fertility could leave the country with an escalating number of 'uneconomic schools' (schools with lesser enrolment rates that cannot justify their economic costs), raising the threat of teachers losing their jobs, a trend that the State of Kerala has seen play out for more than three decades.

Evidence from different parts of the country suggests that declining fertility rates have already started influencing schooling requirements, with classrooms adjusting to smaller cohorts. Data from the Unified District



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The growing elderly population is set to exert increasing pressure on healthcare and social security, thereby putting a strain on the state's finances

Information System for Education and the Ministry of Education highlights a significant reduction in the number of government schools over the last decade, with schools dropping from 11.07 lakh in 2014-15 to 10.18 lakh in 2023-24, amounting to a reduction of close to 90,000 schools across the country. This decline has been accompanied by a sharp increase in private schools; their numbers grew from 2.88 lakh to 3.31 lakh over the same period, an increase of 43,000 schools.

While falling birth rates have led to a reduction in enrolments and closure of government schools, smaller families and improved capacity to afford education have propelled the demand for private schools. Many parents choose private schools in the hope of giving their wards the education they never had in life, nudged by social pressure and a common perception that government schools generally fall short on quality compared to private schools.

Greying population
As the demographic dividend largely depends on the working age population (15-59), a relatively higher proportion of this specific group can lead to faster economic growth, a dynamic evident in the development phases of several countries, including China, Japan, and South Korea. India has one of the world's largest workforces, rising from 833.8 million (65.2%) in 2021 to a projected peak level of 1,009.0 million (65.5%) in 2041, before declining to 998.1 million (62.8%) by 2051. There is an impending concern that the demographic dividend window will close after 2041, highlighting the urgency of leveraging it before its contribution to economic growth starts to diminish. Nevertheless, close to six out of every 10 persons in the country are expected to be part of the workforce by 2051, which is an encouraging sign.

However, India's population is ageing. In 2021, India's elderly

population (60+) stood at 130.5 million or 9.62% of the population. By 2051, this number is projected to touch 325.3 million (20.5%), highlighting that there will be a profound increment in the ageing population. The median age, a measure that splits the population evenly by age, is projected to climb from 28 years in 2021 to 40 by 2051, signalling India's shift towards a more advanced stage of demographic transition. The growing elderly population is set to exert increasing pressure on healthcare and social security, thereby putting a strain on the state's finances.

Policy signals

The declining child population is expected to offer a better teacher-pupil ratio and expand infrastructural facilities in schools. Further, declining birth rates reduce demand for maternity care, allowing the healthcare system to rationalise the use of resources and offer better quality care. Though fertility levels have been falling, continued investments are required for family planning and to prevent unintended pregnancies, as well as reduce infertility and ensure the reproductive rights of women.

India needs to overhaul its education and skill development system to cope with modern-day challenges. It should also equip the younger generation to seize new opportunities before our demographic leverage disappears in the coming decades. The decline in the working-age population can be offset by bringing in more women to formal work (gender dividend) and by expanding access to better-quality employment. With the rapid growth of the elderly population, India's financial and healthcare systems, especially geriatric care, must be redesigned to support the growing needs of elderly citizens. At the same time, this creates a strong potential for a thriving silver economy, and could help in unlocking a second demographic dividend in the future.

2. Core Themes & Projections

A. The Education Crisis: "Uneconomic Schools"

Declining Young Population: The 0-4 age group is projected to plummet from 113.5 million (2021) to just **8.6 million** by 2051.

Infrastructure Redundancy: A reduction of nearly 90,000 government schools has already occurred in the last decade (2014–2024).

The Private Shift: Despite falling birth rates, private school numbers grew by 43,000, driven by increased affordability and perceived quality gaps in government schooling.

B. The Closing Window of Demographic Dividend

The Peak: India's working-age population (15–59) is expected to peak at 1,009 million (65.5%) in 2041.

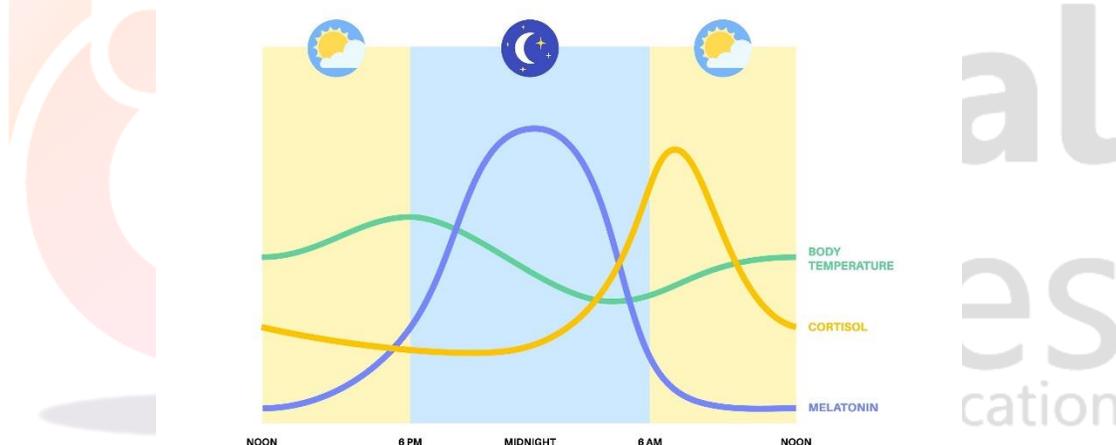
The Decline: Post-2041, the workforce will begin to shrink, reaching 62.8% by 2051.

Urgency: This highlights a narrow 15-year window to maximize economic growth through skill development before the "dividend" disappears.

C. The Greying of India

Elderly Surge: The 60+ population will more than double, rising from 9.6% (130.5m) in 2021 to **20.5% (325.3m)** by 2051.

Median Age: India's median age will rise from 28 to 40 years, signaling a "mature" demographic stage similar to current-day East Asian economies.



3. Policy Implications & Solutions

Gender Dividend: Offsetting the shrinking workforce by increasing Female Labour Force Participation Rate (LFPR).

Silver Economy: Redesigning healthcare for **geriatric care** and creating financial products for the elderly to unlock a "second demographic dividend."

Educational Overhaul: Utilizing the improved teacher-pupil ratio (due to fewer students) to focus on quality and vocational skill-building rather than just physical expansion.

Daily News Analysis

Rationalizing Healthcare: Shifting resources from maternity/pediatric care toward chronic disease management and elderly support.

Related Static Concepts

Concept	Definition/Relevance
Demographic Transition Model (DTM)	India is currently in Stage 3 (Late Expanding) and moving toward Stage 4 (Low Fluctuating/Stabilizing).
Replacement Level Fertility (TFR)	The level of fertility at which a population replaces itself (2.1). Most Indian states have already dropped below this.
Dependency Ratio	The ratio of dependents (0-14 and 65+) to the working-age population (15-64). This ratio will rise sharply after 2041.
Silver Economy	The system of production, distribution, and consumption of goods and services aimed at using the purchasing potential of older people.

Conclusion

India's demographic future is no longer about quantity, but quality and distribution. The transition offers a "peace dividend" through lower maternal and primary education costs, but threatens fiscal stability through rising pension and healthcare demands. The "2041 Peak" serves as a deadline for India to transition from a labor-intensive economy to a knowledge-based one.

UPSC Prelims Exam Practice Question

Ques: Which of the following best defines Replacement Level Fertility (TFR)?

- A. Number of children needed to maximize economic growth
- B. Fertility level at which population exactly replaces itself
- C. Number of children per woman in urban areas
- D. Ratio of working population to dependents

Ans: b)

UPSC Mains Exam Practice Question

Ques: "India is transitioning from a demographic dividend to a demographic burden." Critically examine. (250 Words)

The Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Amendment Bill, 2026, introduced in the Lok Sabha on March 13, 2026, represents a fundamental shift in how the Indian state recognizes gender identity. It seeks to move away from the "self-determination" model established by the Supreme Court toward a "medical-biological" model.

What is new in transgender rights Bill?

How is the government proposing to alter the definition of transgender person? What is the right to self-perceived gender identity? What does the new Bill propose on gender certification and SRS? Why are transgender communities opposing the amendments?

EXPLAINER

Abhinav Lakshman

The story so far:

Twelve years after the Supreme Court recognised the transgender identity and held that "self-determination of gender is an integral part of personal autonomy and self-expression", falling within the realm of personal liberty guaranteed by the Constitution of India, the Union government on March 13 introduced a Bill in the Lok Sabha to take away transgender people's "right to self-perceived gender identity" and redefine a "transgender person" by proposing amendments to the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act, 2019. Transgender community leaders, activists, and people across the country reacted with shock, arguing that the amendments go against the fundamental principles underlying their long struggle for recognition.

What are the changes being brought about?

The key changes being proposed have to do with the definition of a "transgender person" and the expansion of the section on offences against transgender people and punishments for them.

In the amendment Bill, the Centre has called for the omission of sub-section (2) of section 4 of the Act, which says: "A person recognised as transgender under sub-section (1) shall have a right to self-perceived gender identity."

In addition to this, a new definition of "transgender person" is proposed. It describes them as people "having such socio-cultural identities as kinner, hijra, aravani, and jogta, or eunuch", people with intersex variations, and people who have "congenital variations" in "male or female development" in their "primary sexual characteristics, external genitalia, chromosomal patterns, gonadal development, endogenous hormone production or response or such other medical conditions".

The definition also includes any person or child who has been "compelled to assume, adopt, or outwardly present a transgender identity, by mutilation, emasculation, castration, amputation, or any surgical, chemical, or hormonal procedure or otherwise". However, it adds that this definition shall not include "persons with different sexual orientations and self-perceived sexual identities".

Compared to this definition, the Act currently defines transgender person as someone "whose gender does not match with the gender assigned at birth and includes trans men and trans women (whether or not such person has undergone Sex Reassignment Surgery (SRS) or hormone therapy or laser therapy or such other therapy), person with intersex variations, genderqueer and person having such socio-cultural identities as kinner, hijra, aravani and jogta."

Further, a specific definition for "people with intersex variations" has also been proposed to be omitted.

Apart from these, the Bill suggests introducing the terminology for "authority", defining it as "a medical board, headed by a Chief Medical Officer or a Deputy Chief Medical Officer, as may be appointed by the Central government, State government or Union territory Administration".

Another key amendment is on the



Activists and members of the community during a demonstration against the Bill on Wednesday. AP

physical or medical examination, the proposed amendment requires the District Magistrate to "examine the recommendation of the authority", and decide, if deemed necessary or desirable, and after consulting other medical experts, before issuing the certificate.

A new section has also been proposed, which confers the right of transgender people to have their first names changed in birth certificates and other identification documents, with the caveat that the person should be a "transgender person" under the revised definition.

The Bill also mandates that individuals apply for a revised gender certificate after undergoing SRS, as opposed to the current law, which leaves this to the individual.

Additionally, medical institutions performing SRS would be required to furnish details of such procedures to the District Magistrate.

The Bill also significantly expands provisions relating to offences and penalties, introducing graded punishments, including rigorous imprisonment up to life and fines of up to ₹5 lakh, for crimes against transgender persons and children.

However, it remains to be seen what further changes could come through in the form of Rules, if this amendment Bill is passed by Parliament.

How did the amendment Bill come about?

Union Social Justice Minister Virendra Kumar introduced the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Amendment Bill, 2026, in Lok Sabha on March 13. Days earlier, media reports cited that the Union Cabinet had approved amendments to the 2019 Act, though details were not disclosed. It remains unclear how long the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment and the Centre had been preparing these changes.

Transgender activists, including Tamil Nadu-based Grace Baru, who had been central to the drafting of the 2019 Act, told *The Hindu* that the amendments seem to have been brought in without consultation with the community. Several leaders and members have described their initial reaction as one of "shock", calling the changes "sudden".

Interestingly, just hours before the Bill was introduced, the Ministry had posted on X, promoting the 2019 version of the Act and advertising the fact that this Act allowed the right to self-perceived gender identity as a key feature.

A few days back, on March 4, the

recognised a third gender beyond male and female, and the fundamental right of persons to self-determination of gender identity, the court accepted the principle that the concepts of gender and sexuality are different and that gender identity is on a spectrum.

The court said, "Gender identity is one of the most fundamental aspects of life which refers to a person's intrinsic sense of being male, female or transgender or transsexual persons."

The judgment explained that "a person's sex is usually assigned at birth, but a relatively small group of persons may be born with bodies which incorporate both or certain aspects of both male and female physiology. At times, genital anatomy problems may arise in certain persons and their innate perception of themselves is not in conformity with the sex assigned to them at birth and may include pre and post-operative transsexual persons and also persons who do not choose to undergo or do not have access to operation and also includes persons who cannot undergo successful operations."

On sexual orientation, the court defined it as an individual's enduring emotional, romantic, or physical attraction to others.

Importantly, the court held that no person should be forced to undergo medical procedures – such as SRS, sterilisation, or hormone therapy – as a condition for legal recognition of their gender identity.

It concluded that self-determination of gender is integral to personal autonomy, dignity, and freedom under Article 21 of the Constitution. Justice Sika, in his judgment concurring with Justice Radhakrishnan, expanded on this, saying, "If democracy is based on the recognition of the individuality and dignity of man, as a fortiori we have to recognise the right of a human being to choose his sex/gender identity which is integral to his/her personality and is one of the most basic aspects of self-determination, dignity and freedom."

Ms. Banu said, "there is an issue that the government seems to be including only those in the definition of transgender who may have been accommodated in Hindutva's history and is using terms that indicate Hindutva's accommodation of transgender identity like 'hijra, kinner, aravani, etc.' And there seems to be some sort of refusal to use respectful terms that have evolved for transgender people in other parts of the country, like in Tamil Nadu, where there is now a vocabulary of *thirunagai* and *thirunambi*."

Dr. Aqsa Shaikh has raised the issue of transgender people across the country having to now deal with the existential question of whether they continue to remain transgender as per the proposed new definition, while another Delhi-based transwoman spoke of concerns that this might create divides within the community about who has legitimacy to use the transgender identity.

When the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Bill, 2019, was introduced, the Statement of Objects and Reasons in it noted that it flowed from this very judgment of the Supreme Court, adding that one of the principal goals of bringing this Bill was to "confer right

THE GIST

The Amendment Bill proposes removing the "right to self-perceived gender identity" and introducing a new definition of a "transgender person", focusing on socio-cultural identities, intersex variations, and congenital conditions.

It introduces a medical board led certification process, requires scrutiny by the District Magistrate, mandates a revised certificate after SRS, and expands provisions on offences and punishments.

Transgender activists argue the changes contradict the NALSA judgment on self-determination of gender, could exclude sections of the community, and have been brought without consultation.

News Analysis: The 2026 Transgender Rights Amendment Bill

1. The Redefinition of 'Transgender Person'

The Bill proposes a significant narrowing of who qualifies as "transgender."

Current Law (2019): Defines a transgender person as someone whose gender does not match the gender assigned at birth. It explicitly includes trans-men, trans-women, genderqueer individuals, and those with socio-cultural identities like hijra or aravani, regardless of whether they have undergone surgery.

Proposed Amendment (2026): Limits the definition to those with "congenital variations" in primary sexual characteristics, chromosomes, or hormones. It specifically targets those who have faced "mutilation, emasculation, or amputation."

Exclusion: Critically, the new Bill states that this definition shall not include persons with "self-perceived sexual identities" or different sexual orientations.

2. Abolishing the Right to Self-Perceived Gender Identity

The most controversial change is the omission of Section 4(2) of the 2019 Act.

What it was: This section granted every person the right to a "self-perceived gender identity." It meant your internal sense of being male, female, or third gender was the legal basis for your identity.

The Change: By removing this, the government effectively ends the era of self-declaration. Gender identity is no longer an "internal sense" but a "verifiable biological condition."

Gender Certification and SRS (Sex Reassignment Surgery)

The Bill introduces a gatekeeping mechanism through a new "Authority."

Medical Boards: Instead of a simple affidavit to the District Magistrate (DM), a Medical Board (headed by a Chief Medical Officer) must now examine the individual.

DM's Discretion: The DM will only issue a certificate after "examining the recommendation" of this medical authority and consulting experts if deemed "desirable."

Mandatory Revision: If a person undergoes SRS, they are now mandated to apply for a revised certificate. Furthermore, medical institutions must report all SRS procedures to the DM.

Why the Government is Proposing Changes

The government's "Statement of Objects and Reasons" cites three main justifications:

Preventing Misuse: Claiming the 2019 definition was too "vague," making it impossible to identify "genuine oppressed persons."

Biological Basis: Arguing the law was intended only for those facing exclusion due to "biological reasons" for no fault of their own, not for "personal choice" or "gender fluidity."

Legal Compatibility: Stating the self-perception model was "incompatible" with other existing statutory provisions in India.

Why the Community is Opposing the Bill

Activists and community leaders have expressed "shock," citing several points of regression:

Violation of NALSA (2014): The Supreme Court in the NALSA vs. Union of India case held that self-determination of gender is a fundamental right under Article 21 (Right to Life and Liberty). Activists argue this Bill is unconstitutional.

Pathologization: By requiring medical board examinations, the Bill "pathologizes" identity, treating a person's gender as a medical condition to be "proven" rather than a human right.

Erasure of Diversity: Critics argue the Bill uses "Hindutva-centric" terms (Kinner, Hijra) while ignoring diverse regional identities like Thirunagai (Tamil Nadu) and excluding genderqueer or non-binary people who do not have "congenital variations."

Lack of Consultation: Key stakeholders claim the Bill was drafted and introduced without consulting the transgender community.

Related Static Concepts

Concept	Description
NALSA vs. Union of India (2014)	The landmark SC judgment that recognized the "Third Gender" and the right to self-determination of gender identity.
Article 21	Protection of Life and Personal Liberty. The SC linked gender identity to the "dignity" and "privacy" aspects of this Article.
Yogyakarta Principles	International principles on the application of international human rights law in relation to sexual orientation and gender identity.
Section 377	While this dealt with "unnatural offences" (decriminalized in Navtej Singh Johar), the new Bill's exclusion of "sexual orientation" from transgender rights marks a decoupling of gender and sexuality in policy.

Conclusion

The 2026 Amendment Bill marks a pivot toward a biometric and biological verification of identity. While the government frames this as a move to ensure benefits reach "genuine" beneficiaries, the transgender community views it as a rollback of a decade of legal progress. If passed, it is highly likely to face a challenge in the Supreme Court on the grounds that it violates the mandate of the NALSA judgment.

UPSC Mains Exam Practice Question

Ques: "The Transgender Persons Amendment Bill, 2026 marks a shift from rights-based recognition to state-controlled verification." Critically examine. **(150 Words)**

NCERT book ban, a chapter on judicial transparency

Max Boot, former Features Editor of *The Wall Street Journal*, authored the seminal study on the United States judiciary, 'Out of Order: Arrogance, Corruption, and Incompetence on the Bench' (1998). Robert H. Bork, former Solicitor General of the United States, wrote the foreword to it with a striking conclusion – "Our Courts are behaving badly and the public, to the degree it can be brought to understand that, will exert force for reform, a reform that must be structural as well as intellectual and moral."

He observed that the book's subtitle sums up a system in distress. The book underscores the critical role that the media and citizens must play while dealing with the judicial institution in a democracy.

In February this year, the Supreme Court of India, faulting what it felt as selective reference to corruption within the judiciary, directed "a complete blanket ban" on a Class eight social science textbook published by the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT). The three-judge Bench, presided over by the Chief Justice of India, further alluded to "an underlying agenda to undermine the institutional authority and demean the dignity of the judiciary".

The Court subsequently ordered that the persons responsible for preparing the passages should be 'disassociated' from future projects by governments and public universities. The Court thus instantly punished them, without due process or hearing. The prohibition by the Court is problematic as it sends critical signals about the shape of India's democracy today.

What appears to have annoyed the Bench were the passages in the book on judicial delay and corruption in judiciary. As per the news report cited by the Court, the textbook has data on the approximate number of pending cases in Indian courts. It refers to the Bangalore Principles of Judicial Conduct, which prescribe values for judicial life. It also discusses the in-house procedures evolved by the Supreme Court and the constitutional mechanism for the removal of errant judges.

An undermining of freedom

By itself, a book ban is the most egregious form of censorship. Such a move directly impacts the right to freedom of speech under Article 19, a solemn promise in the Constitution. This right could be restricted only by a law made by the



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state on grounds expressly provided under Article 19(2), such as "the sovereignty and integrity of India, the security of the state, friendly relations with foreign states, public order, decency or morality, or in relation to contempt of court, defamation, or incitement to an offence". There is no law made by the state to justify the ban on the book in question. Judicial orders or judgments do not come under the realm of 'law' made by the state, as understood in the context of Article 19 (*Narsh Shridhar Mirajkar vs State of Maharashtra*, 1966).

For an act to amount to contempt of court, there must be material that scandalises the authority of the court or prejudices or interferes with judicial proceedings or the administration of justice, as defined under Section 2(c) of the Contempt of Courts Act, 1971. Whether mere references to corruption in the judiciary and case backlogs meet this high threshold for criminal contempt was a question that, unfortunately, did not form part of the Court's deliberations. What was also not examined was whether the statements were too general in nature to suggest any malicious intent to scandalise the Court.

Further, and importantly, going by the scheme of judicial review, courts must put to constitutional scrutiny the law passed by Parliament often violating fundamental rights. When the courts take on the task of book banning, citizens are left without remedy, as constitutional courts are the last resort to safeguard fundamental rights.

Global efforts

In advanced democracies, the credibility of the court is a matter of concern, primarily for the court itself. Transparency International has conducted a number of surveys that show that there is a prevailing notion about judicial corruption. Judiciaries across the world have made efforts to address this problem. In Kenya, the reforms led by Chief Justice Willy Mutunga, between 2011 and 2013, are an illustrative example. During this period, institutions such as judicial ombudspersons, court users' committees, and performance management committees were established.

By 2013, public trust in Kenya in the judiciary had risen to 61%, compared to 27% in 2009. The reforms continued even thereafter. This happened only by acknowledging the issues and trying to address them, rather than suppressing critical voices.

In India, the courts including the top court have acknowledged the menace of delay and corruption. Judges have repeatedly warned about the 'bad apples' within the system. The very existence of the in-house Procedure indicates the possibility that a minuscule number of judges may breach their oath.

In *K. Veeraswami vs Union Of India And Others* (1991), the Court categorically held that judges of the High Courts and the Supreme Court fall within the definition of "public servant" for the purposes of prosecution under the Prevention of Corruption Act, while also cautioning against the potential for misuse of this provision by the executive. The Court also said: "We consider that the society's demand for honesty in a judge is exacting and absolute. The standards of judicial behaviour, both on and off the Bench, are normally extremely high. For a Judge to deviate from such standards of honesty and impartiality is to betray the trust reposed on him. No excuse or no legal relativity can condone such betrayal. From the standpoint of justice, the size of the bribe or scope of corruption cannot be the scale for measuring a judge's dishonour. A single dishonest judge not only dishonours himself and disgraces his office but jeopardises the integrity of the entire judicial system."

The need for introspection

Therefore, the need to eradicate corruption and delay is also in the best interest of the judiciary. In the interim order directing the book ban, the Court also pointed out that the "book also chooses not to delve into any of the transformative initiatives and measures pioneered by this Court towards overhauling legal aid mechanisms and streamlining the ease of access to justice". Not addressing all counterarguments might render an opinion potentially incomplete. Yet, that is no reason for banning the view expressed. If the exercise of free speech is required to follow a particular form, the right itself becomes illusory. During judicial deliberations, nobody pointed out that the judiciary, like other organs of the state, must be open to dissent and reform.

The first step in fighting systemic problems such as corruption – whether in the executive or the judiciary – is acknowledging it. After all, it is imperative to curb all kinds of corruption and that civil society is educated about the institutional challenges. A court that continuously reforms itself is the bedrock of any democracy.

The top court's ban on an NCERT textbook exposes gaps in judicial accountability and public trust

GS Paper II : Indian Polity

UPSC Mains Exam Practice Question: Discuss whether criticism of the judiciary amounts to contempt of court. Where should the line be drawn? **(250 Words)**

Context :

In a significant development for Indian constitutional law, the Supreme Court in February 2026 ordered a "complete blanket ban" on a Class 8 NCERT textbook. The Court ruled that the passages concerning judicial corruption and case backlogs were "selective" and aimed at "undermining institutional authority." This move has sparked a nationwide debate on the limits of Article 19(1)(a), the definition of criminal contempt, and the judiciary's role in censoring educational content.

The Core Controversy

The Content: The textbook included data on pending cases, referenced the Bangalore Principles of Judicial Conduct, and discussed the constitutional mechanisms for removing errant judges.

The Court's View: The three-judge Bench expressed concern that the book ignored the "transformative initiatives" of the judiciary (such as legal aid reforms) and instead focused on a "selective reference to corruption."

The Punishment: Beyond the ban, the Court ordered that the authors and researchers be "disassociated" from future government projects, a move critics argue bypassed "due process."

Legal and Constitutional Issues

A. Freedom of Speech (Article 19)

Under the Indian Constitution, the state can only restrict speech through a law based on specific grounds in Article 19(2) (e.g., public order, defamation, or contempt of court).

The Gap: Critics argue there is no specific statute authorizing a ban on these grounds; judicial orders are generally not considered "law" in the context of restricting fundamental rights (ref: Naresh Shridhar Mirajkar case).

B. The Threshold of Contempt

For a publication to be "contemptuous," it must "scandalize the court."

General vs. Specific: Legal experts question whether general statements about "systemic delays" or "corruption" meet the high threshold required for criminal contempt, which usually requires malicious intent to obstruct justice.

Global and Domestic Precedents

Global Best Practices: In countries like Kenya (2011–2013), judicial trust was restored not by suppressing criticism, but by acknowledging corruption and creating ombudspersons and performance committees.

Indian Precedents: In *K. Veeraswami vs Union of India* (1991), the SC itself ruled that judges are "public servants" under the Prevention of Corruption Act, famously stating that "a single dishonest judge... jeopardizes the integrity of the entire judicial system."

Impact on "Uneconomic Schools" and Pedagogy

This ban coincides with broader shifts in the NCERT curriculum. Educators worry that removing "difficult" topics like judicial delay prevents students from understanding the real-world challenges of the Indian democratic machinery.

Related Static Concepts

Concept	Definition/Relevance
Article 19(2)	Lists "Reasonable Restrictions" on Free Speech, including "Contempt of Court."
Bangalore Principles	A 2002 international code of judicial ethics focusing on independence, impartiality, integrity, and propriety.
Judicial Review	The power of the judiciary to examine the constitutionality of legislative and executive actions.
In-house Procedure	A self-regulating mechanism evolved by the SC in 1999 to deal with complaints against judges.

Conclusion

The NCERT book ban represents a tension between Institutional Autonomy and Public Accountability. While the judiciary seeks to protect its "dignity" from perceived malice, the move raises questions about the "chilling effect" on academic freedom. As the Bedrock of Democracy, a judiciary that remains open to introspection and dissent is often viewed as more resilient than one that resorts to censorship.

