

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

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The geopolitical landscape of West Asia has undergone a seismic shift following the confirmed death of Iran's Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, in a coordinated U.S.-Israeli military operation (codenamed "Epic Fury") on February 28, 2026.

This "decapitation strike" has triggered a multi-front conflict, involving direct Iranian retaliatory strikes on Israel and Gulf states, and the formalization of a transitional leadership council in Tehran. The event marks the most significant challenge to the Islamic Republic's 47-year theocratic structure and carries profound implications for global energy security and regional alliances.

Iran bombs U.S. allies across West Asia

Iran vows revenge for the killing of Supreme Leader Khamenei; trades strikes with Israel

Trump warns against retaliation; Israel pledges 'non-stop' strikes against Iran's leaders, military

New leadership council begins work, says Iran; next Supreme Leader to be chosen in a few days

Associated Press
Agence France-Presse
TEHRAN/DUBAI

Iran vowed revenge on Sunday after the killing of its Supreme Leader, and traded strikes with Israel as part of a widening war prompted by a U.S. and Israeli bombardment a day earlier.

U.S. President Donald Trump warned that any retaliation would only lead to further escalation. He said he would "be talking" to Iranian leaders but was vague on the timing and noted that much of the country's leadership was dead.

"They want to talk, and I have agreed to talk, so I will be talking to them. They should have done it sooner," he was quoted as saying by *The Atlantic*.

Blasts in Tehran sent a huge plume of smoke into

the sky in an area where there are government buildings. Iranian state television said that it had been targeted by strikes.

"The technical team is assessing the damage," said the broadcaster.

Iranian authorities say more than 200 people have been killed since the start of the U.S. and Israeli strikes that killed Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and other senior leaders.

Earlier, Iran fired missiles at an ever-widening list of targets in Israel and Gulf Arab states in retaliation while Israel pledged "non-stop" strikes against Iran's leaders and military.

In Israel, loud explosions caused by missile impacts or interceptions could be heard in Tel Aviv.

Israel's rescue services said nine people were killed and 28 wounded in a strike that hit a synagogue



A video grab from Israeli military footage shows strikes on what it calls 'headquarters of the Iranian terror regime' in Tehran. AFP

in the central town of Beit Shemesh, bringing the overall death toll in the country to 11. The U.S. military said three service members have been killed and five seriously wounded in the Iran operation.

Iran's President Masoud

Pezeshkian said in a pre-recorded message aired on state television that a new leadership council had begun its work.

Iran's Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi said a new Supreme Leader would be chosen in "one or two

days". Iran has named Ayatollah Alireza Araf, a senior cleric, to its interim leadership council.

The interim council, which will also include the President and the head of the judiciary, will lead the country until the Assembly

of Experts "elects a permanent leader as soon as possible".

Escalating tensions

"You have crossed our red line and must pay the price," Iran's parliamentary Speaker, Mohammad Bagher Qalibaf, said in a televised address on Sunday. "We will deliver such devastating blows that you yourselves will be driven to beg."

Mr. Trump warning against any retaliation said on a social media post, "They better not do that. If they do, we will hit them with a force that has never been seen before!"

He also said that the strikes had sunk nine Iranian naval vessels and partially destroyed Iran's navy headquarters.

As U.S. and Israeli strikes have pounded Iran, the Islamic Republic has

retaliated with missiles and drone attacks on Israel and nearby Arab Gulf countries hosting U.S. forces.

Israel's Defence Minister Israel Katz said on Sunday that Israel will have "a non-stop air train" of strikes against military and leadership targets in Iran.

Shrapnel from Iranian attacks on Abu Dhabi killed two people, state media said, and debris from aerial interceptions caused fires at the city's main port and on the facade of the Burj Al Arab hotel.

Attacks also extended into Oman – Iran's long-time interlocutor with the West that hadn't been drawn into the fray previously.

EDITORIAL
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Key Dimensions of the Conflict

A. Political Succession and Internal Stability

Interim Governance: Under Article 111 of the Iranian Constitution, a Leadership Council comprising President Masoud Pezeshkian, Chief Justice Mohseni Ejei, and a senior jurist (Ayatollah Alireza Araf) has assumed temporary control.

The Succession Crisis: The Assembly of Experts is tasked with electing a new Supreme Leader. However, the reported deaths of other high-ranking officials, including IRGC commanders, create a power vacuum. This may lead to an internal struggle between the "ultraconservative" IRGC elements and the relatively "pragmatic" presidential office.

B. Military Escalation and "Operation Epic Fury"

U.S.-Israel Strategy: The operation shifted from traditional "deterrence" to active "regime change" and "pre-emptive" strikes to dismantle Iran's nuclear and ballistic missile infrastructure.

Iranian Retaliation: Tehran's "Wave" of strikes has expanded beyond Israel to target Gulf Arab states (UAE, Bahrain, Kuwait) hosting U.S. bases. This highlights the vulnerability of the "Abraham Accords" partners and the fragility of regional maritime hubs like Abu Dhabi and Dubai.

C. Global and Diplomatic Impact

The "Trump Doctrine": The U.S. administration's shift toward "Peace Through Strength" involves high-risk military interventions, moving away from its previous "America First" isolationism.

Collapse of Diplomacy: Iranian officials claim the strikes sabotaged a near-final nuclear deal, effectively ending the possibility of a negotiated settlement on the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) for the foreseeable future.

Strategic Implications for India

Area of Concern	Potential Impact
Energy Security	Disruptions in the Strait of Hormuz could cause a surge in crude oil prices, impacting India's CAD (Current Account Deficit).
Diaspora Safety	India has millions of citizens working in the Gulf (UAE, Oman, Qatar) who are now in a potential crossfire zone.
Connectivity	The future of the INSTC (International North-South Transport Corridor) and Chabahar Port is uncertain under a new, potentially more volatile or compromised Iranian regime.
Strategic Balance	India must balance its "Strategic Autonomy" between its growing defense ties with Israel/U.S. and its historical energy and security ties with Iran.

Conclusion

The assassination of Ayatollah Khamenei is a "Black Swan" event that has effectively decapitated the "Axis of Resistance." While the U.S. and Israel view this as a window for democratic transition within Iran, the immediate reality is one of regional anarchy. The transition from a centralized theocracy to a new leadership will be fraught with volatility, potentially leading to a protracted regional war or a hardline military takeover by the IRGC. For the global community, the priority shifts from non-proliferation to containment and humanitarian stabilization.

UPSC Prelims Exam Practice Question

Ques : The Strait of Hormuz is strategically important because:

1. It connects the Persian Gulf with the Arabian Sea.
2. A significant percentage of global crude oil trade passes through it.
3. It lies entirely within the territorial waters of Iran.

Which of the statements given above is/are correct?

- A) 1 and 2 only
- B) 2 only
- C) 1, 2 and 3
- D) 1 only

Ans: a)

UPSC Mains Exam Practice Question

Ques: Assess the implications of a prolonged conflict in the Strait of Hormuz for India's energy security and macroeconomic stability. Suggest mitigation measures. (150 Words)



The recent escalation of conflict in West Asia—triggered by military strikes involving the Israel-U.S. axis and Iran—has caused a massive disruption in the global aviation sector. For India, this has manifested in the cancellation of over 350 flights and the suspension of services to 11 nations. This crisis highlights the vulnerability of international "air corridors" to regional instability and underscores the strategic importance of West Asia as a transit hub for East-West connectivity.

Over 350 flights cancelled by Indian airlines; services to 11 nations halted

Jagriti Chandra
NEW DELHI

Indian airlines cancelled nearly 350 flights on Sunday, with Air India suspending 20 additional long-haul services to European destinations, including London, Zurich, Milan, Frankfurt and Copenhagen.

The cancellations add to the complete suspension of flights by all Indian carriers to 11 countries in West Asia, following air strikes in the region in the wake of the war between Israel-U.S. and Iran and an urgent advisory issued by the Directorate-General of Civil Aviation valid until March 2. Air India on Sunday announced 20 additional flight cancellations across Europe, taking the total number of its long-haul and ultra-long-haul servic-



People cross a street as smoke rises from the site of a reported Iranian strike in Dubai. AFP

es, over and above the Gulf flights, scrapped for the day to 48. This includes 28 earlier cancellations affecting routes to the U.S., Canada and Europe.

The UAE's aviation regulator announced that the state would cover all accommodation and sustenance costs for the strand-

Indians among those injured in Iranian strikes

NEW DELHI

Several Indians were among those who have been injured in the missile and drone attacks by Iran in West Asia, authorities in the UAE and Oman said. Indian missions heightened activities to address concerns of citizens scattered across West Asia. **>> PAGE 5**

ed passengers, ensuring continued provision of essential services, according to *Khaleej Times*.

The Dubai Department of Economy and Tourism issued a formal directive to hotel managers, asking them to allow affected guests to extend their stay.

In Abu Dhabi, authori-

ties issued a parallel order that goes a step further, confirming that the government would bear the accommodation costs for stranded guests, according to local media reports.

The Embassy of India in Muscat, Oman issued a public notice informing that Indian citizens in Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, who hold valid resident cards, were eligible for a visa on arrival, enabling them to enter Oman and seek temporary shelter.

The advisory added that Indian passport holders with a valid visa or residence permit from the U.S., the U.K., Canada, Japan and Schengen countries are also eligible for a visa on arrival, allowing entry into Oman for up to 10 days without a pre-arranged visa.

Key Highlights of the Crisis

Aviation Paralysis: Indian carriers (Air India, IndiGo, etc.) have halted operations to major West Asian hubs. Air India alone cancelled nearly 50 long-haul services, including those to London, Frankfurt, and Zurich, due to the closure of critical airspace.

Regulatory Intervention: The Directorate General of Civil Aviation (DGCA) issued an emergency advisory (valid until March 2, 2026) to avoid high-risk flight information regions (FIRs) over Tehran, Baghdad, and the Persian Gulf.

Diplomatic Relief Measures:

UAE's Support: The UAE government has taken an unprecedented step by covering accommodation and sustenance costs for stranded passengers.

Oman's "Visa on Arrival" Policy: To provide temporary shelter, Oman has eased visa norms for Indian residents of GCC countries and those holding valid visas for major Western powers (U.S., UK, etc.).

Analytical Dimensions

1. Strategic & Geopolitical Implications

The conflict represents a shift from "shadow warfare" to direct military engagement. For India, West Asia is a "Link West" priority.

Airspace Sovereignty vs. Safety: The closure of airspace by Iran, Iraq, and Jordan forces airlines to take longer, more expensive routes (e.g., via Central Asia), affecting the economic viability of the aviation sector.

Energy Security: Since West Asia is India's primary source of crude oil, any disruption in the Strait of Hormuz (complementing the air disruption) could lead to a domestic inflationary spiral.

2. Economic Impact

Operational Costs: Rerouting long-haul flights adds 2–3 hours of flying time, increasing fuel consumption by roughly 20% and elevating "war-risk surcharges" on air freight.

Impact on the Diaspora: With over 8 million Indians residing in the Gulf, the suspension of flights disrupts the flow of remittances and human mobility, which are vital to the Indian economy.

3. Role of International Law & Regulators

ICAO Standards: The crisis tests the Chicago Convention principles regarding the safety of civil aviation during armed conflicts.

Diplomatic Crisis Management: The proactive stance by the Indian Embassy in Muscat and the UAE's hospitality directives serve as case studies in Consular Diplomacy.

Challenges for India

Evacuation Preparedness: If the conflict prolongs, India may need to activate a large-scale evacuation plan (similar to Operation Ganga or Vande Bharat).

Supply Chain Disruptions: Beyond passengers, the "Cargo Crunch" affects time-sensitive exports like pharmaceuticals and electronics.

Conclusion

The West Asia aviation crisis of 2026 is a stark reminder that in a globalized world, regional "hot zones" have immediate domestic repercussions. For India, the challenge lies in balancing its strategic neutrality while ensuring the safety of its citizens and the resilience of its economy. Moving forward, India must advocate for "Protected Air Corridors" under international supervision and diversify its transit routes to mitigate the impact of future geopolitical shocks.

UPSC Mains Exam Practice Question

Ques: How does instability in West Asia challenge India's 'Link West Policy' and its balancing strategy between Israel, Iran, and the Gulf monarchies? **(150 Words)**



In the Union Budget 2026-27, the Government of India unveiled the 'Coconut Promotion Scheme' to revitalize a sector that supports nearly 30 million livelihoods. While the focus remains on boosting productivity, experts and stakeholders argue that the real battleground for the Indian coconut industry has shifted from mere "yield" to "climate and disease resilience."

Why key to coconut cultivation today is sustainability, not productivity

The 'Coconut Promotion Scheme' must not be limited to distributing high-yield seedlings but must prioritise the development and mass multiplication of climate-resilient varieties for farms along the east coast and in peninsular regions, and wilt-tolerant varieties for coconut-growing regions along the west coast

R. Ranjit Kumar

The 2026-27 Union Budget announced a 'Coconut Promotion Scheme' with the primary aim of improving productivity by rejuvenating old, non-productive gardens with high yielding coconut varieties and establishing new plantations along the coast. The farming community has welcomed the announcement.

The Coconut Development Board (CDB) is already implementing a similar scheme, which has helped rejuvenate old gardens and expanded cultivation into non-traditional areas, including in parts of Gujarat, Assam, and other non-peninsular regions – sufficient to partially offset the widespread destruction of coconut palms in Kerala and Tamil Nadu by disease.

Heat and disease
India is the world's largest producer and consumer of coconuts. The domestic prices of coconut and tender coconut remain higher than prevailing international prices even though the productivity per palm in India is already higher than in Sri Lanka, the Philippines, and Indonesia. In places like Anaimalai in Tamil Nadu, Dwarf's Tall hybrid palms regularly produce 250 to 300 tender coconuts per tree.

Today, climate change and disease are greater concerns than productivity. Research by the Central Horticulture Crops Research Institute (CHCRI) has projected that temperatures in regions with plantations may rise by 1.6-2.1°C by 2030 and up to 3.2°C by 2050. Higher temperature without a significant change in the rainfall levels will increase the vapour pressure deficit and intensify drought stress.

Studies have also found that large parts of interior peninsular India, including parts of Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh, along with the south interior region of Tamil Nadu and the east coasts could become less suitable for coconut cultivation in the coming decades as a result.

Expanded scope
The CDB has found that coconut can still be cultivated along the Western Ghats belt in Kerala, coastal Karnataka, and western Tamil Nadu even during the high temperature regimes. However, these regions are beset by root with disease; in Alappuzha and Malappuram districts, the coconut landscape has been completely desiccated.

Therefore, the new 'Coconut Promotion Scheme' must not be limited to distributing high-yield seedlings but must prioritise the development and mass multiplication of climate-resilient varieties for farms along the east coast and in peninsular regions, and wilt-tolerant varieties for the traditional coconut-growing regions along the west coast.

Large tracts of land vested with the



A coconut farm at Povalachi near Pollachi in Coimbatore district, Kerala.

State horticulture departments and universities can be used to establish mother palm gardens. Similarly, the State should consider strengthening research in institutions like the CHCRI and the Tamil Nadu Agricultural University, so that they can identify and breed heat-tolerant, drought resilient, and disease resistant genotypes.

Farmer producer organisations (FPOs), cooperatives, and credible private nurseries should also be enabled to mass produce these resilient seedlings. The aspect of the scheme to enhance productivity entails distributing free or subsidised inputs. Many such schemes often distribute biological inputs, microbial formulations, micro nutrients, etc. but in practice, they are often substandard or poorly stored, reducing the microbial viability.

Instead, the State should consider direct benefit transfers, since farmers must be trusted to decide whether they need irrigation systems, soil amendments, labour for rejuvenation or other improvements.

Failed take-off
The third area that merits a serious rethink is adding value. In many coconut-growing regions today, production barely meets strong domestic demand for culinary purposes. The domestic price of coconut has increased three fold since 2024. Encouraging FPOs to invest in processing units during lean supply periods without also assuring them of marketing channels will only expose them to financial risk. The equipment already supplied under such schemes often lies idle.

The 'Cluster Development Programme' implemented by the National Horticulture Board (NHB) has an outlay of about ₹150

crore for three verticals: production, value addition, and marketing. However, the programme didn't take off because its high investment barriers prevented FPOs and cooperatives from being meaningful participants as implementing agencies. Even after repeated stakeholder consultations and deadline extensions, private firms were not interested in being the implementing agencies.

The CDB is already implementing schemes that provide a 25% capital subsidy to the industry involved in coconut value addition, so there is no reason for them to subscribe to the same variant of the scheme implemented by the NHB, that too with numerous compliance requirements, including inspection and auditing regulations. The subsidy percentage also varies across the verticals, confounding farmers and investors alike.

The banana cluster in southern Tamil Nadu is another example of an enterprise that remains largely on paper.

Smaller but better
The government must evaluate these experiences in good faith, including by adopting fool-proof metrics to measure the success of schemes rather than resorting to official reports and stage-managed interactions with farmers.

Large, centrally designed clusters may not be the answer. Instead, smaller pilot

models anchored in a genuine cooperative spirit with hand-holding – for example, marketing partnerships with experienced FPOs like Amal or TTC – could be tested in locations such as Tiptur (which grows tall copra), Anaimalai (tender coconut), and Pollachi (coconut oil). Smaller but better designed projects can yield more useful lessons as well.

Downscaling the 'Coconut Promotion Scheme' with the 'Cluster Development Programme' could also eventually help fund the multiplication of better coconut saplings.

Real crises
Farmers rarely have the institutional voice that large industries possess. Policies are often drafted based on official briefings rather than ground realities. A simple visit to affected areas like Alappuzha and Pollachi will reveal that root wilt disease is destroying livelihoods and that climate stress is no longer theoretical.

The 'Coconut Promotion Scheme' is an opportunity to study and develop climate resilient and disease-resistant coconut varieties, and to acknowledge that enhancing productivity alone won't secure the future. Climate resilience, wilt resistance, direct trust in farmers, and honest evaluation of past failures must guide implementations.

If these principles are adopted in full spirit, the scheme can protect India's leadership in coconut cultivation for decades. If not, however, it will be yet another well-intentioned allocation that doesn't address the real crises facing coconut cultivators.

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THE GIST

India is the world's largest producer and consumer of coconuts. However, the domestic prices of coconut and tender coconut remain for higher than prevailing international prices

The 2026-27 Union Budget announced a Coconut Promotion Scheme with the primary aim of improving productivity by rejuvenating old, non-productive gardens with high yielding coconut varieties and establishing new plantations along the coast

Today, climate change and disease are greater concerns than productivity for coconut cultivation in the country

Climate resilience, wilt resistance, direct trust in farmers, and honest evaluation of past failures must guide implementations of the scheme

The Coconut Promotion Scheme (2026-27)

The scheme, with an initial allocation of ₹350 crore, aims to modernize the sector through:

Rejuvenation: Replacing senile and non-productive palms with high-yielding varieties.

Expansion: Establishing new plantations in both traditional and non-traditional regions (e.g., Gujarat, Assam).

Competitiveness: India is the world's largest producer, but domestic prices remain high due to supply-chain inefficiencies and disease-induced losses.

The Core Conflict: Productivity vs. Sustainability

While high-yielding hybrids (like Dwarf x Tall) can produce 250–300 nuts per tree, two "silent killers" are threatening the industry's long-term viability:

A. Climate Change and Heat Stress

Research by the CPCRI (Central Plantation Crops Research Institute) suggests that temperatures in plantation regions could rise by up to 3.2°C by 2070.

Impact: High temperatures ($>33^{\circ}\text{C}$) during the flowering phase lead to "button shedding" (loss of young nuts) and poor pollination.

Regional Vulnerability: Interior peninsular India (parts of Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, and interior Tamil Nadu) may become unsuitable for cultivation due to increased vapour pressure deficit and drought.

B. The Root Wilt Crisis

The Root (Wilt) Disease (RWD), caused by phytoplasma, has devastated traditional belts like Alappuzha (Kerala) and Pollachi (Tamil Nadu).

It is a non-fatal but debilitating disease that reduces nut size, oil quality, and overall palm vigor.

The spread is often aggravated by climate stress and sap-sucking insect vectors.

3. Policy Gaps and Proposed Shifts

The current implementation framework often relies on "top-down" clusters or centralized distribution of inputs. Experts suggest a more decentralized, farmer-centric approach:

I. From "High-Yield" to "Climate-Resilient" Seedlings

Instead of generic high-yield seeds, the government should prioritize:

East Coast & Peninsular India: Breeding for heat tolerance and drought resilience.

West Coast: Focus strictly on wilt-tolerant genotypes.

Implementation: Utilize State horticulture land for "Mother Palm Gardens" and empower Farmer Producer Organizations (FPOs) for mass multiplication.

II. Direct Benefit Transfer (DBT) Over Subsidized Inputs

Current schemes often distribute biological inputs (microbial formulations) that are often substandard or poorly stored.

The Fix: Trust farmers with direct cash transfers. This allows them to choose what their specific land needs—be it better irrigation, specific soil amendments, or labor for rejuvenation.

III. Rethinking the "Cluster" Model

The Cluster Development Programme (CDP) by the National Horticulture Board has struggled due to high investment barriers for FPOs.

The Fix: Move away from large, centrally designed clusters. Instead, test smaller pilot models with "hand-holding" partnerships from FMCG giants (e.g., Amul or ITC) for marketing and value addition.

4. Value Addition: Beyond the Raw Nut

The domestic price of coconuts has tripled since 2024. However, value addition (oil, neera, desiccated coconut) remains risky for small farmers.

Market Linkages: Without assured marketing channels, expensive processing equipment provided under government schemes often lies idle.

Regional Specialization: Focus on niche clusters, such as Ball Copra in Tiptur, Tender Coconut in Anaimalai, and Coconut Oil in Pollachi.

Conclusion: A Vision for 2030

For India to maintain its global leadership in the coconut sector, the Coconut Promotion Scheme must evolve. The transition from "productivity-first" to "resilience-first" is no longer a choice but a necessity. By integrating scientific research on disease resistance with direct financial empowerment for farmers and marketing partnerships, India can shield its 10 million coconut farmers from the dual threats of a warming planet and persistent pathogens.



UPSC Prelims Exam Practice Question

Ques: With reference to coconut cultivation in India, consider the following statements:

India is the largest producer of coconut in the world.

Root Wilt Disease in coconut is caused by a fungal pathogen.

High temperatures during flowering can cause “button shedding” in coconut palms.

Which of the statements given above is/are correct?

A) 1 and 3 only

B) 2 only

C) 1, 2 and 3

D) 1 only

Ans: a)

UPSC Mains Exam Practice Question

Ques: Examine the impact of climate change on plantation crops in India with special reference to coconut cultivation. (250 words)



The Supreme Court of India recently took strong exception to certain passages in the Class 8 Social Science textbook. The Bench viewed critical references to judicial delays and corruption not as educational material, but as a "deep-seated conspiracy" to tarnish the integrity of the institution.

Judicial Stance: Declared it would not allow any entity to undermine the judiciary's reputation.

Executive Response: Education Minister Dharmendra Pradhan expressed remorse and promised disciplinary action against officials responsible for the content.

The Critique: Many argue this is an instance of judicial overreach leading to executive arbitrariness, where legitimate academic discussion is stifled under the guise of protecting institutional dignity.

Analysis of the Textbook Content

The textbook aimed to foster "critical awareness" rather than "bland tutorials." However, the court found the phrasing lacked academic rigor.

Content Type	Textbook Description	Judicial/Govt Perception
Judicial Corruption	"People experience corruption at various levels of the judiciary."	Seen as a "social media-style" broadbrush assertion.
Case Pendency	Discussed as a systemic hurdle to justice.	Viewed as an attempt to intimidate or delegitimize.
Political Executive	Included images of cash seized from a candidate's car.	Accepted as part of civic awareness.

The "Selective Outrage" Argument

The central thesis of the critique is that the Judiciary is reacting selectively.

Self-Protection: The Court appears hyper-sensitive when its own integrity is questioned, yet it has remained largely silent on other significant "rewriting" efforts within the same textbooks.

Selective outrage

Judiciary seems quick to take offence only when it sees itself under attack

The Supreme Court Bench that took up the NCERT Class 8 social science textbook case might have overreacted when it saw the critical references to the judiciary as a "deep-seated conspiracy" and declared that it will not allow "anyone on earth" to tarnish the judiciary's integrity. While the government has expressed remorse, Education Minister Dharmendra Pradhan's statement that action will be taken against officials responsible for inserting references to case pendency and "judicial corruption" is an exercise in executive arbitrariness prompted by judicial overreach. In fairness to the Court, it would likely not have taken offence to the passages had these had been in any other book. But textbooks are official, authoritative accounts and the judiciary found the passages ill-motivated. Instances of judicial corruption are real and censoring textbooks is not a corrective measure.

Since the BJP came to power, rewriting school and college textbooks has been a key part of its agenda. Right-wing commentators often find court judgments, such as those giving precedence to the environment as against development, or worse, as against religious practices of Hindus, and therefore not nationalistic or beneficial to the vast majority of the people of India. An adviser to the Prime Minister recently called the judiciary the single biggest obstacle to development. The Court, perhaps, saw the textbook as an attempt to intimidate the judiciary. Some of the sentences were indeed in the form of broad-brushing social media assertions not carefully constructed with rigour. The textbook, for instance, said, "People do experience corruption at various levels of the judiciary" and went on to describe complaints and redress mechanisms. But, such critical references had been used in chapters dealing with the government or the political executive as well. The chapter on elections had a picture of currency notes apparently found in the car of a candidate. The textbook writers probably aimed to spark critical awareness, not offer bland tutorials in civic studies. But as with other textbooks, there are problematic passages. The many history chapters uncritically valorise medieval Hindu kingdoms and portray their struggle to retain power as rightful resistances to Muslim rule. Wars for plunder and territorial expansion have always been part of history, and they did not begin with Muslim invaders. Chapters on Muslim kingdoms briefly refer to Akbar's tolerance and Babur's intellectual curiosity but remain largely negative. The chapter on penury under British rule and Mughal-era wealth is not balanced. The problem is not that the textbook selectively targets the judiciary; it is that the judiciary selectively targets certain portions.

Ideological Shifts: Since 2014, there has been a documented effort to realign textbooks with a specific ideological narrative.

This includes:

Valorization of medieval Hindu kingdoms.

Negative Portrayals of Muslim rule, focusing on conflict rather than syncretic culture.

Omission of historical nuances regarding wars of territorial expansion.

The Paradox: While the Court views a sentence on corruption as a "conspiracy," it has not applied the same level of scrutiny to broader historical distortions that may impact the secular fabric of education.

The Political Backdrop: Judiciary vs. Development

The tension is exacerbated by the current political climate where high-ranking officials and advisors to the PM have labeled the judiciary an "obstacle to development" (due to environmental or stay orders).

Key Insight: The Court likely viewed the NCERT passages not in isolation, but as part of a larger executive attempt to "discipline" or "intimidate" the legal branch by poisoning the minds of future citizens against it.

Conclusion: Censorship is Not a Corrective

Censoring textbooks to remove mentions of corruption or pendency does not erase those realities; it only diminishes the credibility of the education system. A healthy democracy requires institutions that are robust enough to withstand criticism and an education system that encourages students to ask difficult questions.

UPSC Prelims Exam Practice Question

Ques: With reference to the doctrine of Separation of Powers in India, consider the following statements:

1. The Constitution of India explicitly provides for complete separation between the executive, legislature and judiciary.
2. Judicial review is a part of the basic structure of the Constitution.
3. The judiciary can strike down executive actions if they violate fundamental rights.

Which of the statements given above is/are correct?

- A) 2 and 3 only
- B) 1 and 2 only
- C) 1 and 3 only
- D) 1, 2 and 3

Ans: A)

UPSC Mains Exam Practice Question

Ques: Examine the constitutional balance between judicial accountability and judicial independence in India. **(250 Words)**



India is currently in a "once-in-a-lifetime" window where its working-age population outnumbers dependents. However, this demographic dividend is set to end by 2040. While global leaders like China and Germany enroll nearly 50% of secondary students in vocational tracks, India languishes at 1.3%. The "Skill India" mission, despite its high-profile launch, faces "herculean" structural challenges and what experts call "Galgotian" blunders—a reference to administrative incompetence and lack of academic rigor.

Skill India as herculean challenges, Galgotian blunders

A once-in-a-lifetime opportunity requires a herculean effort. India's demographic dividend, that ends by 2040, is one such opportunity. Several European Union countries and China have successfully financed skill systems. In these countries, approximately 50% of secondary-level students are enrolled in vocational education streams. In India that share is 1.3%, reflective of an educational system that neglected school education till 1990, and vocational education till 2006.

However, in 2020, India's National Education Policy (NEP) said: "By 2025, 50% learners will be exposed to vocational education." "Exposed" still reveals an attitudinal problem among policy designers. Vocational education in most countries is around 2% of the education budget. For China and Germany it is 11%. India has no data that is publicly available due to fragmented training schemes in Ministries. India's strategy rests on Budget announcements which falter year-on-year. A scheme that was celebrated last year is forgotten the next year. Consider the internship scheme announced in Budget FY 2026: only 5% of the allocated funds were spent and its design proved ineffective.

CAG reports, issues raised

The herculean task of making India "the skill capital of the world" is inconsistent with "Galgotian" blunders. Issues of financing skills are crucial. The Comptroller and Auditor General of India (CAG) in 2025 audited the flagship Skill India scheme, Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Yojana (PMKVY)-2015-22. Ten years ago, it had similarly looked at compliance and oversight issues of skill institutions.

Both reports raise issues of financial impropriety. In 2015, the CAG dealt with financial reporting delays and unclear accountability of disbursed funds. In 2025, the report mentions that 94.5% of bank accounts were invalid and approximately 41% of trainees in short-term training achieved placement.

How have we evolved from 2015 through 2025? When the short-term skill ecosystem was started, the vision was to create a vibrant public-private market for skills. Over the past decade, however, the focus on quantity through short-term training

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has yielded limited results. Since the CAG's direct concern is fund use, we list three ideas for it.

Imagine a scenario where no operational funding was provided by the PMKVY. What if the amount upward of ₹10,000 crore spent annually was extended as skill loans to students? This would have led to more choices for students, improved the quality of institutions as they competed for enrolment, and promoted demand-driven skill development, benefiting students as they are from economically weaker backgrounds. A model similar to that for educational loans could have been followed. The worst case would be non-performing assets, which we have ways to handle. It is not too late. We can do so now and use skill loans better. There is already a policy framework in place. Priority needs to shift: part of PMKVY funding could be through skill loans. Of course, design work is needed to roll this out, but it is doable. It needs a product-market that has banks and non-banking financial companies on board. It is worth questioning why the National Skill Development Corporation began as a non-banking finance company, later became a funder for training partners, and now primarily implements government schemes.

Using skill vouchers

Use of skill vouchers is another trainee-based skills financing idea, more so for distribution of public funds. It allows flexibility for policymakers and a choice for students. There is no better way to implement the NEP priority of lifelong learning.

Since vouchers follow the trainee rather than the institution, it incentivises delivery and outcomes. It creates a competitive market. Vouchers can also be good tools to provide upskilling for Artificial Intelligence (AI)-led transition, providing targeted skills in AI, digital and green skills. They can be used for needed segments such as enhancing women workforce participation or provide foreign language learning for global labour markets.

Purchasing power in the hands of learners will drive quality and accountability and be a driver of a demand-based skills market. Singapore and Croatia have implemented them well. It will also

encourage school leavers to pursue vocational courses instead of defaulting to degrees, which often inflate tertiary enrolment.

The idea of skill levies

Skill levies on organised industries, used in more than 90-plus countries, is another fundamental idea. A well-designed skills levy can sustainably finance skills. In 2017, we had designed and recommended a Reimbursable Industry Contribution (RIC) to the Government of India for the Twelfth Five Year plan. At that time there were 62-plus countries doing it; now, 90-plus have adopted it, for good reasons.

Across Latin America, in Germany, Singapore, South Africa and South Korea, such models have been used to ensure industry ownership of skills and to create stable funding insulated from political and budgetary cycles. Linking contributions to firm size and payroll and then returning them to the industry when training has happened makes employers in-charge of skill development.

Today, skills programmes are supply-driven and government-financed.

Employer engagement in today's system is inadequate. We can move from an employer-engaged to an employer-owned system through the RIC reform. It is tested world-wide and there is a small demographic window for this policy choice.

Finally, real time skills demand must feed into policy. Understanding this trajectory needs transparent rules. A mandate for online job boards to share data in a form that safeguards their business interest but also provides aggregate understanding to the government is needed. Data mining and AI modelling can help. Periodic/one-off skill gap studies (as has been the norm) cannot achieve this goal. The data shared can be made public in the National Career Service (NCS) portal. India's goal to construct a labour market information system has not materialised. This may be the only workable way for skills planning.

Enough strategic errors have been made. By 2040, the demographic dividend will end. It is time for a course correction – we know we can. We hope, we will.

Reforming skill financing is crucial to harness India's demographic dividend

The "Audit of Failures": CAG Findings (2015-2025)

The Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) reports on the Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Yojana (PMKVY) reveal a decade of stagnant progress:

Financial Impropriety: In 2025, the CAG found that 94.5% of bank accounts linked to the scheme were invalid.

Placement Crisis: Only 41% of trainees in short-term programs actually secured jobs.

Budgetary Faltering: The 2026 Budget's internship scheme saw only 5% fund utilization, highlighting a massive gap between policy announcement and ground execution.

Structural Shifts: Moving from Supply to Demand

The current system is "supply-driven" (government decides what to teach). To succeed, it must become "demand-driven" (industry decides what it needs). Three radical financial reforms are proposed:

A. Skill Loans vs. Grants

Instead of giving ₹10,000 crore annually to training centers (which often leads to "ghost" centers), the funds should be converted into Skill Loans for students.

Benefit: Students become "customers" who choose high-quality institutions, forcing poorly performing centers to shut down.

B. The Skill Voucher System

Vouchers act as a "currency" for education that follows the trainee, not the institute.

Targeting: Vouchers can be specifically earmarked for AI-led transitions, Green Skills, or Foreign Languages for global markets.

Models: Successful implementations in Singapore and Croatia show that vouchers drive institutional accountability.

C. Reimbursable Industry Contribution (RIC)

Adopted by over 90 countries, this involves a "skill levy" on organized industries.

Mechanism: Companies contribute a small percentage of their payroll to a fund. They can "claim back" this money only if they provide certified training to their employees.

Result: It shifts the system from being "employer-engaged" to "employer-owned."

The Data Deficit: Labour Market Information System (LMIS)

India lacks a real-time understanding of which skills are actually in demand.

The Problem: Periodic "Skill Gap Studies" are outdated by the time they are published.

The Solution: Mandate online job boards to share aggregated, anonymized data. Using AI modeling on this data can create a "Live" National Career Service (NCS) portal to guide policy in real-time.

Conclusion: A Final Call for Course Correction

The transition from a "degree-default" culture to a "skill-first" economy is hampered by fragmented schemes and lack of transparency. With only 14 years left until the demographic window begins to close, India cannot afford more "strategic errors." Shifting the purchasing power to the learner (via loans/vouchers) and the responsibility to the employer (via RIC) is the only way to transform India from a country with "labor surplus" to the "skill capital of the world."

UPSC Mains Exam Practice Question

Ques: Critically evaluate the performance of the Skill India Mission in light of audit findings and structural bottlenecks. (150 Words)



Sixteenth Finance Commission — misses and concerns

The Sixteenth Finance Commission had significant flexibility in determining its approach and methodology, as its terms of reference followed directly from constitutional provisions, unlike earlier commissions that operated under detailed central directives. This Commission, as before, addressed the two key dimensions of fiscal transfers – namely the vertical and the horizontal.

The vertical dimension

The Commission took note of the increase in the share of States in the divisible pool of central taxes from 32% to 42% by the Fourteenth Finance Commission. The Fourteenth Finance Commission had justified it on account of a discontinuation of State plan grants, amounting to only 3% of the divisible pool of central taxes at the time of transition. The subsequent reduction to 41% was due to the change in the status of Jammu and Kashmir. The Sixteenth Finance Commission noted the Centre's concern about the reduction in its fiscal space. The Centre had responded to this substantial increase in the share of states by the Fourteenth Finance Commission by, first, increasing the non-shareable cesses and surcharges, second, reducing its share in the financing of centrally sponsored schemes and third, not accepting sector-specific/State-specific grants recommended by the Fifteenth Finance Commission. In the end, however, the Sixteenth Finance Commission retained the States' share at 41%, imparting to it a kind of semi-permanence.

The Sixteenth Finance Commission makes no recommendations regarding the non-shareable cesses and surcharges which, by their very nature, should be limited and levied for finite periods. These should be earmarked for specific purposes and not merged with the Centre's general funds. Instead, Sixteenth Finance Commission recommended a 'grand bargain' (paragraph 7.67) between the Centre and States saying that 'States would agree to a smaller share in the resulting larger divisible pool, with no loss of revenues to either side' provided the Centre agreed to merge a large part of the cesses and surcharges in the regular taxes.

The Commission did not take into account its constitutional duty as enumerated in Articles 270 and 280 for objectively determining the share of States in the shareable pool of central taxes while making its observations on the cesses and surcharges. It would have been better had the



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Evaluating the federal implications of the Sixteenth Finance Commission recommendations

Commission at least pointed out to the Centre that the steep increase in cesses and surcharges was not warranted and not in the spirit of the Constitution. Further, the Commission chose to discontinue the revenue deficit grants and did not recommend any State and sector specific grants. This became a route to lower the share of States in the Centre's revenue receipts as compared to the Fifteenth Finance Commission.

The average effective transfers covering tax devolution and Finance Commission grants to the States as a percentage of the Centre's pre-transfer gross revenue receipts were 27.0%, 27.2% and 28.3%, respectively during the Finance Commission periods (11, 12, 13). This share increased sharply to 35.6% during the Fourteenth Finance Commission period. In the Fifteenth Finance Commission period, covering the years 2020-21 to 2024-25, this share came down marginally to 34.4%, still considerably higher than those of the Eleventh and Thirteenth Finance Commission periods. This steep increase in resources transferred as a proportion of gross revenue receipts of the Centre should not be overlooked.

Looking at the first year of the Sixteenth Finance Commission's award period, 2026-27, this ratio is 32.7% as per the Centre's budget estimates. The Sixteenth Finance Commission's projections for later years may prove to be overestimates since the 2026-27 nominal GDP growth, assumed at 11%, is higher than the Budget estimate of 10%. The Commission also did not factor in the revenue reducing effect of the major Goods and Services Tax (GST) reforms undertaken in September 2025, while the Commission was still in session.

Horizontal dimension

The Sixteenth Finance Commission introduced a new criterion of contribution to reflect an efficiency consideration. But it measured it through the share of a State's Gross State Domestic Product (GSDP) in an all-State GSDP.

There is a need, however, to differentiate the efficiency of the production system from that of the fiscal system. In the production system, the inter-State distribution of GSDP depends on many factors which includes the inter-State movement of financial and human resources. It largely depends on market forces which tend to lead to a concentration of productive capital stock in a limited number of States. Human resources also move from less developed to the more developed States.

This change involved using GSDP in two opposite ways. In the income distance formula, the lower the per-capita GSDP of a State, the higher the per-capita share of that State. In the contribution criterion, the higher the per-capita GSDP of a State, the higher is its share. However, the Commission did not finally use the GSDP. Instead, it used its square root. This was meant to reduce the excessive effects of using GSDP to reflect contribution on some States.

In the devolution formula, the weights of some of the other criteria have also been changed. These are purely judgemental. Dropping the tax effort/fiscal discipline criterion, which was a fiscal efficiency criterion is not consistent with the Commission's own narrative.

Losses and gains

Consequently, the main States that have lost on account of the Sixteenth Finance Commission devolution scheme as compared to the Fifteenth Finance Commission are Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, West Bengal, Bihar, Odisha, Chhattisgarh and Rajasthan. The other group of losing States are Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, Manipur, Nagaland, Tripura, Sikkim, and Goa (the north-east or extremely small States). The gain by other richer States has not been uniform.

Ideally, the losses of some States could have been mitigated through normatively determined revenue gap grants. Devolution is not enough to capture the finer details of cost and need differentials of India's highly differentiated States. Further, if a Finance Commission changes the tax devolution formulae, then the consequential loss of some of the States could be neutralised by the revenue gap grants.

In fact, Article 275 provides an important mode of fiscal transfers for the consideration of State-specific 'needs'. It should not be confused with revenue deficits. Needs can be estimated in order to equalise standards of critical services such as health and education.

This would have facilitated accommodating the performance argument of the richer States while still promoting the equalisation objective. Even if there are difficulties in estimating revenue gap grants since it involves normative assessment of States' needs and resources, the Sixteenth Finance Commission need not have taken the shortcut of dropping these altogether. While ad hoc State-specific grants are not appropriate, equalisation grants still have a place.

The views expressed are personal

GS Paper II : Indian Polity

UPSC Mains Practice Question: Critically analyze whether performance-based criteria such as 'Contribution to GDP' are compatible with the constitutional goal of fiscal equalization. (150 Words)

Context :

The 16th FC retained the States' share in the divisible pool at 41%, maintaining continuity with the 15th FC. However, this figure is often described as a "mirage" due to the rising share of Cesses and Surcharges.

The Problem: Cesses and surcharges are not shared with States. They now account for nearly 20% of the Centre's Gross Tax Revenue (GTR). This shrinks the actual "divisible pool," leaving States with an effective transfer of only about 32–33% of the Centre's total receipts.

The "Grand Bargain" Critique: The 16th FC suggested that States might accept a lower percentage if the Centre merged cesses into regular taxes. Dr. Rangarajan argues this was a "short-cut" and the Commission should have instead taken a firm constitutional stand against the indefinite use of non-shareable cesses.

2. Horizontal Devolution: Equity vs. Efficiency

The most significant shift in the 16th FC is the introduction of a new "Efficiency" criterion, which has altered how funds are distributed among States.

The New Devolution Formula (2026–31)

Criterion	Weight (15th FC)	Weight (16th FC)	Significance
Income Distance	45%	42.5%	Equity: Aids poorer States (distance from the richest State).
Population (2011)	15%	17.5%	Need: Based on the 2011 Census.
Area	15%	10%	Cost of service delivery in larger geographies.
Forest & Ecology	10%	10%	Sustainability and environmental services.
Demographic Performance	12.5%	10%	Reward for population control.
Contribution to GDP	—	10%	New: Efficiency reward for industrialized States.
Tax & Fiscal Effort	2.5%	Dropped	Replaced by the broader GDP contribution.

The "Square Root" Moderation

To prevent rich States from taking too large a slice of the pie via the new Contribution to GDP criterion, the Commission used the square root of GSDP rather than the absolute GSDP.

Goal: This acts as a dampener, ensuring that while "growth engine" States are rewarded, the redistribution toward poorer States isn't completely destabilized.

Major Concerns: The "Misses"

Dr. Rangarajan identifies three primary failures that could hurt the fiscal health of specific States:

Discontinuation of Revenue Deficit Grants (RDG): Unlike previous Commissions, the 16th FC has stopped providing RDGs. This hit "losing" States like West Bengal, Kerala, and Punjab, which have high committed expenditures.

Daily News Analysis

No State/Sector-Specific Grants: The Commission moved away from targeted grants (e.g., for health or education), potentially reducing the ability to equalize standards of critical public services across the country.

Overestimation Risks: The 16th FC assumed an 11% nominal GDP growth, which may be optimistic. If growth slows, the absolute amount of money flowing to States will drop significantly.

Conclusion: Winners and Losers

The 16th FC's formula marks a move toward "Performance-Based Federalism." * **Winners:** Industrialized Southern and Western States (Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, Maharashtra) gained marginally due to the new GDP contribution weight.

Losers: Poorer Northern and Eastern States (UP, Bihar, MP) and smaller North-Eastern States saw their shares dip due to the reduced weight of "Income Distance" and the removal of deficit grants.

The ultimate challenge remains: how to reward economic efficiency without abandoning the constitutional goal of **fiscal equalization**—ensuring a child in Bihar has the same access to services as a child in Tamil Nadu.

