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EDITORIAL ANALYSIS



AUGUST 6



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COMPREHENSIVE
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**UNIQUE AND BEST IN
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- 1. Indian cities need to be rescued before they crumble around us (MINT)**
- 2. Nailing Pakistan's lies on Indus water sharing (HINDUSTAN TIMES)**
- 3. Ten years of disability rights, but with uneven impact (HINDUSTAN TIMES)**
- 4. India's GenZ opportunity (BUSINESS STANDARD)**



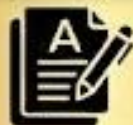
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Indian cities need to be rescued before they crumble around us

Engineering city governments is the only durable solution to India's urban crisis. One way or another, this must be achieved



**RAJAT ARULTHALIA
& ADITIA SINHA**
are, respectively, founder director, Foundation
for Economic Development, and an economist

INDIA, census commissioner Ajay Mittal wrote down the definition of a town: its population should be above 5,000, its density above 500 persons per square kilometre, and three-fourths of its male working population must be engaged in double or triple shifts in agriculture. That definition still largely stands, but India's towns and cities are falling apart. Traffic, waste management, law and order, water, sewage—the further we go from the capital of the country or a state, the worse these get.

Many are oversteering in the problem, but this is equally not so. Even small Indian towns with low densities of population are badly run, while Tokyo, with many more people than our largest cities, has none of the problems that afflict urban India. This was true even when Japan was at the income per-head level that we are today. What explains that? Some commonly cited reasons can be struck off. Poor city norms can't be blamed, as Indians adapt just fine to rules and norms once they move overseas. Lack of funds cannot be an explanation either, given how large Indian public budgets have grown. We have spent huge amounts on infrastructure, including some rather motorised projects that, having a few very well-served users, do not justify the expenditure. Nor is lack of state capacity the culprit. Roads keep getting built with fewer errors and cost.

The real reason is that Indian cities are run from the state level, with almost no incentive for any electrically accountable administration to run them well. State governments depend on votes from a widely dispersed base and the state of urban spaces is rarely an election issue. This also means that little information on civic dysfunction reaches state administrations.

Take the case of Bangalore. Home to 20% of Karnataka's population, it generates about 10% of the state's revenues. For any chief minister of this state, the rational thing to do is to use this money to please rural voters ahead of urban ones. Similarly, residents of Gurgaon in Haryana cannot rely on a virtuous cycle of service delivery and accountability at the city level, since it is the state government based in Chandigarh that holds the power to make a noticeable difference. Where it comes to smaller cities, this problem of skewed information and weak incentives worsens.

An administration can do a good job when it has a strong and functional locus of responsibility for specific functions, the authority to perform them, and accountability for outcomes. Unfortunately, city administrations in India lack this loop.

The 73rd and 74th constitutional amendments of 1992 tried to devolve power to rural and urban local bodies, but left it up to state governments. It is little surprise that more than three decades later, the country's Congress and Indian General



found that only four functions—control of crematoriums, stray animals, street lighting and slaughterhouses—had been devolved with full autonomy, while 11 others, like roads, water, civic planning, etc., remained in the hands of state governments. Nobody likes to give up power.

Yes, in Indian cities, state-appointed municipal commissioners, usually an IAS officer, hold the reins of finance and administrative power for most city infrastructure and operating functions. Police powers also lie with the state-appointed police commissioner. Schools are run by the state education department. State-run entities like water boards and development authorities manage other important aspects of local governance. Functions are rarely ever devolved and state finance commissions are typically not even appointed, let alone their recommended allocations being followed. City councils, if they exist, are rarely elected regularly. Few urban residents know of this gulf. And our towns and cities keep falling further into disrepair.

What is the solution? A top-down approach would be another constitutional amendment to fix the 73rd and 74th. It would make the principle of subsidiarity mandatory. This demands that a function sits at the lowest level capable of performing it, and hence, hospitals, for instance, would go to the city level, while higher ones would be under

the state administration.

We must let funds and accountability follow functions. This calls for properly devised tax revenues based on a transparent formula for tax sharing, routine elections of city governments and expanded space for the latter to levy local taxes within well-defined limits. This would fix the system across the country, but it may be a practical challenge to get such a far-reaching constitutional amendment passed.

A more fiddly approach may be to accomplish all of the above at the state level instead of through a national bill. This way, success in one state could strengthen the idea's appeal among others, and that public good abridgement across the country may notice the benefits of devolving responsibility, authority and account ability.

An important argument here is that no chief minister holds power forever, but local strongholds are common. If public funds get greater autonomy to develop their local areas, regardless of the time at the state level, need not spell doom for them. They would have an opportunity to demonstrate excellence in governance and administrative skills in urban spaces. If chief ministers with their own urban functions begin to view devolution as an innovative policy, rather than dilution of their power, they might push for what urban India needs and that other state leaders following suit

- **Key Terms and Explanations**
- **Census Town vs. Statutory Town**
 - In India, urban centers are broadly classified into statutory towns and census towns. A statutory town is any location notified under a law by the state government with a municipal body (such as a Municipal Corporation or Municipal Council).
 - A census town, as defined by Asok Mitra during the 1961 Census, must satisfy three mandatory quantitative criteria:
 - A minimum population of 5,000.
 - A population density of at least 400 persons per square kilometer.
 - At least 75% of the male main working population engaged in non-agricultural pursuits.
- **Principle of Subsidiarity**
 - The principle of subsidiarity dictates that social, political, and administrative functions should be performed at the lowest governance level capable of executing them effectively. Higher-level authorities should step in only when lower-level bodies lack the capacity or scale to achieve the intended outcome.
- **73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendment Acts (1992)**
 - These landmark amendments aimed to institutionalize local self-governance in India by creating a constitutional framework for rural (Panchayats) and urban (Municipalities) local bodies.
 - The 74th Amendment introduced **Part IXA** and the **Twelfth Schedule**, listing 18 specific functions (such as urban planning, water supply, and public health) intended for transfer to Urban Local Bodies (ULBs).
- **Parastatal Bodies**
 - Parastatals are state-created, non-elected, single-purpose agencies managed directly by state bureaucracy rather than municipal councils.
- **Fiscal Devolution and State Finance Commissions (SFCs)**
 - Fiscal devolution refers to the transfer of financial resources, revenue-raising powers, and grants from higher levels of government to local bodies.
 - Under **Article 243Y** (read with **Article 243I**), state governments are constitutionally mandated to appoint a State Finance Commission every five years. The SFC reviews the financial position of municipalities and recommends guidelines for tax sharing, duties, tolls, and grants-in-aid.
- **Incentive Misalignment in Urban Governance**
 - This phenomenon occurs when the political actors who hold executive authority over a city do not depend on that city's voters to stay in power. Chief Ministers and state legislators often draw their political support from widespread rural constituencies. Consequently, they are incentivized to divert urban-generated tax revenue toward rural welfare programs, leaving urban infrastructure underfunded and poorly managed.

- **Core Thesis and Debunked Myths**

- **The Central Thesis**

- The crisis of Indian cities—manifested through chronic traffic congestion, unmanaged solid waste, frequent flooding, poor law enforcement, and unreliable public utilities—is primarily a structural failure of political economy and administrative design.
- Indian cities are systematically starved of operational autonomy and financial resources because they are governed from state capitals. State leadership lacks political incentives to empower local urban administrations, leaving municipal bodies unable to respond to local needs.

- **Deconstructing Common Urban Fallacies**

- **Myth 1: Overcrowding and High Population Density are the Core Drivers of Urban Chaos**

- **The Reality:** High population density alone does not dictate civic breakdown. Tokyo possesses a significantly higher population and urban density than most major Indian cities, yet it maintains high-quality public transport, clean streets, and efficient public utilities.
- **Evidence:** Even small Indian census and statutory towns with low population densities display identical infrastructural failure, garbage accumulation, and broken civic delivery as megacities. Urban decay in India is driven by governance failure, not population size.

- **Myth 2: Indian Citizens Suffer from a Universal Lack of Civic Sense**

- **The Reality:** Civic behavior is heavily shaped by institutions, enforcement mechanisms, and infrastructural quality, rather than innate culture.
- **Evidence:** When Indian citizens migrate or travel overseas to cities with clear rules and consistent enforcement (such as Singapore or London), they adapt to local norms, sort waste properly, and follow traffic rules. The problem lies in weak institutional incentives and non-enforceable regulations within Indian municipalities.

- **Myth 3: Shortage of Funds Prevents Cities from Improving Infrastructure**

- **The Reality:** Overall public budgets in India have expanded significantly over the past three decades. Large capital expenditures are routinely allocated for capital-intensive projects, such as capital city metro lines and elevated corridor flyovers.
- **Evidence:** Cities often prioritize expensive, high-visibility projects over basic civic investments like well-designed bus routes, storm-water drain maintenance, footpaths, and decentralized waste collection. The core issue is capital misallocation, driven by top-down state-level decision-making rather than an absolute lack of money.

- **Myth 4: State Machinery Lacks Civil Engineering and Execution Capacity**

- **The Reality:** State departments repeatedly execute complex engineering tasks, such as relaying kilometres of urban tarmac, building large bypass roads, and installing massive water trunk lines.
- **Evidence:** The underlying issue is not technical execution, but a broken feedback loop of administrative accountability. Because state departments operate without local oversight, works are routinely re-tendered and re-laid without long-term durability standards, benefiting contractor-politician networks instead of city residents.

- **Historical Evolution of Urban Governance in India**
- **Pre-Independence Foundation: Lord Ripon's Resolution (1882)**
 - The institutional structure of municipal administration in India traces back to the colonial era. Lord Ripon's 1882 Resolution on Local Self-Government is considered the initial blueprint for local democratic bodies in British India.
 - However, its primary aim was administrative convenience and local revenue extraction rather than genuine democratic decentralization. Municipalities remained subordinate to colonial district collectors, establishing a pattern of bureaucratic control over local political leadership.
- **Post-Independence Standardization: Asok Mitra's 1961 Census Criteria**
 - Following independence, urban spaces were largely viewed as secondary to rural agricultural development. In 1961, Census Commissioner Asok Mitra introduced a standardized, objective definition to classify urban areas based on population size, density, and non-agricultural male employment.
 - While this criteria brought order to statistical demographic tracking, urban governance systems remained largely unchanged, relying on outdated colonial-era municipal acts.
- **The Constitutional Turning Point: 74th Amendment Act (1992)**
 - The passage of the 74th Constitutional Amendment Act (CAA) in 1992 sought to grant constitutional status to Urban Local Bodies (ULBs). It introduced **Part IXA** (Articles 243P to 243ZG) and the **Twelfth Schedule**, which outlined 18 municipal functions.
 - However, the amendment contained a major structural compromise: **Article 243W** used discretionary language ("*the Legislature of a State may, by law, endow...*"). This allowed state governments to retain control over whether to transfer actual political, administrative, and financial powers to local municipalities.
- **Modern State of Play: CAG Audit Findings**
 - More than three decades after the 74th CAA, decentralization remains largely incomplete. Performance audits by the Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) across various states reveal a persistent refusal by state governments to surrender power:
 - **Minimal Functional Devolution:** Out of the 18 functions listed in the Twelfth Schedule, only four minor functions—management of crematoriums, control of stray animals, provision of street lighting, and operation of slaughterhouses—are fully devolved with financial and administrative autonomy in most states.
 - **Retention of Core Functions:** Core urban functions—including urban planning, land-use regulation, water supply, sewage systems, roads, and public transport—remain under state departments or state-appointed parastatals (e.g., Jal Boards, Development Authorities).
 - **Fiscal Dependency:** State Finance Commissions are rarely set up on schedule, their recommendations are often ignored, and municipal bodies remain reliant on discretionary state grants.

AXIA IAS ACADEMY: COMPREHENSIVE URBAN GOVERNANCE ANALYSIS

DEBUNKING MYTHS AND DIAGNOSING THE REAL REASON FOR INDIA'S URBAN DECLINE

DEBUNKING COMMON MYTHS

1 OVERCROWDING?



NOT THE PROBLEM:
Tokyo has higher density and is efficient. Small towns fail too.

2 POOR CIVIC SENSE?



INCORRECT:
Indians adapt fine overseas.

3 LACK OF FUNDS?



NO: State budgets are large. Massive infrastructure projects (vanity metro) funded.

4 LACK OF CAPACITY?



INCORRECT:
Roads are relaid repeatedly.

STATE-LEVEL CONTROL vs CITY-LEVEL DEVOLUTION

FAILED MODEL (RED FLOW): CURRENT SYSTEM



IDEAL MODEL (GREEN FLOW): DESIRED FUNCTIONAL LOOP



CAG audits find key functions like water, planning, and roads are retained by states.

- Police power with the state. Parastatals control critical aspects.

THE PATH FORWARD (STRATEGIES)



A TOP-DOWN CONSTITUTIONAL AMENDMENT
Mandatory subsidiarity, routine elections, transparent tax formulas, greater local tax power.

B STATE-LEVEL DEVOLUTION (PRAGMATIC APPROACH)



Achieve all changes via state legislation. Success in one state inspires others. (insurance policy for local political power).

- **Logical and Philosophical Foundations**

- **The Principle of Subsidiarity and Democratic Localism**

- At its core, local self-governance rests on the philosophy that democracy thrives when decision-making is brought closest to the citizen. This framework assumes that local residents possess specialized knowledge of their immediate environment, enabling them to evaluate the costs and benefits of civic projects more effectively than distant bureaucrats.

- When governance is centralized at the state level, this local knowledge is lost, resulting in top-down urban interventions that misalign with everyday community needs.

- **The Principal-Agent Problem and Information Asymmetry**

- In political economy, the relationship between citizens (principals) and elected officials (agents) relies on clear lines of accountability. In Indian urban centers, this relationship is severed by severe information asymmetry:

- City residents face local problems (such as sewage overflows or unpaved roads), but the state-level leaders who hold the executive power to fix these issues operate out of distant state capitals.
- Because state governments depend primarily on rural electorates to win elections, urban complaints carry little political weight. The feedback loop between citizen frustration and political consequences is broken, leading to administrative inertia.

- **Fiscal Federalism: Aligning Revenue Generation with Spending Authority**

- A foundational principle of public economics is that public expenditure responsibility must match revenue-raising powers. Currently, major Indian cities generate a disproportionate share of state revenue through property transactions, commercial taxes, and economic activity.

- However, these revenues are channeled directly into state coffers, leaving municipal bodies with limited taxation powers and meager budgets. Decoupling local revenue generation from local spending decisions removes the financial autonomy needed for effective city management.

- **Political Insurance Theory: Creating Incentives for Political Devolution**

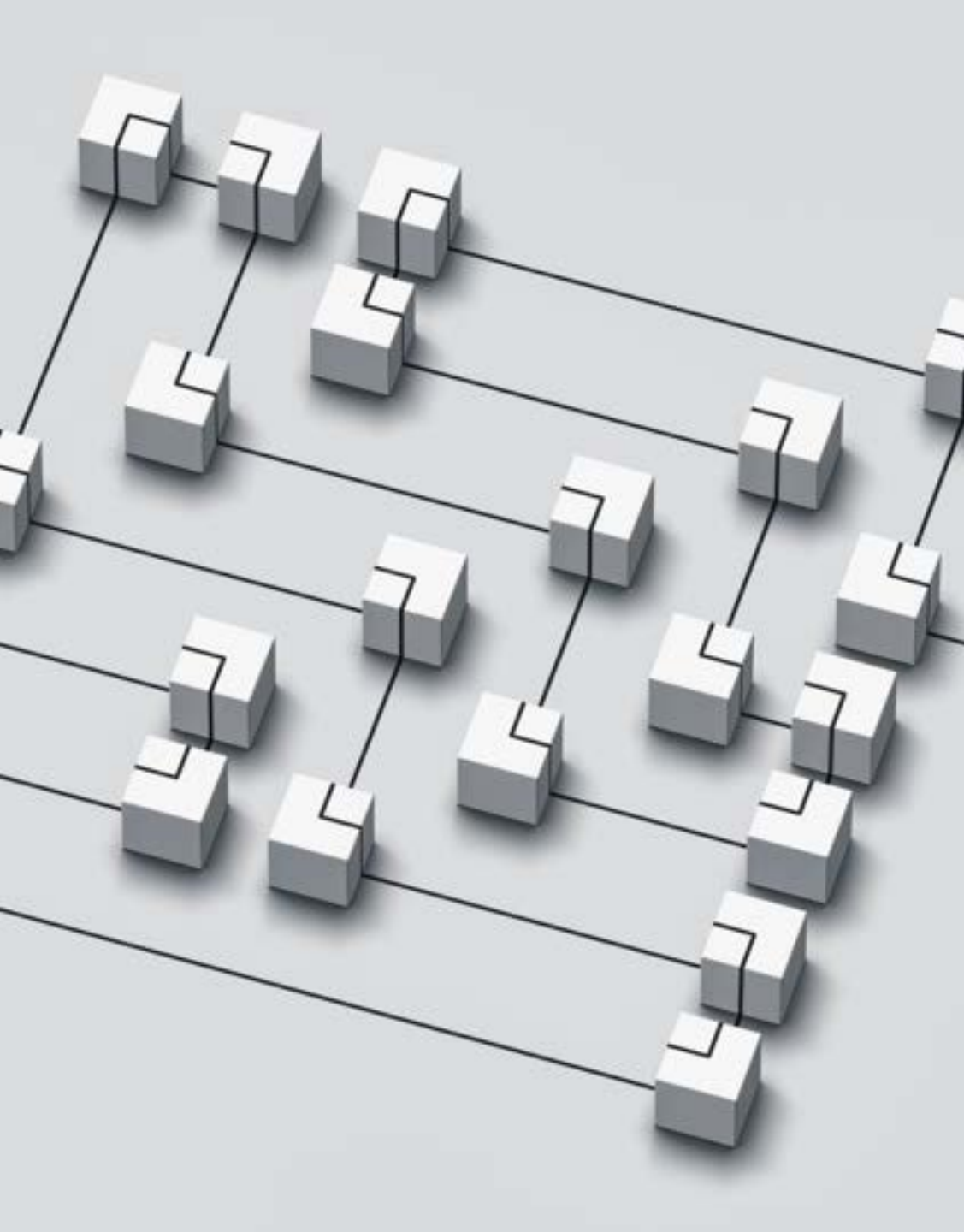
- State politicians often resist devolution because they view it as a zero-sum loss of authority. However, political insurance theory suggests an alternative perspective:

- In competitive democracy, state-level leaders frequently face electoral losses.
 - If a state framework creates powerful, autonomous local government institutions (such as strong city mayoralities), regional politicians can build local strongholds.
 - These urban bastions offer political leaders an institutional platform to demonstrate governance capability and remain politically relevant, even when their party loses power at the state level. Frame devolution as an insurance policy rather than a loss of power, and state leaders may find a compelling reason to support it.
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- **Multidimensional Analysis**
- **Political Dimension**
 - **Executive Fragmentation:** Executive authority in Indian cities is divided among various entities, including state-appointed IAS Municipal Commissioners, Police Commissioners, and single-purpose Parastatals. Elected Mayors are often reduced to ceremonial roles with short tenures and minimal executive authority.
 - **Voter Disenfranchisement:** Urban voters rarely see local civic conditions reflect in state election campaigns. As a result, citizen participation in municipal elections remains low, reinforcing political disinterest in urban affairs.
- **Economic Dimension**
 - **Growth Drag on the National Economy:** Cities contribute over 60% of India's GDP, yet they suffer from structural underinvestment. Infrastructure deficits in public transit, logistics, and housing create economic inefficiencies that reduce urban productivity.
 - **Underdeveloped Municipal Finance Markets:** Without autonomous revenue sources (such as predictable property taxes and user charges), Indian municipalities struggle to issue municipal bonds or access private capital markets, leaving them dependent on state government transfers.
- **Social Dimension**
 - **Exacerbation of Urban Inequality:** Urban decay disproportionately impacts low-income households and informal settlement residents. While affluent gated communities privatize basic services (using diesel generators, private water tankers, and private security), the urban poor rely on failing public utilities.
 - **Spatial Segregation:** Inadequate urban planning and land-use policies push informal workers to peripheral urban fringes, increasing commute times and reducing access to economic opportunities.
- **Legal and Constitutional Dimension**
 - **Structural Flaws in Article 243W:** The discretionary wording in Part IXA allows state legislatures to withhold core administrative and financial powers from municipal corporations.
 - **Weak Enforcement of State Finance Commissions:** States frequently delay appointing SFCs or ignore their fiscal recommendations, undermining the constitutional intent of the 74th Amendment.
- **Ethical Dimension**
 - **Spatial Injustice:** Extracting tax revenues from dense urban centers while denying residents basic living standards—such as clean air, potable water, and safe public spaces—raises fundamental questions of spatial fairness.
 - **Lack of Intergenerational Equity:** Short-sighted urban development that neglects ecological infrastructure (such as wetlands, urban forests, and natural drainage channels) risks leaving compromised, flood-prone cities to future generations.
- **International Dimension**
 - **Global Competitiveness Gap:** Modern national economic strength depends on the efficiency of major metropolitan regions. Indian megacities lag behind regional peers like East Asian hubs in infrastructure reliability, public transit, and overall quality of life.
 - **Compliance with Global Commitments:** Persistent urban planning deficits undermine India's ability to meet **UN Sustainable Development Goal 11** (Sustainable Cities and Communities) and its climate resilience targets under the Paris Agreement.

- **Linkages with NCERT Textbooks**
- **Class 6 Social and Political Life (Part I) – Chapter 7: "Urban Administration"**
 - **Core Conceptual Link:** Introduces young learners to the basic structures of a Municipal Corporation, the duties of Ward Councillors, and the distinction between elected representatives and appointed administrative staff (such as Municipal Commissioners).
 - **Relevance:** Highlights the ground-level breakdown of civic services, showing how citizen grievances regarding garbage accumulation or broken streetlights stall due to administrative inertia.
- **Class 11 Political Science: Indian Constitution at Work – Chapter 8: "Local Governments"**
 - **Core Conceptual Link:** Traces the historical evolution of local self-government from Lord Ripon's 1882 resolution to the 73rd and 74th Amendments, explicitly addressing the principle of subsidiarity and democratic decentralization.
 - **Relevance:** Examines why the 74th Amendment failed to bring about genuine local autonomy, emphasizing how states used discretionary legislative powers to avoid devolving financial and functional authority.
- **Class 12 Sociology: Indian Society & Social Change and Development in India**
 - **Core Conceptual Link:** Examines rapid urbanization, rural-to-urban migration patterns, and the rise of informal housing settlements.
 - **Relevance:** Unpacks how centralized urban planning creates spatial segregation and urban informalities, leaving lower-income communities without access to public services.
- **Class 11 Economics: Indian Economic Development – Chapter 8: "Infrastructure"**
 - **Core Conceptual Link:** Explores the relationship between infrastructure development (transport, energy, sanitation) and economic productivity.
 - **Relevance:** Connects urban infrastructural deficits directly to economic inefficiencies, demonstrating how capital misallocation into high-visibility projects harms long-term growth.





- **Linkages with UPSC CSE and APSC Syllabus**
- **General Studies Paper 1 (Indian Society & Geography)**
 - **Syllabus Topic:** *Urbanization, their problems and their remedies.*
 - **Application:** Provides an analytical framework to critique conventional urban growth theories. Shows that urban issues stem from structural governance failures rather than demographic pressure alone.
- **General Studies Paper 2 (Governance, Constitution, Polity)**
 - **Syllabus Topic:** *Devolution of powers and finances up to local levels and challenges therein; Structure, organization and functioning of the Executive; Role of civil services in a democracy.*
 - **Application:** Analyzes the institutional conflict between elected municipal councils and state-appointed bureaucrats (IAS Commissioners/Parastatals), the incomplete implementation of the 12th Schedule, and the political economy of urban-to-rural fiscal transfers.
- **General Studies Paper 3 (Economy, Environment, Infrastructure)**
 - **Syllabus Topic:** *Infrastructure: Energy, Ports, Roads, Airports, Railways etc.; Economic Growth and Development.*
 - **Application:** Evaluates capital misallocation in urban infrastructure (e.g., underutilized metro systems vs primary civic amenities) and examines financial innovations like Municipal Bonds, Land Value Capture (LVC), and property tax reform.
- **General Studies Paper 4 (Ethics and Human Interface)**
 - **Syllabus Topic:** *Public/Civil service values and Ethics in Public administration; Accountability and Governance.*
 - **Application:** Examines the ethics of spatial justice, the lack of transparency in state-level municipal contracting, and the erosion of civic trust caused by non-responsive local government institutions.

- **Way Forward: Strategic Reform Roadmap**
- **Top-Down Structural Reform: Re-amending the 74th Constitutional Amendment**
 - **Binding Subsidiarity Mandate:** Amend Article 243W to replace discretionary language ("*may*") with mandatory language ("*shall*"), constitutionally obligating states to transfer all 18 functions under the Twelfth Schedule to ULBs.
 - **Institutionalizing the Mayor-in-Council System:** Transition from ceremonial mayors to directly elected mayors with a fixed five-year tenure and clear executive authority, mirroring governance models in cities like London or New York.
 - **Enforceable Fiscal Transfers:** Mandate that State Finance Commission recommendations be binding on state governments, tied to clear, transparent formula-based revenue sharing.
- **Bottom-Up Pragmatic Reform: State-Led Innovation and Political Insurance**
 - **Demonstration Effect Across States:** Since passing a national constitutional amendment requires broad political consensus, progressive states can take the lead by passing state-level municipal reform acts. Demonstrating improved governance and economic growth in one state can create competitive pressures for others to follow suit.
 - **Aligning Political Incentives:** Reframe local decentralization as a political insurance mechanism for state leaders. Establishing autonomous municipal leadership allows political parties to build durable urban strongholds, helping them maintain institutional influence even during state-level electoral downturns.
- **Institutional Integration: Streamlining Parastatals Under Local Control**
 - **Abolishing Parallel Agencies:** Single-purpose parastatal entities (such as Urban Development Authorities and Jal Boards) should be brought under the direct administrative control of elected Municipal Corporations to eliminate overlapping jurisdictions and clarify accountability.
 - **Empowering Unified City-Region Authorities:** Establish unified Metropolitan Planning Committees (MPCs) with statutory authority to coordinate transport, land use, and environmental management across expanding urban regions.
- **Fiscal Autonomy and Innovative Revenue Generation**
 - **Reforming Property Taxation:** Modernize property tax systems using GIS mapping, self-assessment models, and regular valuation updates to ensure stable municipal revenue streams.
 - **Unlocking Alternative Finance:** Empower financially stable Municipal Corporations to issue municipal bonds and use Land Value Capture (LVC) mechanisms to finance long-term urban infrastructure without relying on state grants.
- **Citizen-Centric Participatory Governance**
 - **Activating Ward Committees and Area Sabhas:** Operationalize Ward Committees and Area Sabhas under the 74th CAA to ensure citizen participation at the neighborhood level.
 - **Institutionalizing Participatory Budgeting:** Allow residents to directly vote on a portion of local municipal capital expenditure, closing feedback loops and rebuilding public trust in civic institutions.

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- **UPSC CSE Mains Questions**
 - **1. UPSC CSE Mains (GS Paper 2, 2022)**
 - *"To what extent, in your view, has the 74th Constitutional Amendment Act been able to empower Urban Local Bodies (ULBs) in India? Identify the structural bottlenecks that hinder their effective functioning."*
 - **2. UPSC CSE Mains (GS Paper 2, 2020)**
 - *"The local self-government system in India has not proved to be an effective instrument of democratic governance. Critically evaluate the statement and suggest measures to empower local bodies."*
 - **3. UPSC CSE Mains (GS Paper 1, 2021)**
 - *"Urbanization in India is accompanied by acute spatial segregation and infrastructure deficits. Discuss the governance challenges that exacerbate this issue in Indian cities."*
 - **4. UPSC CSE Mains (GS Paper 2, 2017)**
 - *"Assess the importance of the principle of subsidiarity in the context of decentralization in India. Why have state governments resisted transferring real financial and administrative power to municipalities?"*
 - **APSC CCE (Assam Public Service Commission) Questions**
 - **1. APSC CCE Mains (GS Paper 2, 2022)**
 - *"Critically examine the implementation of the 74th Constitutional Amendment Act in Assam. How far have the Guwahati Municipal Corporation (GMC) and other urban local bodies achieved functional and financial autonomy?"*
 - **2. APSC CCE Mains (GS Paper 2, 2020)**
 - *"Overlapping jurisdictions between state development authorities (like GMDA) and elected urban local bodies lead to governance friction. Discuss the institutional reforms required to streamline urban administration in North-Eastern cities."*

Nailing Pakistan's lies on Indus water sharing

The Indus basin has become a unique global anomaly where an upper riparian State is deprived of its natural rights while the lower riparian State wastes a massive volume of water

The Indus Water Treaty (IWT), signed in Karachi on September 19, 1960, was a historic water-sharing agreement between India and Pakistan. The IWT classifies Indus, Jhelum, and Chenab as the "western rivers" whereas Ravi, Beas, and Sutlej are the "eastern rivers". The primary tributaries of the Indus system originating in India are Jhelum, Chenab, Ravi, Beas, and Ghaggar. After the April 2025 terror attack in Pabalgam, Kashmir, in which 26 people were killed, India announced that it was holding the IWT in abeyance, given credible evidence of Pakistan's involvement in the attack.

After Partition, only 12 out of 143 canals in undivided Punjab remained with East Punjab (India). Most of the profitable schemes and technically feasible projects were in West Punjab (Pakistan). East Punjab was deprived of development given rivers were at a significant distance from most of its area.

At the instance of West Punjab, East Punjab and West Punjab entered into an agreement on December 20, 1947, to continue the status quo ante on the Upper Bari Doab Canal (UBDC) and Ferozepur Headworks till March 31,

1948. Deliberately or otherwise, West Punjab did not take any steps until March 31, 1948, to negotiate any further agreement with East Punjab. In the absence of any agreement, East Punjab on April 1, 1948, discontinued the use of its installations for the benefit of Central Bari Doab Canal (CBDC) in West Punjab. The CBDC and Digulpur canals irrigated only 6% of the total irrigated area of Pakistan.

Pakistan soon created a false narrative that India had turned off water to all six rivers on April 1, 1948. On December 16, 1952, M Zafarullah Khan, Pakistan's Representative in the UN Security Council, stated, "... On 1 April, 1948, ... India turned off the waters of these rivers which used to flow into Pakistan". Khan did not mention nor was questioned in the Security Council about the mechanism to turn off the flow of and India's capacity to channel or store the water of the six mighty rivers for six weeks.

India had not built any structure on any of these six rivers during the nine months between Independence and March 31, 1948, which could control their waters. Khan succeeded in misguiding the Security Council as well as the entire world. This was the context in which the IWT was born.

After the signing of the IWT, India was allowed exclusive use of the eastern rivers estimated at 33 million acre feet (MAF). Pakistan received the waters of the western rivers estimated at 135-140 MAF. Ironically, the treaty allowed India only around 19.6% of the water though it accounts for almost twice that share in terms of catchment

area. On the other hand, Pakistan receives around 81% of the water with a much smaller catchment area.

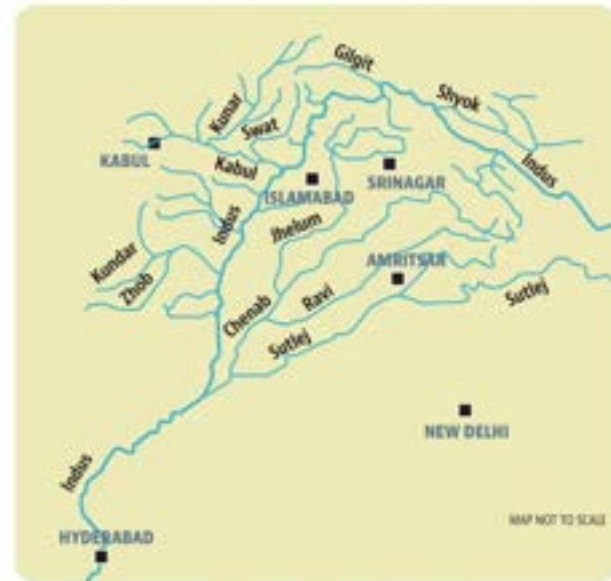
And, according to the 1941 census, 25 million of the dependent population (54%) was in Pakistan and 21 million (46%) in India. Despite this, the river waters were so unevenly distributed under the IWT.

This post-Partition environment severely disrupted India's food supply line. Even today, there is acute shortage of water in Punjab, Haryana, Rajasthan and the National Capital Territory of Delhi, increasing reliance on drawing ground water.

Even now, Pakistan continues with its misleading narratives and overlooks both hydrological realities of water availability and the established operational and maintenance practices of run-of-the-river hydro-power projects. And it has

used every international platform to amplify its rhetoric: Transboundary water was framed as a "weaponised global common" during a policy seminar in Brussels, co-organised by the Centre for European Policy Studies (CEPS) and Pakistan's diplomatic mission to the EU. Similarly, another international seminar titled "The Indus Waters Treaty: An Instrument of Peace and Regional Stability" was held in Islamabad on June 30, where Pakistan sought to draw parallels between the Indus River and critical global maritime chokepoints such as the Strait of Hormuz and the Suez Canal.

A Pakistani minister reportedly threatened to "chop off" the hands of anyone constructing diversion structures on the western rivers. Similarly,



Ever since the 1950s, Pakistan has spread misleading narratives, completely overlooking key hydrological realities of the basin.

during an address to the Pakistani diaspora in Tampa, Florida, Pakistan's army chief Asim Munir issued direct military and nuclear threats against India. He said that Pakistan would launch missile strikes to destroy any future Indian dams built on the Indus River basin. Munir should remember that issuing provocative remarks only serve to inflame public opinion across the border, hardening positions.

Out of the 33 MAF of water allocated to India, close to seven MAF still flows to Pakistan due to local site constraints. In Pakistan, approximately 30-40 MAF escapes unutilised into the Arabian Sea, while an additional 30 MAF is lost due to operational inefficiencies and unlined irrigation canals. The systematic wastage of 60 MAF of Indus water by Pakistan, juxtaposed against India's restricted usage of around 27 MAF despite being the upper riparian State, illustrates the imbalance in the water-

sharing arrangement. Rather than spouting empty rhetoric at various forums, Pakistan should focus on minimising its internal water wastage and optimising its resource management to foster regional peace and stability.

The Indus basin has become a unique global anomaly where an upper riparian State is deprived of its natural rights in use of rivers that flow through its territory — be it meeting the basic water demands of its population or contingency storage — while the lower riparian State thriftlessly lets a massive volume get drained into the sea unutilised and wastes a significant quantum of the utilised water because of inefficient irrigation practices.

Devendra Kumar Sharma is member, National Security Advisory Board, and former chairman, Bhakra Beas Management Board. The views expressed are personal



Devendra Kumar Sharma

- **Key Terms and Explanations**

- **Indus Waters Treaty (IWT, 1960):** A transboundary water-sharing agreement signed in Karachi on September 19, 1960, between India and Pakistan, brokered by the World Bank. It allocated the rights over six rivers of the Indus basin based on a division into "Eastern" and "Western" rivers.
- **Upper Riparian vs. Lower Riparian:**
 - *Upper Riparian:* A state located upstream along a river system where the water originates or flows first (e.g., India in the context of the Indus basin).
 - *Lower Riparian:* A state located downstream that receives the river flow after it passes through upstream territory (e.g., Pakistan).
- **Eastern Rivers vs. Western Rivers:**
 - *Eastern Rivers:* Sutlej, Beas, and Ravi. India was granted unrestricted operational rights over these rivers (~33 Million Acre Feet).
 - *Western Rivers:* Indus, Jhelum, and Chenab. Pakistan was allocated the bulk of these waters (~135–140 MAF), while India was permitted limited non-consumptive uses such as run-of-the-river power generation, domestic supply, and restricted agricultural use.
- **Million Acre Feet (MAF):** A standard unit of volume used in water resource management, representing the volume of water required to cover one acre of land to a depth of one foot. 1 MAF equals approximately 1.233 billion cubic meters of water.
- **Run-of-the-River Hydropower Projects:** Facilities that generate electricity using the natural flow and elevation drop of a river without creating large storage reservoirs. Under the IWT, India is permitted to construct run-of-the-river plants on the Western rivers, provided they comply with strict design specifications regarding pondage and spillway gates.
- **Catchment Area:** The total geographical area drained by a river and its tributaries. Despite India accounting for nearly 40% of the Indus basin's catchment area, it was allocated under 20% of the basin's total water volume under the IWT framework.
- **Bari Doab and Doabs:** A *doab* is a tract of land lying between two converging rivers. *Bari Doab* specifically refers to the fertile land mass situated between the Beas and Ravi rivers in historical Punjab, which was bisected during Partition.
- **Treaty Abeyance:** A state of temporary suspension or inactivity regarding legal treaty obligations, invoked when fundamental conditions or baseline security assumptions underlying the agreement are severely breached by one party.

- **Core Dynamics and Key Arguments**
 - **Structural Asymmetry vs. Geographical Reality:** The foundational division of the 1960 treaty created an asymmetric water allocation. India received control over ~19.6% of the water volume (~33 MAF) despite holding almost twice the relative share in terms of catchment area. Conversely, Pakistan received ~80.4% (~135–140 MAF) of the total water volume, creating a long-term resource squeeze for India's northwestern states.
 - **Rejection of the "1948 Water Stoppage" Narrative:** Historical records contradict the assertion that India arbitrarily cut off all river flows on April 1, 1948. The temporary stoppage affected only the Central Bari Doab Canal (CBDC) and Dipalpur canal systems due to the expiry of the temporary Standstill Agreement of December 20, 1947, which West Punjab failed to extend. India possessed neither the storage dams nor the physical diversion infrastructure in 1948 to cut off the six rivers of the Indus system.
 - **Lower Riparian Mismanagement vs. Upper Riparian Scarcity:** A significant volume of allocated water (~7 MAF) continues to flow unutilized from India into Pakistan due to terrain constraints and delayed infrastructure projects. Simultaneously, Pakistan loses nearly 60 MAF annually—roughly 30–40 MAF draining unutilized into the Arabian Sea and another 30 MAF lost through unlined canals and inefficient flood irrigation—while upper riparian Indian regions (Punjab, Haryana, Rajasthan, NCT of Delhi) face severe groundwater depletion.
 - **Weaponization of Diplomatic Rhetoric:** Lower riparian narratives have increasingly framed run-of-the-river infrastructure permitted under the treaty as strategic "chokepoints" akin to the Strait of Hormuz or Suez Canal. Escalatory rhetoric and military threats aimed at upper riparian development conflict with technical provisions that allow run-of-the-river projects.
 - **Security-Water Nexus and Treaty Viability:** The principle that hydro-diplomacy cannot be decoupled from national security underlines the decision to hold the treaty in abeyance. Continued cross-border security threats undermine the cooperative spirit required to maintain complex transboundary water-sharing mechanisms.

- **Historical Evolution of the Issue**

- **Pre-1947 (Colonial Era Irrigation Engineering):** The British colonial administration constructed an extensive, integrated canal irrigation network across undivided Punjab, primarily drawing water from the Western and Eastern tributaries of the Indus to transform arid plains into agricultural colonies.
 - **1947 (Partition and Hydrological Fragmentation):** The Radcliffe Line bisected the hydro-geographic unity of Punjab. Headworks such as Madhopur (on the Ravi) and Ferozepur (on the Sutlej) remained in East Punjab (India), while the downstream canal commands they fed lay in West Punjab (Pakistan), instantly creating an upper/lower riparian dispute.
 - **December 20, 1947 – March 31, 1948 (Standstill Agreement):** East and West Punjab signed a temporary arrangement to maintain existing water flows through the Upper Bari Doab Canal (UBDC) until March 31, 1948. West Punjab failed to initiate negotiations for a long-term agreement before the deadline expired.
 - **April 1, 1948 (Canal Water Dispute):** Upon the expiry of the Standstill Agreement, East Punjab stopped water supply to the Central Bari Doab Canal (CBDC) and Dipalpur Canal. Supply was restored in May 1948 following the Inter-Dominion Accord, but the event established long-standing legal and political arguments over water rights.
 - **1951–1960 (World Bank Mediation and Treaty Negotiations):** David Lilienthal (former head of the US Tennessee Valley Authority) proposed a technical resolution, prompting the World Bank to offer its good offices in 1952. Eight years of negotiations culminated in the signing of the Indus Waters Treaty on September 19, 1960, by Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru and Pakistani President Ayub Khan.
 - **1960–2010s (Institutional Operation and Friction):** The Permanent Indus Commission (PIC) managed routine technical data exchanges and inspections. However, major disputes arose over Indian run-of-the-river projects, including the Baglihar Hydroelectric Project (resolved via a World Bank neutral expert in 2007) and the Kishanganga Project (adjudicated by the Permanent Court of Arbitration in 2013).
 - **Present Era (Reassessment and Abeyance):** Escalating security developments and persistent non-cooperation on treaty modification mechanisms prompted India to issue formal notices seeking modifications to the 1960 treaty framework, eventually leading to holding the treaty in abeyance to align water governance with contemporary national security imperatives.
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KEY TERMS & EXPLANATIONS



IWT (1960)
Water crisis in Riparian Waters in an nuary



RIPARIAN STATES
> Upper vs Lower
> Lower preparation



MAF (Million Acre Feet)
Water groundwater table, agriculture'n pressure



RUN-OF-THE-RIVER HYDROPOWER
Water crisis hydropower



CATCHMENT AREA
Unrealized hydropower and agriculture loss loss

CORE CONCEPTS & LOGIC

Doctrinal Balance:

Harmon Doctrine vs Arrentar Integrity VS Absolute Territorial Integrity

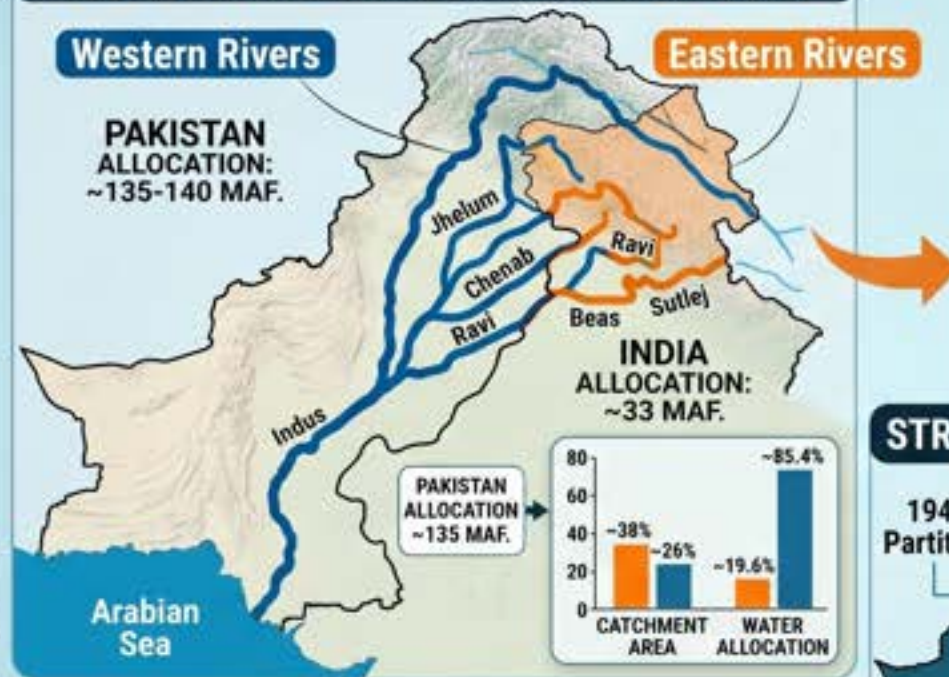
-> **EQUITABLE UTILIZATION**

No-Harm Principle, Hydro-Realism & Linkage Theory



COMPREHENSIVE ANALYSIS OF THE INDUS WATERS TREATY (IWT) FOR UPSC CSE PREPARATION

IWT STRUCTURAL ASYMMETRY DIAGRAM



DOWNSTREAM WASTE vs UPSTREAM SCARCITY

India
Falling groundwater table, agriculture
Agriculture pressure

Pakistan
60 MAF
Systematic Wastage:
~30 MAF to Arabian Sea
~30 MAF canal loss

MULTIDIMENSIONAL IMPACT ANALYSIS



SOCIAL
Water crisis in agrarian NW states, health



POLITICAL
Inter-state federal friction, security nexus



LEGAL
IWT Art. IX & XII, Rebus Sic Stantibus VCLT 62

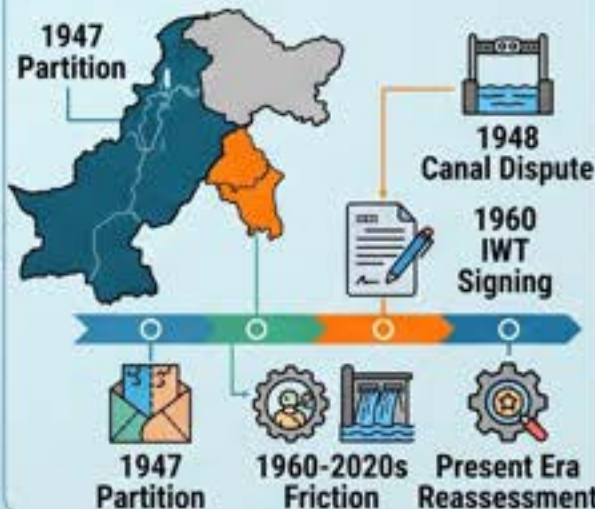


ETHICAL
Equity vss stewardship



Unrealized hydropower and agriculture loss

STRATEGIC EVOLUTION TIMELINE



WAY FORWARD (REFORMS & SOLUTIONS)



1. INFRASTRUCTURE OPTIMIZATION
• Complete Ujh, Shahpurkandi to capture unutilized 7 MAF
• Modernize canals



2. TREATY MODERNIZATION
• Climate change data
• modern Hydrological modeling



3. INTERNAL DEMAND MANAGEMENT
• Micro-irrigation
• Crop diversification



4. EVIDENCE-BASED DIPLOMACY
Strategic communication of upper riparian rights and downstream efficiency gaps

UPSC CSE PYQ & SYLLABUS REFERENCE

PYQ
MAINS
2021
2020
2016

SYLLABUS LINKS
• GS1 Geography
• GS2 Neighbor Relations
• GS3 Irrigation/Energy
• GS4 Ethics
Optionals: PSIR/Geography

- **Logical and Philosophical Foundations**
- **Harmon Doctrine vs. Absolute Territorial Integrity:**
 - *Harmon Doctrine (Absolute Territorial Sovereignty):* Asserts that a sovereign state has absolute rights to utilize all water resources within its geographical boundaries, regardless of downstream impacts.
 - *Absolute Territorial Integrity:* Asserts that a lower riparian state has an unqualified right to receive the natural flow of an international river uninterrupted by upstream activities.
 - *The IWT Compromise:* The treaty bypassed both extreme positions by physically partitioning the river system—giving India exclusive rights over the Eastern rivers and allocating the Western rivers primarily to Pakistan.
- **Equitable and Reasonable Utilization:** A core principle of International Water Law (codified in the 1997 UN Watercourses Convention) establishing that water allocation must balance factors like basin geography, population dependency, socio-economic needs, and existing usage patterns. The allocation of ~81% of water to lower riparian areas despite the upper riparian holding double the catchment area remains an unusual application of this principle.
- **The "No-Harm" Principle (*Sic Utere Tuo Ut Alienum Non Laedas*):** Dictates that an upper riparian state must not use its territory in a manner that causes significant harm to neighboring states. India's adherence to run-of-the-river parameters reflects this principle, even as political rhetoric downstream challenges these technical installations.
- **Hydro-Realism and Linkage Theory:** Water diplomacy operates within the broader matrix of national security. The philosophical underpinning of holding a treaty in abeyance rests on the premise that legal agreements require good faith and mutual security compliance—water governance cannot remain isolated from cross-border threats.



- **Multidimensional Analysis**
- **Social Dimension**
 - **Agricultural Livelihoods:** Northwestern states (Punjab, Haryana, Rajasthan) rely heavily on canal networks for intensive agriculture. Reduced surface water availability increases agricultural vulnerability across agrarian communities.
 - **Groundwater Crisis:** Inadequate surface water allocation has led to heavy groundwater extraction, resulting in falling water tables and water quality degradation across the Indo-Gangetic plains.
 - **Urban and Domestic Supply:** Expanding urban centers, including the National Capital Territory of Delhi, face structural water deficits, heightening competition between agricultural and municipal water needs.
- **Political Dimension**
 - **Domestic Inter-State Friction:** Surface water limitations exacerbate domestic disputes over canal projects, such as the Sutlej-Yamuna Link (SYL) canal issue between Punjab and Haryana.
 - **National Security Alignment:** Transboundary water policy is directly linked to national security strategies, treating water management as a component of broader regional posture.
- **Legal Dimension**
 - **Treaty Provisions (Article IX & XII):** The IWT specifies mechanisms for dispute resolution (Commission -> Neutral Expert -> Court of Arbitration) and outlines provisions for treaty modification or termination by mutual agreement under Article XII.
 - **International Law (*Rebus Sic Stantibus*):** Codified under Article 62 of the Vienna Convention on the Law of Treaties, this doctrine allows for the suspension or modification of a treaty when a fundamental change of circumstances occurs relative to those existing at the time of its conclusion.
 - **Customary Water Rights:** The treaty's structural allocation illustrates the complex balance between upper riparian natural sovereignty and lower riparian prescriptive rights.
- **Ethical Dimension**
 - **Inter-Generational Equity:** Over-extraction of groundwater caused by surface water constraints compromises resource access for future generations in upper riparian areas.
 - **Stewardship vs. Wastage:** Allowing tens of millions of acre-feet of fresh water to flow unutilized into the sea while adjacent upper-riparian regions suffer acute water stress raises ethical questions regarding global resource stewardship.
- **International Dimension**
 - **Precedent for Upper Riparian Rights:** India's posture on the IWT influences broader regional hydro-diplomacy, including transboundary water discussions involving upper-riparian systems such as the Brahmaputra (Yarlung Zangbo).
 - **Multilateral Platforms:** Strategic framing of transboundary rivers on international platforms highlights how water management is integrated into international diplomatic narratives.
- **Economic Dimension**
 - **Unrealized Hydropower Potential:** Structural limits on Western river storage hamper optimal power generation in mountain regions, creating opportunity costs for local industrial development.
 - **Agricultural Productivity Costs:** Sub-optimal utilization of allocated water volumes (~7 MAF unused due to infrastructure gaps) leads to productivity losses in domestic agricultural sectors.

- **Linkages with NCERT Textbooks**
 - **Class 10 Geography – Chapter 3: Water Resources**
 - *Core Concept:* Multi-purpose river valley projects, canal systems, inter-state water disputes, and water scarcity metrics.
 - *Context Linkage:* Explains the operational design of major infrastructure like the Bhakra-Nangal project on the Sutlej River and illustrates the socio-economic impacts of surface water distribution across Punjab, Haryana, and Rajasthan.
 - **Class 11 Geography (India: Physical Environment) – Chapter 3: Drainage System**
 - *Core Concept:* Spatial patterns of the Indus river system, Himalayan tributaries, catchment areas, and run-of-the-river dynamics.
 - *Context Linkage:* Provides the geographical baseline needed to evaluate catchment area proportions, seasonal river discharge variations, and physical constraints affecting upper riparian water utilization.
 - **Class 12 Political Science (Politics in India Since Independence) – Chapter 1 & 8: Challenges of Nation Building & Regional Aspirations**
 - *Core Concept:* Post-Partition infrastructure division, state reorganization, and inter-state river water disputes (e.g., SYL canal).
 - *Context Linkage:* Traces how the 1947 partition fragmented the Punjab canal network and fueled ongoing domestic political disputes over river allocations.
 - **Class 12 Political Science (Contemporary World Politics) – Chapter 8: Environment and Natural Resources**
 - *Core Concept:* Resource geopolitics, transboundary water management, and the concept of global/regional commons.
 - *Context Linkage:* Examines the hydro-diplomatic dimensions of the IWT within global frameworks governing shared natural resources.



- **Linkages with UPSC CSE Syllabus**
- **GS Paper 1: Geography**
 - **Water Resources & Physical Geography:** Distribution of water resources across the northwestern Indian subcontinent, drainage basin dynamics of the Indus system, and the physical constraints of storage in upper riparian mountain terrains.
- **GS Paper 2: Governance, Polity & International Relations**
 - **India and its Neighborhood:** Bilateral treaty dynamics, transboundary water governance, mechanisms for dispute resolution, and security-foreign policy linkages.
 - **Inter-State River Disputes:** Constitutional provisions (Article 262, Inter-State River Water Disputes Act) linked to domestic surface water allocations.
- **GS Paper 3: Economy, Infrastructure & Environment**
 - **Irrigation Infrastructure:** Water-use efficiency, canal lining projects, storage dams, and run-of-the-river power generation.
 - **Environmental Degradation:** Groundwater depletion in the breadbasket states of India, ecological flows of Himalayan rivers, and climate-induced changes in glacier melt patterns.
- **GS Paper 4: Ethics**
 - **Ethics in International Relations:** Balancing strict legal compliance with national security imperatives; ethical resource stewardship versus downstream operational wastage.
- **Optional Subjects**
 - **PSIR (Paper 2):** Hydro-politics, transboundary resource conflicts, application of the *Rebus Sic Stantibus* doctrine, and realism in neighborhood diplomacy.
 - **Geography (Paper 2):** Integrated river basin planning, regional development imbalances, and water management in drought-prone areas.

- **Way Forward**

- **Accelerating Domestic Infrastructure for Allocated Waters:**

- Prioritize the completion of strategic storage and diversion projects—such as the Shahpurkandi Dam, the Ujh Multi-Purpose Project, and the second Ravi-Beas link—to capture and fully utilize the ~7 MAF of Eastern river waters currently flowing unutilized downstream.
 - Modernize canal systems across Punjab, Haryana, and Rajasthan (e.g., lining of the Rajasthan Feeder and Sirhind Feeder) to reduce conveyance losses and alleviate regional groundwater stress.

- **Modernizing the Legal Framework:**

- Re-evaluate or update the 1960 treaty framework to incorporate contemporary realities, including climate change impacts, shrinking Himalayan glaciers, altered hydrological flows, and updated demographic pressures.
 - Integrate modern data-sharing protocols using real-time satellite telemetry to monitor basin discharge rates transparently.

- **Promoting Water Use Efficiency:**

- Transition domestic agricultural practices in upper riparian states away from flood irrigation toward precision micro-irrigation (drip and sprinkler systems) and support crop diversification out of water-intensive paddy-wheat cycles.
 - Encourage lower riparian state management to improve canal infrastructure and reduce the ~60 MAF lost to unlined canals or unutilized discharge into the sea.

- **Integrating Security and Hydro-Diplomacy:**

- Maintain a firm alignment between transboundary diplomatic commitments and national security imperatives, ensuring that treaty compliance remains grounded in mutual security and good faith.
 - Active international diplomacy should present objective, technical data regarding catchment geography, run-of-the-river design parameters, and operational realities to counter narrative misperceptions.

- **UPSC Mains Questions**
 - **UPSC CSE Mains 2021 (GS Paper 2):**
 - *"Present an assessment of the Indus Waters Treaty and examine its significance in the context of changing bilateral relations between India and Pakistan."*
 - **UPSC CSE Mains 2020 (GS Paper 1):**
 - *"Rivers linking can provide solutions to the multi-dimensional inter-related problems of droughts, floods, and interrupted navigation. Critically examine."*
 - **UPSC CSE Mains 2016 (GS Paper 2):**
 - *"Water disputes between states in India are becoming increasingly common. Evaluate the effectiveness of constitutional and legal mechanisms in resolving these disputes."*
 - **UPSC CSE Mains 2013 (GS Paper 3):**
 - *"Analyze the internal security threats and transboundary challenges posed by water scarcity and regional resource distribution in South Asia."*
- **APSC (Assam Public Service Commission) Questions**
 - **APSC CCE Mains 2022 (GS Paper 2):**
 - *"Examine the geopolitical significance of transboundary river water sharing for India's neighborhood diplomacy. How do upper-riparian dynamics influence regional stability?"*
 - **APSC CCE Mains 2020 (GS Paper 1):**
 - *"Discuss the physical and economic geography of major river systems originating in the Himalayas, highlighting their significance for national food and energy security."*

Ten years of disability rights, but with uneven impact

Ten years after the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (RPwD) Act, 2016, India has risen to acknowledge progress, but not yet to celebrate completion. The Act marked a decisive shift from welfare to rights. It replaced the 1995 law, expanded recognised disabilities from seven to 21 categories, introduced the language of dignity, equality, non-discrimination, reasonable accommodation, accessibility, inclusive education, social security, and participation, and mandated reservations in education and government employment for persons with benchmark disabilities.

Its greatest achievement is conceptual. It gave disabled people a stronger legal vocabulary to assert that exclusion is not charity denied, but rights violated. The law helped move disability from the margins of policy to the centre of constitutional imagination. The courts have also strengthened this shift. In *Vijay Kumar v. UPSC*, the Supreme Court clarified that reasonable accommodation is central to equality and that disability rights cannot be reduced only to benchmark disability thresholds. It emphasised that the RPwD Act imposes positive obligations on the State and, in certain contexts, private actors to enable full participation.

There have been administrative gains too. The Unique Disability ID project has attempted to create a national database and uniform disability certification system, intended to improve transparency and delivery of benefits. The Accessible India Campaign has made accessibility a public policy issue, with government reporting progress in public buildings, transport facilities, airports, and ICT accessibility. These are not minor achievements in a country where accessibility was long treated as goodwill rather than infrastructure.

Yet the Act's first decade also reveals a painful truth: India has often been better at writing rights than delivering them.

The first major shortcoming is data. India's Census 2011 counted 2.68 crore persons with disabilities, or 2.2% of the population, while WHO estimates that 10% of the global population experiences significant disability. This gap matters. If disabled people are undercounted, they are under-budgeted, under-placed and under-represented. The next Census and all major surveys must use better functional disability questions, disaggregate by gender, caste, age, rurality, income, and type of impairment, and connect data to budgets.

Second, accessibility remains uneven. A ramp at the entrance is not accessibility if there is no accessible transport to reach the building, no usable toilet, no tactile path, no sign language, no captioning, no accessible website, and no staff trained to respond with dignity. The Act

must now move from "accessibility features" to accessibility ecosystems.

Third, certification has become both an enabler and a gatekeeper. URD can simplify access, but when disability certification is delayed, medically narrow, digitally difficult, or unavailable in rural areas, it can block the very benefits it is meant to deliver. A rights-based system must not make disabled people endlessly prove their existence.

Fourth, implementation is fragmented. Disability commissioners often lack adequate powers, staff, and follow-through. Grievance redressal remains weak. Many institutions comply on paper, but not in spirit. Equal opportunity policies, accessibility audits, reservations, inclusive education, and reasonable accommodations need public dashboards, timelines, penalties, and monitoring.

Fifth, the law needs a deeper intersectional imagination. A disabled Dalit woman, a deaf child in a rural school, a neurodivergent student in a competitive exam system, a person with psychosocial disability seeking employment, or a wheelchair user in a climate-vulnerable settlement does not experience disability alone. Poverty, caste, gender, language, region, climate risk, and digital exclusion shape access to rights.

The next decade must therefore be about implementation, with teeth. India needs a national accessibility compliance mission with local government accountability. Every municipality should conduct disability-led access audits of streets, schools, hospitals, public transport, courts, shelters, and digital services. Public procurement must make accessibility mandatory. No public infrastructure should be approved, funded, or inaugurated unless it meets universal design standards.

Inclusive education must shift from admission to belonging: trained teachers, classroom accommodations, accessible materials, assistive technology, anti-bullying systems, and support for neurodivergent learners. Employment must move beyond reservation to retention, promotion, workplace accommodations, private-sector accountability, and dignified livelihoods. Most importantly, disabled people must be involved in designing, monitoring, and evaluating the law's implementation. "Nothing about us without us" cannot remain a mere slogan. The RPwD Act has already changed what disabled people can claim. The next decade must change what disabled people can actually live.



Purteet Singh Singhal

Purteet Singh Singhal is a disability inclusion activist and an accessibility consultant. He is the founder/curator of *Green Disability*, working at the intersection of climate change, disability inclusion & mental health. The views expressed are personal.

- **Key Terms and Conceptual Framework**

- **Rights of Persons with Disabilities (RPwD) Act, 2016:** Landmark legislation enacted by the Indian Parliament to align national law with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD). It replaced the Persons with Disabilities Act, 1995, expanding recognised disabilities from 7 to 21 categories and shifting the statutory focus from medical charity to enforceable human rights.
- **Benchmark Disability:** A legal threshold defined under Section 2(r) of the RPwD Act, specifying a person with not less than 40% of a specified disability, as certified by a designated medical authority. This status acts as a key gateway for statutory entitlements, including reservations in higher education institutions (minimum 5%) and public employment (minimum 4%).
- **Reasonable Accommodation:** Necessary and appropriate modifications and adjustments—which do not impose a disproportionate or undue burden—required in a specific case to ensure persons with disabilities enjoy their rights equally with others.
 - *Example:* Granting additional time, screen-reading software, or a human scribe to a candidate with visual or motor impairments during a civil services examination.
- **Universal Design:** The proactive design of products, environments, programs, and services to be usable by all people, to the greatest extent possible, without the need for specialized adaptation or retrofitting.
 - *Example:* Constructing a public transit terminal with level entrances, wide automated doors, and tactile paving integrated into the original floor design, rather than retrofitting an isolated steel ramp on the side.
- **Unique Disability ID (UDID):** A national digital initiative managed by the Department of Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities (DEPwD) to build a centralized database for persons with disabilities and issue a single smart card for cross-state verification and seamless welfare delivery.
- **Accessible India Campaign (Sugamya Bharat Abhiyan):** A nationwide policy drive launched in 2015 aimed at creating a barrier-free environment across three key pillars: the built environment, transportation ecosystems, and Information and Communication Technology (ICT) systems.
- **Intersectionality in Disability:** An analytical framework recognizing that disability does not exist in isolation. It intersects with social stratifiers such as caste, gender, economic status, rurality, and age, multiplying structural disadvantage and exclusion.
 - *Example:* A rural Dalit woman with a physical impairment faces compounded discrimination arising simultaneously from patriarchal norms, caste oppression, economic deprivation, and physical inaccessibility.

- **Main Arguments and Substantive Issues**

- **The Conceptual Shift: From Welfare to Rights**

- The statutory landscape governing disability in India underwent a major paradigm shift with the enactment of the RPwD Act, 2016. The law discarded the traditional medical and charity-based perspectives—which treated disabled individuals as passive recipients of state welfare—and established a rights-based constitutional framework. It formally codified rights to dignity, personal autonomy, non-discrimination, inclusive education, and full social participation. Crucially, the legislation established positive obligations on the State and private entities to dismantle structural barriers.

- **Role of the Judiciary as an Enforcer**

- The higher judiciary has played a crucial role in operationalizing the provisions of the 2016 Act. In landmark rulings such as *Vikash Kumar v. UPSC*, the Supreme Court established that reasonable accommodation is a fundamental component of substantive equality. The Court affirmed that access to reasonable accommodation is not restricted solely to individuals meeting the 40% benchmark disability threshold; rather, it extends to anyone facing physical or structural barriers to equal participation. The judiciary has repeatedly affirmed that failing to provide reasonable accommodation constitutes direct discrimination under Article 14 of the Constitution.

- **Administrative Gains vs. Implementation Reality**

- Administrative initiatives such as the Unique Disability ID (UDID) project and the Accessible India Campaign have helped normalize disability rights within mainstream policy conversations. However, a significant gap remains between legislative intent and practical execution:

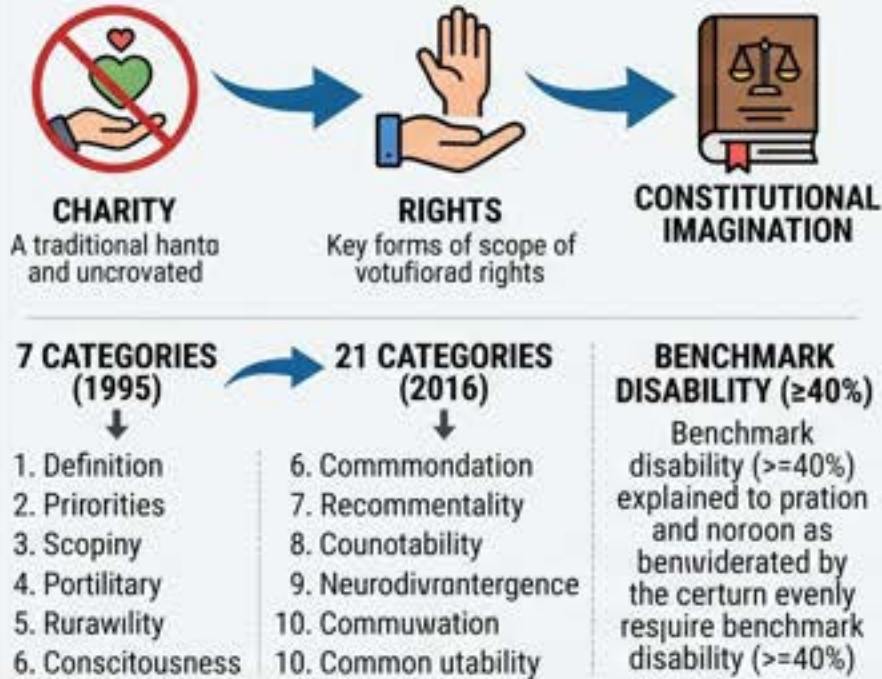
- **The Data Deficit:** Official data sources, such as Census 2011, identify 2.68 crore persons with disabilities (2.21% of the population). In contrast, the World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that approximately 16% of the global population lives with significant disability. This under-counting leads to systematic under-budgeting, poor urban planning, and policy invisibility.
- **Fragmented Accessibility:** Public policy frequently reduces "accessibility" to isolated physical retrofits, such as installing a single concrete ramp at a building entrance. True accessibility requires an integrated ecosystem: accessible feeder transport, tactile pathways, low-floor buses, usable toilets, screen-reader-compliant digital platforms, and trained personnel.
- **Certification as a Bureaucratic Gatekeeper:** While the UDID project aimed to streamline service delivery, disability certification often functions as a bottleneck. Rigid medical boards, complex digital application portals, and a lack of rural assessment infrastructure turn certification into a barrier, forcing individuals to repeatedly prove their impairment to access basic constitutional rights.
- **Weak Institutional Enforcement:** State and Central Commissioners for Persons with Disabilities frequently lack adequate statutory enforcement powers, dedicated investigative staff, and execution mechanisms. As a result, non-compliance with equal opportunity policies and accessibility standards carries few practical consequences.

- **Historical Evolution of Disability Policy in India**
- **Pre-Independence Era: Charitable and Institutional Models**
 - During the colonial period, state intervention in disability was minimal and largely confined to institutional containment, custodial care, and legal guardianship under statutes like the Indian Lunacy Act, 1912. Disability was viewed primarily through a medical or charitable lens, with care left to private philanthropists, religious trusts, and families.
- **Post-Independence to 1980s: The Medical Rehabilitation Phase**
 - Following independence, the State adopted a welfare-oriented, medical rehabilitation model. Policies were managed primarily through social welfare departments and focused on physical rehabilitation, vocational training centers, and sheltered employment. Disabled citizens were viewed as targets of welfare rather than rights-bearing agents, with little policy emphasis on environmental accessibility, non-discrimination, or civil rights.
- **The 1990s: Initial Legislative Recognition**
 - The UN Decade of Disabled Persons (1983–1992) and the Proclamation on Full Participation and Equality of People with Disabilities in the Asian and Pacific Region (1992) pressured India to establish statutory safeguards.
 - **The Persons with Disabilities (Equal Opportunities, Protection of Rights and Full Participation) Act, 1995:** India's first major comprehensive disability law. It recognized 7 categories of disability, mandated a 3% reservation in public sector employment, and introduced basic provisions for non-discrimination in public infrastructure. However, its framework remained predominantly welfare-centric, lacked penal sanctions for non-compliance, and treated accessibility as a discretionary goal rather than a binding statutory duty.
- **The UNCRPD Catalyst (2006–2007)**
 - India signed and ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) in 2007. This international commitment required member states to replace welfare-oriented laws with comprehensive human rights legislation, recognizing legal capacity, accessibility, and reasonable accommodation as fundamental entitlements.
- **Enactment of the RPwD Act, 2016 and Beyond**
 - To meet its UNCRPD obligations, Parliament passed the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016. This law repealed the 1995 Act, expanded recognized conditions from 7 to 21 (including acid attack survivors, Parkinson's disease, and neurodivergent conditions), increased job reservations to 4%, and introduced penal provisions for offenses against disabled persons. Subsequent initiatives—including the Accessible India Campaign, the UDID project, and proactive judicial interventions—have continued to shape India's contemporary disability rights landscape.



DECODING THE RPWD ACT, 2016: A DECADE OF PROGRESS AND CHALLENGES IN INDIA

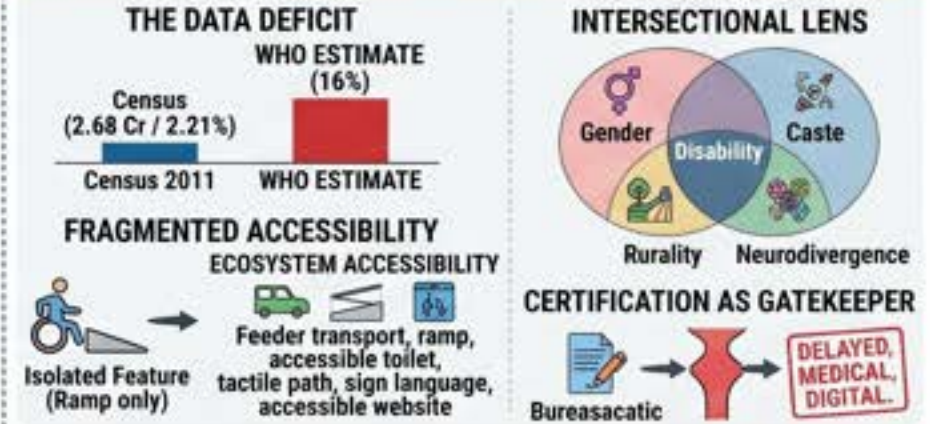
FROM WELFARE TO RIGHTS: A PARADIGM SHIFT



A DECADE OF ACHIEVEMENTS



IMPLEMENTATION SHORTCOMINGS (THE CRUCIAL GAPS)



UPSC & NCERT LINKAGES



THE WAY FORWARD: IMPLEMENTATION WITH TEETH



- **Logical and Philosophical Foundations**
- **The Social Model vs. The Medical Model**
- The philosophical core of modern disability jurisprudence rests on the transition from the **Medical Model** to the **Social Model of Disability**:
 - **Medical Model:** Treats disability as an individual physical or mental deficit requiring medical treatment, cure, or charitable assistance. The barrier is viewed as residing entirely within the individual's body.
 - **Social Model:** Distinguishes between "impairment" (a physical, sensory, or cognitive condition) and "disability" (the social, structural, and attitudinal barriers that exclude individuals). Under this framework, a wheelchair user is not inherently disabled by their spinal injury, but rather by a public building built exclusively with stairs.
- **Constitutional Morality and Substantive Equality**
- The logic of the RPwD Act is rooted in the Indian Constitution's transformative vision:
 - **Substantive Equality (Article 14):** Formal equality—treating everyone identically—often perpetuates inequality when applied to unequal baseline conditions. Substantive equality requires affirmative action, positive state obligations, and reasonable accommodation to ensure equal outcomes.
 - **Non-Discrimination (Article 15):** The constitutional mandate against discrimination extends to institutional structures that exclude disabled individuals from public spaces, education, and employment.
 - **Right to Life with Dignity (Article 21):** The Supreme Court has repeatedly affirmed that the right to life extends beyond mere physical survival to encompass living with human dignity, self-reliance, and autonomy.
- **Amartya Sen's Capability Approach**
- Philosophically, disability policy benefits from Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum's **Capability Approach**. This framework argues that human well-being should be evaluated not merely by income or resource distribution, but by a person's real freedom to achieve valuable "functionings" (what a person can do or be). A person with a disability often faces "conversion handicaps"—requiring higher resources or environmental adaptations to convert primary goods (like education or transport) into actual capabilities.
- **Participatory Democracy: "Nothing About Us Without Us"**
- The political philosophy underpinning disability rights asserts that disabled individuals are active citizens who must participate directly in designing, implementing, and monitoring the policies that affect them. Denying disabled people agency in policymaking reinforces paternalistic attitudes and results in ineffective, poorly designed interventions.

- **Multidimensional Analysis of Disability Issues**
- **Social Dimension**
 - **Attitudinal Barriers and Stigma:** Deeply ingrained cultural prejudices frequently view disability through lenses of sympathy, charity, or past karma, leading to social isolation and marginalization.
 - **Caregiving and Gender Disparities:** The primary responsibility for caregiving falls predominantly on women within households, often restricting their economic independence and educational opportunities due to a lack of institutional community support networks.
 - **Intersection of Poverty and Impairment:** Poverty increases the risk of impairment due to inadequate healthcare, malnutrition, and hazardous working conditions. Conversely, living with an impairment increases economic vulnerability due to high out-of-pocket medical expenses and employment barriers.
- **Political Dimension**
 - **Political Invisibilization:** The lack of reliable census data leads to an undercount of disabled voters, diminishing their political leverage as a recognized voter bloc.
 - **Electoral Inaccessibility:** Despite Election Commission directives, many polling stations lack basic accessibility features such as ramps, tactile Braille signage on EVMs, or accessible political campaign materials, restricting political participation.
 - **Underrepresentation:** Persons with disabilities remain severely underrepresented in municipal bodies, state legislatures, and Parliament, leaving legislative debates largely devoid of lived disability perspectives.
- **Legal Dimension**
 - **Enforcement Deficit:** While the RPwD Act provides strong statutory rights, its enforcement mechanisms remain weak. Section 89 and Section 92 outline penalties for non-compliance and offenses, but convictions remain rare due to prolonged trial procedures and weak investigative capacity.
 - **Guardianship vs. Supported Decision-Making:** Section 14 of the Act introduced "supported decision-making" to replace plenary guardianship. However, lower judicial and administrative systems frequently revert to plenary guardianship, denying individuals their legal capacity in financial and personal matters.
- **Ethical Dimension**
 - **Human Dignity vs. Utilitarian Efficiency:** Urban planning and public resource allocation often prioritize utilitarian cost-benefit models, treating accessibility retrofits as inefficient expenditures for a "small minority" rather than fundamental rights.
 - **Ethics of Universal Inclusion:** A society's ethical maturity can be measured by how it treats its most vulnerable members. Built environments that exclude individuals based on physical or cognitive variations violate core principles of social justice and shared humanity.
- **International Dimension**
 - **Global Commitments:** India is a signatory to the **UNCRPD** and the **Incheon Strategy ("Make the Right Real")**, which set regional benchmarks for disability-inclusive development across Asia and the Pacific.
 - **Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs):** The 2030 Agenda highlights disability inclusion across key targets, including Goal 4 (Inclusive Education), Goal 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), Goal 10 (Reduced Inequalities), and Goal 11 (Sustainable Cities).
- **Economic Dimension**
 - **Macroeconomic Losses:** According to International Labour Organization (ILO) estimates, excluding persons with disabilities from the workforce results in an annual loss of 3% to 7% of Gross Domestic Product (GDP).
 - **Out-of-Pocket Expenditure:** Disabled individuals and their families incur significant extra costs for assistive technologies, private transport, medical care, and personal assistance, reducing household savings and disposable income.
 - **Private Sector Inclusion:** While public sector reservation exists, the private sector has largely treated disability hiring as a Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) initiative rather than an economic imperative for talent diversity and innovation.

- **Linkages with NCERT Textbooks**

- **Class 6 Political Science (Social and Political Life - I): Chapter 2 - "Diversity and Discrimination"**

- *Linkage:* Introduces young learners to prejudice, stereotypes, and the historical usage of terms like "handicapped." It provides foundational discussions on how social attitudes construct barriers for children with special needs.

- **Class 11 Political Theory: Chapter 3 - "Equality" & Chapter 4 - "Social Justice"**

- *Linkage:* Explores the theoretical distinction between formal equality (treating everyone identically) and substantive equality (providing special measures and reasonable accommodations). It supplies the conceptual foundation for understanding affirmative action under the RPwD Act, 2016.

- **Class 11 Sociology (Introducing Sociology): Chapter 4 - "Culture and Socialisation"**

- *Linkage:* Examines how social norms and institutional practices socialize individuals to view physical and cognitive differences through medicalized or discriminatory lenses.

- **Class 12 Sociology (Indian Society): Chapter 5 - "Patterns of Social Inequality and Exclusion"**

- *Linkage:* Contains a dedicated section on disability as a structural dimension of social stratification. It explains how disability intersects with poverty, gender, and caste, emphasizing that physical impairments are transformed into social disabilities through structural exclusion.

Linkages with the UPSC CSE Syllabus

UPSC Paper	Relevant Syllabus Topic	Context & Application
GS Paper 1	<i>Social Empowerment; Salient features of Indian Society; Diversity of India.</i>	Analysis of disability as a social stratification dimension; intersectionality with caste, gender, and rurality.
GS Paper 2	<i>Welfare schemes for vulnerable sections; Mechanisms, laws, institutions, and Bodies constituted for PwDs; Issues relating to Health, Education, Human Resources.</i>	Critical evaluation of the RPwD Act, 2016, judicial judgments (Vikash Kumar), UDID project, and institutional roles of Disability Commissioners.
GS Paper 3	<i>Inclusive growth and issues arising from it; Infrastructure (Transport, Urban Development, ICT).</i>	Economic cost of exclusion; universal design in national infrastructure projects, Smart Cities Mission, and digital accessibility standards.
GS Paper 4	<i>Ethics and Human Interface; Human Values; Empathy and Compassion towards vulnerable sections; Attitude change.</i>	Ethical imperatives of dignity; dismantling attitudinal stigma; administrative empathy in public service delivery.

- **Strategic Way Forward**
- **Data Reform and Inclusive Enumeration**
 - Adoption of international measurement tools, such as the **Washington Group Questions on Disability Statistics**, in the upcoming Census and National Family Health Survey (NFHS). These tools evaluate functional difficulty (e.g., seeing, hearing, walking, remembering) rather than relying on narrow medical diagnoses, yielding more accurate population estimates for resource allocation.
- **Establishing a National Accessibility Compliance Mission**
 - Transition from voluntary accessibility campaigns to a statutory **National Accessibility Compliance Mission**. This body should possess the authority to conduct mandatory audits of public buildings, transit systems, commercial spaces, and digital platforms.
 - Enforce strict universal design standards during the public procurement stage: no public infrastructure project should receive budgetary approval, clearance, or inauguration without an accredited accessibility compliance certificate.
- **Streamlining and Decentralizing Certification**
 - Shift disability certification away from centralized, hospital-based medical boards. Integrate initial screenings into Primary Health Centers (PHCs) and Community Health Centers (CHCs) using mobile health teams and tele-assessment tools.
 - Ensure full interoperability of the UDID system across all state welfare schemes to eliminate redundant verification processes for citizens moving between states.
- **Building Inclusive Educational and Employment Ecosystems**
 - **Education:** Move beyond basic school enrolment toward true classroom belonging. This requires mandatory pre-service training for teachers in inclusive pedagogy, universal provision of assistive technologies, screen-reader-accessible textbooks, and formal support structures for neurodivergent students.
 - **Employment:** Expand disability inclusion beyond public sector quotas into the private sector through tax incentives, accessible workplace mandates, reasonable accommodation subsidies, and fair promotion policies.
- **Strengthening Institutional Enforcement Mechanisms**
 - Empower Central and State Disability Commissioners by granting them civil court powers, independent investigative wings, and dedicated enforcement budgets.
 - Establish public real-time dashboards to track accessibility audit progress, equal opportunity policy compliance, grievance resolution, and backlog clearing for public sector reservations.

- GS Paper 2 (2020):** "India is far away from the goal of inclusive growth without proper inclusion of persons with disabilities in the mainstream of society." Comment in the context of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016.
- **GS Paper 2 (2018):** "The Accessible India Campaign (Sugamya Bharat Abhiyan) was launched to achieve universal accessibility for Persons with Disabilities." Discuss its key components and examine how far it has succeeded in creating a barrier-free environment.
 - **GS Paper 4 (Ethics - 2019):** "Empathy and compassion towards the weaker sections of society are vital values for a civil servant." In this context, explain how an administrative mindset can shift from a 'charity-based approach' to a 'rights-based framework' when serving persons with disabilities.

APSC (Assam Public Service Commission) Questions

- **APSC Mains (GS Paper 2 - Social Justice):** "Analyze the implementation challenges of the RPwD Act, 2016 in the North-Eastern region of India, with special reference to Assam. What measures can be taken to improve rural accessibility and disability certification?"
- **APSC Mains (GS Paper 1 - Society):** "Discuss how intersecting social factors like geography, rural poverty, and gender compound the vulnerabilities of disabled persons in Assam. Suggest policy measures for inclusive social protection."

India's GenZ opportunity

Its jobless growth model needs serious course correction



ILLUSTRATION: ANNA KISHINEVA

The student protests at Jantar Mantar, sparked by the Neel paper leak, have now ended, with a promise by the government to bring about educational reforms. But the events of the past month reflect much deeper anger over rising inequality and the lack of jobs in India's growth and development model. The country's demographic dividend risks turning into a disaster if unemployment — especially among educated youth — keeps rising despite headline-grabbing growth in gross domestic product (GDP).

In my November 2022 column in this paper, I had written about why India should not be complacent about youth unrest, given similar movements in neighbouring Bangladesh and Nepal. Rising levels of education without adequate job opportunities are a dangerous mix. As the UNDP's 2012 Human Development Report¹ showed, this was a major contributor to the Arab uprisings at the beginning of this century.

The government initially cracked down on the protests but, as the movement gained momentum, acceded to the demand for a change in the education minister and set up a high-powered examination reform committee. But in addition to exam reforms, which are no doubt important, more widespread course corrections in governance, education and economic policies must be made.

Governance reforms to strengthen the institutions of democracy and the media are important. But in addition, India must also tackle the lack of jobs — especially youth unemployment. This will require fundamental changes in India's development model. India's GDP has grown, but the elasticity of employment-to-GDP growth — how much does employment grow for every percentage point of GDP growth — has been declining from around 0.5 in the 1980s to 0.2 in the 2000s to 0.16 today.

Its employment elasticity is now one of the lowest in the world, compared to over 0.3 for Bangladesh and Vietnam, 0.4 for China and Indonesia, and 0.5 for the Philippines. According to the International Labour Organization (ILO), Vietnam's employment-to-popu-

lation ratio is around 75 per cent, whereas India's has hovered at around 50 per cent. If India's employment-to-population ratio had been 10 percentage points higher, at 60 per cent, that would have meant 145 million more people in regular jobs. Imagine that.

India needs serious second-generation reforms in its labour and land laws, which make it difficult to hire labour formally and make land acquisition so costly. Lowering the costs of power, freight and capital, which are higher in India compared to its competitors, will also be necessary. These must also be accompanied by moving away from its crony-capitalist, big-business-friendly, capital-intensive economic model.



IF TRUTH BE TOLD
AJAY CHHIBBER

Forget China, which has long fringed the head of India and will by next year become a high-income country. Now even Vietnam, which was behind India in 2015, has, in 20 years, moved into the upper-middle-income category, with a gross national income (GNI) per capita of \$4,650 in 2021, while India remains a lower-middle-income country, with a GNI per capita of \$2,360.

The level of investment in Vietnam is not that different from India. Where it differs is that, like China in its initial development phase (see chart), Vietnam relied heavily on export-led foreign direct investment, which in turn created more jobs. In Vietnam, net foreign direct investment (FDI) averaged well over 7 per cent of GDP and, in its early years, reached 10-12 per cent of GDP. In India's case, net FDI never reached even 4 per cent of GDP, averaging closer to 1-2 per cent

The capital challenge

Net foreign direct investment as a share of GDP (%)



Source: World Bank

of GDP, and has been declining as even those who invested in India are pulling their money out.

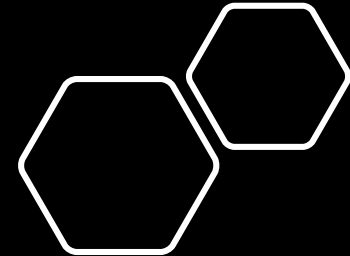
Being part of key trade and investment agreements such as the Asian Free Trade Area, the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership, the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership and the European Union (EU) FTA is a big reason for Vietnam's success in attracting FDI. Vietnam has used these agreements to drive domestic reforms. India has shown no intention of joining any broader trade and investment agreement and has even weakened existing bilateral investment treaties. India has started down the path of bilateral trade agreements but is still struggling to finalise one with the US and ratify the one with the EU.

Vietnam, again like China, has also focused on tourism, attracting over 20 million tourists in 2021, compared with India's 10 million tourists — not counting non-resident Indian home visits. China received around 40 million tourists. India, with its huge cultural heritage, could easily attract 30 million tourists a year if it went to make a concerted effort and use tourists to create lots of jobs. It's a low-hanging fruit for generating employment, which India must focus on.

History shows that most GenZ movements have not led to lasting change. The Arab Spring revolts were largely crushed, with not much change. Recent GenZ revolts in India's neighbourhood have seen changes in regimes but not meaningful reforms. Even in China, major reforms stalled after the brutal crushing of a student-led revolt in Tiananmen Square in 1989 and restarted only in 1992.

India can and should take a different path. Let's hope these protests lead to major course correction in India's jobless growth model and to the wider economic reforms the government has promised. Otherwise, socialism will persist, and India may find it harder to move into the upper-middle-income category in the coming decade and escape the middle-income trap as it approaches 100 years of independence.

The writer is a distinguished visiting scholar at George Washington University, and former country director for Vietnam at the World Bank. <https://tiny.cc/mw289W7c79g27004>
a.chhibber@comcast.net



- **Key Terms and Explanations**

- **Jobless Growth:** A macroeconomic phenomenon where an economy experiences expansion in Gross Domestic Product (GDP) without a corresponding increase in net employment opportunities. For instance, an economy growing at 7% annually through capital-intensive tech hubs while formal job generation remains stagnant illustrates this imbalance.
- **Employment Elasticity of GDP:** A metric measuring the percentage change in employment associated with a 1% change in economic output. An elasticity of 0.16 signifies that for every 10% growth in GDP, total employment expands by a meager 1.6%, highlighting diminishing job creation efficiency.
- **Premature De-industrialization:** Occurs when a developing economy transitions directly from agriculture to service-led growth without first expanding its labor-intensive manufacturing sector. For example, skipping large-scale factory manufacturing to rely primarily on high-skill IT services leaves low-skilled labor unabsorbed.
- **Demographic Dividend vs. Demographic Disaster:** Demographic Dividend refers to economic acceleration resulting from a high ratio of working-age population relative to dependents. If this cohort remains underemployed, educated, and disillusioned, the scenario turns into a Demographic Disaster characterized by social instability.
- **Middle-Income Trap:** A situation where a developing nation reaches a middle-income tier but fails to transition to a high-income nation due to declining competitiveness in low-wage manufacturing and an inability to innovate in high-value industries.
- **Employment-to-Population Ratio:** The proportion of a country's working-age population that is actively employed. A lower ratio (such as 50%) signifies underutilized human resources compared to peer economies operating above 70%.

- **Main Arguments and Substantive Parts**

- The contemporary growth discourse centers on the stark divergence between national income growth and meaningful labor absorption, raising fundamental questions about long-term socioeconomic stability.
 - **Deteriorating Employment Elasticity:** India's capacity to convert economic expansion into viable livelihoods has eroded systematically over recent decades. The employment elasticity of GDP growth has fallen from approximately 0.5 in the 1980s to 0.3 in the 2000s, and further down to 0.16 today. This trajectory lags significantly behind regional peers like Bangladesh (0.3), Vietnam (>0.3), China (0.4), and the Philippines (0.5).
 - **Capital-Intensive Distortion and Crony Capitalism:** The industrial policy architecture heavily favors large, capital-intensive conglomerates through tariffs, capital subsidies, and regulatory protection. This strategy induces premature de-industrialization by penalizing labor-intensive Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs), leaving the country reliant on high-skill services that cannot absorb millions of agricultural migrants.
 - **Anemic Foreign Investment Integration:** Despite high headline domestic growth, Net Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) as a share of GDP remains persistently depressed, averaging below 1-2% and hovering under 1% in recent years. In contrast, export-oriented industrializers like Vietnam historically attracted Net FDI between 7% and 12% of GDP by integrating deeply into regional multilateral trade networks (such as CPTPP and RCEP).
 - **Vulnerability in Services and Underutilized Low-Hanging Sectors:** High-performing service industries (such as IT/ITeS) are facing structural headwinds due to rapid artificial intelligence integration and global macroeconomic tightening, leading to widespread white-collar retrenchments. Concurrently, labor-absorbing sectors like cultural tourism remain vastly underutilized—generating roughly 10 million international visits compared to regional benchmarks of 20 to 40 million.
 - **Governance Failure and Youth Disillusionment:** Educational expansion without institutional integrity (exemplified by recurring public recruitment examination leaks and paper compromises) breeds severe structural frustration among educated youth. Left unaddressed, systemic underemployment risks shifting democratic youth energy into volatile civil unrest.

- **Historical Evolution of the Issue**

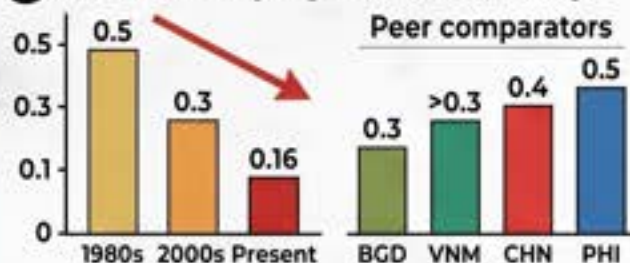
- The structural imbalance between economic growth and job creation is rooted in specific historic policy choices across India's post-independence economic development.
 - **1947–1990 (Planned Economy and Import Substitution):** Early planning frameworks prioritized capital-intensive heavy industries (the Mahalanobis model) under state regulation. While this built a foundational capital base, the rigid licensing framework hindered labor-intensive light manufacturing. Although employment elasticity was relatively high (~ 0.5), overall economic growth remained constrained under the "Hindu rate of growth."
 - **1991 Reforms (LPG Era and Service-Led Divergence):** The Liberalization, Privatization, and Globalization (LPG) reforms unlocked rapid growth, but the primary catalyst was the service sector (software, telecommunications, financial services) rather than labor-absorbing industrialization. Consequently, manufacturing's share of GDP remained stuck near 15-17%, and employment elasticity began its decline toward 0.3.
 - **2000–2010s (High Growth and Informalization):** Rapid GDP growth driven by domestic consumption and services masked deep structural vulnerabilities. Job expansion occurred predominantly in informal, unorganized, and low-wage construction sectors. Attempts to execute sweeping land acquisition and labor law overhauls faced political resistance, keeping factor markets constrained.
 - **2020s–Present (Tech-Disruption, Trade Hesitancy, and Youth Unrest):** The post-pandemic recovery highlighted a growing divergence between corporate profitability and broad-based wage expansion. Rising protectionist tariffs, withdrawal from multilateral regional trade agreements, and persistent capital flight reduced Net FDI inflows. Concurrently, public sector exam irregularities triggered youth-led protests, signaling that educational attainment has outpaced formal job creation.

AXIA IAS ACADEMY

INDIA'S GenZ OPPORTUNITY: Navigating India's Jobless Growth Model

DIAGNOSTIC DIAGRAMS

A India's employment elasticity



B India vs. Vietnam



MULTI-DIMENSIONAL ANALYSIS



Social
Rural-urban migration



Political
Unrest/leaks/
and course



Economic
Weak aggregate demand



International
GVC isolation



Legal
Labor codes delay



Ethical
Distributive justice

HISTORICAL EVOLUTION



UPSC LINKAGES:
Syllabus (GS 3, 4),
NCERT (Class 11, 12)



KEY CONCEPTUAL PILLARS

1. DEMOGRAPHIC DIVIDEND vs. DISASTER

- Ensuring employment for India's youth and managing a skilled labor force effectively.



2. PREMATURE DE-INDUSTRIALIZATION

- Addressing the issue of a shrinking manufacturing base and the need for comprehensive industry support.



3. MIDDLE-INCOME TRAP

- Strategizing to move beyond stagnating growth levels and transitioning to higher economic complexity.



4. CAPITAL-INTENSIVE DISTORTION

- Mitigating the trend of investment favoring technology and capital over broad-based labor absorption.



WAY FORWARD SOLUTIONS



1. PIVOT TO
LABOR-
INTENSIVE
MSMEs



2. FACTOR
MARKET
REFORMS



3. GVC &
TRADE
INTEGRATION



4. CULTURAL
TOURISM
EXPANSION



5. EXAM
SECURITY &
SKILL
ALIGNMENT

- **Logical and Philosophical Base**

- Examining employment trends through logical models and political philosophy reveals underlying structural contradictions within modern growth paradigms.

- **Arthur Lewis Model of Structural Transformation:** Classic developmental economics dictates that sustained growth requires surplus labor to migrate seamlessly from low-productivity agriculture into high-productivity, labor-intensive manufacturing. The current trajectory breaks this logic by jumping directly to capital-intensive services, leaving millions stranded in informal urban gig work or agrarian underemployment.
 - **Amartya Sen's Capability Approach:** Economic development cannot be measured solely by national output or headline GDP metrics; it must expand substantive human freedoms and capabilities. Educated youth lacking secure employment suffer from a deficit of operational capabilities, rendering GDP expansion meaningless to personal agency and social dignity.
 - **Rousseau's Social Contract Theory:** The legitimacy of the modern democratic state rests on an unwritten covenant: citizens invest in education and civic order, and in return, the system offers fair opportunities for upward social mobility. Persistent paper leaks, recruitment corruption, and systemic job shortages breach this contract, leading to alienation and social friction.
 - **Capital-Labor Substitution Paradigm:** Relying heavily on corporate tax cuts, capital subsidies, and automation incentives alters the relative price of factor inputs. Capital becomes artificially subsidized while labor remains constrained by rigid compliance frameworks, logically driving firms toward capital-intensive production despite an abundant workforce.
-

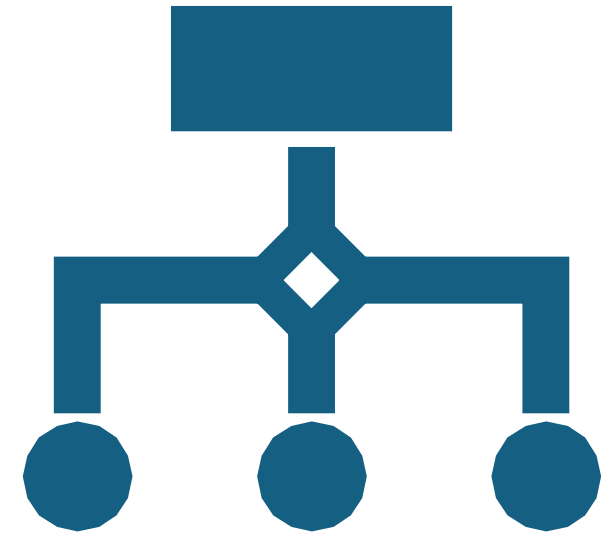
- **Multidimensional Analysis**

- **Social Dimension:** Deepening educational inflation—where higher degrees no longer guarantee middle-class status—creates severe psychological stress and social anxiety among youth. This mismatch weakens social cohesion, exacerbates rural-urban distress migration, and fuels social movements demanding reservation in public employment.
- **Political Dimension:** Persistent unemployment shifts electoral discourse toward short-term welfare transfers, populism, and competitive identity politics rather than long-term structural reforms. Civil unrest driven by youth highlights diminishing public trust in regulatory institutions and recruitment infrastructure.
- **Legal Dimension:** Weak enforcement of public examination security laws undermines state administrative credibility. Additionally, despite the codification of national Labor Codes, delayed state-level notification creates prolonged regulatory ambiguity, discouraging formal enterprise creation and long-term hiring.
- **Ethical Dimension:** A growth model that delivers high wealth concentration to capital owners while depressing real wages for young entrants raises sharp issues of intergenerational equity and distributive justice. State resources spent subsidizing capital-intensive entities while public education yields underemployed youth represents a systemic resource mismatch.
- **International Dimension:** Refusing to join broad regional free-trade frameworks insulates domestic industry but isolates the nation from Global Value Chains (GVCs). Peer nations like Vietnam leverage trade integration and favorable foreign investment frameworks to capture global supply chains departing China, gaining a strategic edge in global manufacturing.
- **Economic Dimension:** Declining employment elasticity directly undermines long-term aggregate demand, as unabsorbed labor restricts consumer spending power. Persistently low domestic capital formation alongside dropping Net FDI risks trapping the economy in a lower-middle-income status, threatening the long-term goal of becoming a high-income nation.

- **Linkages with NCERTs**
 - **Class 11 Indian Economic Development – Chapter 7: *Employment: Growth, Informalisations and Other Issues***
 - *Context:* Explores structural shifts in the labor force, informalization, elasticity of employment, and jobless growth dynamics across different economic sectors.
 - **Class 11 Indian Economic Development – Chapter 3: *Liberalisation, Privatisation and Globalisation: An Appraisal***
 - *Context:* Provides historical context on post-1991 industrial policies, structural adjustments, foreign direct investment trends, and the growth of the service sector versus manufacturing.
 - **Class 12 Introductory Macroeconomics – Chapter 3: *Determination of Income and Employment***
 - *Context:* Details theoretical models of aggregate demand, employment generation mechanisms, investment multipliers, and structural macroeconomic equilibrium.
 - **Class 12 Politics in India Since Independence – Chapter 6: *Democratic Resurgence and Social Movements***
 - *Context:* Illustrates how systemic socioeconomic grievances, youth discontent, and institutional failures historically trigger mass protests, political realignments, and civic demand for democratic accountability.
 - **Class 11 Political Theory – Chapter 8: *Development***
 - *Context:* Analyzes alternative models of development, challenging pure GDP-centric paradigms in favor of human well-being, ecological balance, and equitable growth distribution.



- **Linkages with UPSC CSE Syllabus**
 - **GS Paper 1 (Indian Society):**
 - *Sub-topics:* Salient features of Indian Society, Population and Associated Issues, Urbanization, and Youth Dynamics.
 - *Relevance:* Structural underemployment influences social mobility, changes household demographic decisions, and reshapes urban migration patterns.
 - **GS Paper 2 (Governance, Polity, and Social Justice):**
 - *Sub-topics:* Governance, Institutional Integrity, Transparency, Human Resources Development, and Role of Civil Services.
 - *Relevance:* Institutional reforms in public recruitment systems, paper leak legislation, and the operational contract between citizens and state administrative bodies.
 - **GS Paper 3 (Economic Development & Security):**
 - *Sub-topics:* Indian Economy (Employment, Growth, Development), Industrial Policy, Investment Models, Factor Market Reforms (Land/Labor), and GVC Integration.
 - *Relevance:* Deep-dive analysis of employment elasticity, premature de-industrialization, FDI trendlines, MSME ecosystems, and trade policies.
 - **GS Paper 4 (Ethics, Integrity, and Aptitude):**
 - *Sub-topics:* Public Service Values, Moral Realities of Economic Inequality, Intergenerational Justice, and Distributive Ethics.
 - *Relevance:* Ethical responsibilities of policymakers in resource allocation, ensuring fairness in public competitive hiring, and preventing crony-capitalist distortions.



- **Way Forward**

- **Pivot Toward Labor-Intensive Industrial Policy:**

- Reallocate industrial incentives (such as PLI schemes) toward highly labor-absorptive sectors including textiles, apparel, leather, footwear, and food processing.
- Correct inversion in tariff structures to reduce input costs for domestic small and medium enterprises, enabling them to compete against regional exporters.

- **Second-Generation Factor Market Reforms:**

- Expedite the balanced implementation of the four Labor Codes, ensuring flexibility for employers alongside robust social security nets for informal and gig workers.
- Modernize state-level land banking and leasing frameworks to reduce upfront capital requirements for prospective investors looking to set up manufacturing units.

- **Strategic Trade and Global Value Chain Integration:**

- Re-evaluate participation in comprehensive bilateral and regional free-trade frameworks to lower non-tariff barriers and attract long-term export-oriented foreign investment.
- Modernize Bilateral Investment Treaties (BITs) to restore investor confidence, stabilizing and reversing the decline in Net FDI inflows.

- **Unlocking High-Elasticity Non-Manufacturing Sectors:**

- Overhaul national tourism infrastructure, heritage conservation, and eco-tourism circuits to tap into global travel demand, establishing tourism as a primary engine of local employment.
- Target deep infrastructure investments in logistics, rural connectivity, and cold-chain supply systems to link agricultural surpluses with urban processing hubs.

- **Institutional Security and Skill Framework Overhaul:**

- Enforce strict legal and digital protocols for public recruitment examinations, backed by dedicated statutory bodies to eliminate administrative corruption and paper leaks.
- Align vocational and higher education curricula directly with emerging industry demands (automation, digital services, green energy) to bridge the persistent skill mismatch facing young job candidates.

- **UPSC CSE Mains**

- **2023 (GS Paper 3):** "Faster economic growth requires increased share of the manufacturing sector in GDP, particularly of MSMEs." Comment in the context of the present policy of the Government.
- **2021 (GS Paper 3):** "How far has the doctrine of 'jobless growth' been corrected in the recent past? Analyze the challenges in generating formal employment in the Indian economy."
- **2018 (GS Paper 3):** "Economic growth without social justice leads to uneven development and wide social unrest." Discuss this statement with special emphasis on youth employment in India.
- **2017 (GS Paper 2):** "Quality of higher education and institutional integrity in public examinations are prerequisites to reaping the demographic dividend." Examine.





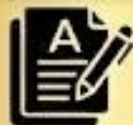
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