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The Enforcement Directorate (ED) recently conducted raids across Punjab and Haryana in connection with the "Donkey Route" human trafficking racket, which illegally smuggled Indian nationals to the United States. These operations are linked to money laundering investigations following the deportation of hundreds of Indians from the U.S. in February 2025.

ED conducts fresh searches in 'U.S. donkey route' case

Agency carries out probes at seven locations in Mansa of Punjab along with Kurukshetra and Karnal in Haryana; this follows leads from earlier raids into an alleged human trafficking racket

Devesh K. Pandey
NEW DELHI

The Enforcement Directorate (ED) on Friday carried out another round of searches in Punjab and Haryana in connection with the U.S. donkey route case involving alleged human trafficking and money laundering.

The searches were conducted at seven locations in Mansa district of Punjab, along with Kurukshetra and Karnal in Haryana.

"This search is based on credible inputs gathered in the previous search operation conducted on July 9 at 11 locations. The inputs show that the second-leg persons/human traffickers were used to arrange illegal route resources outside India in connivance with donkers (human trafficking conduits)," said an official.

Earlier searches were carried out in Amritsar, Sangrur, Patiala and Moga in Punjab, and Ambala, Kurukshetra and Karnal in Haryana.

The operations form part of the ED's probe into the money laundering angle linked to the illegal immigration of individuals



On the radar: The United States sent back hundreds of Indian immigrants on a military plane in February. The ED is investigating a money laundering angle linked to illegal immigration. REUTERS

deported from the United States in February.

Based on 17 FIRs

The ED investigation is based on 17 first information reports (FIRs) registered by the police in Punjab and Haryana against travel agents, visa agents and middlemen who allegedly defrauded individuals seeking to go abroad.

The accused, as per the allegations, had lured victims with false promises of legal air travel and collected about ₹45-50 lakh from each individual.

"However, the agents used to dupe the innocent persons as they were sent

through illegal routes (donkey route) by crossing the borders of many countries illegally through dangerous/jungle routes under the influence of donkers (human trafficking conduits) and the mafia," the agency said.

The ED said the agents, in conspiracy with donkers and other operatives, created threatening circumstances for the victims and their families, coercing them to make additional payments. "Statement of a few deportees were recorded by the ED and further examination of facts revealed names of suspects...", it added.

Earlier this month, the National Investigation Agency (NIA) arrested two alleged donkey route traffickers after conducting searches in Himachal Pradesh and Delhi. The two were reportedly associates of Gagandeep Singh, who was arrested in March.

"Gagandeep was arrested on a complaint of a victim who was illegally trafficked to the U.S. using the infamous 'dunki' route and was deported to India in February this year. The NIA had chargesheeted Gagandeep, a resident of Tilak Nagar in Delhi, in the case on June 27," the agency said.

What is the Donkey Route?

- The “Donkey Route” or “Dunki” route refers to an illegal immigration pathway, often through multiple countries with unsafe and unlawful border crossings.
- Migrants are typically moved through Latin American countries, such as Ecuador or Mexico, and then into the U.S. via dangerous jungle terrains and smuggling networks.
- This method is highly exploitative and run by a global network of traffickers and agents.

Key Issues Highlighted:

1. Human Trafficking:

- Victims were promised legitimate travel to the U.S. but were instead routed illegally.
- Travel agents and traffickers charged ₹45–50 lakh per person, often coercing families into further payments.

2. Money Laundering:

- Proceeds from trafficking were laundered through domestic and international channels.
- ED is probing links between traffickers and money laundering networks, indicating deep-rooted financial crimes.

3. International Implications:

- The U.S. deported over 300 Indian nationals, showing transnational cooperation on illegal immigration.
- Cases like this affect India’s global image and point to the need for international regulatory cooperation.

Agencies Involved:

- Enforcement Directorate (ED): Probing the financial trail under Prevention of Money Laundering Act (PMLA).
- National Investigation Agency (NIA): Arrested traffickers under anti-human trafficking provisions.
- State Police (Punjab and Haryana): Registered 17 FIRs against agents and middlemen.

Ethical & Social Dimensions:

- Highlights the desperation of youth in rural areas seeking better opportunities abroad.
- Reflects failure in employment generation and aspirational mismatch.

- Exploits vulnerabilities of marginalized families, often leading to mental trauma, physical abuse, and loss of life.

Way Forward:

Policy and Legal:

- Strengthen implementation of anti-human trafficking laws like the Trafficking in Persons Bill.
- Need for a dedicated anti-trafficking force with coordination between ED, NIA, and police.
- Crackdown on fraudulent visa/travel agencies with proper licensing and monitoring.

Awareness and Rehabilitation:

- Community outreach to spread awareness against such fraudulent routes.
- Set up support systems for deportees, including counseling, legal aid, and employment assistance.

Bilateral Engagement:

- Collaborate with countries like the U.S., Mexico, Ecuador for intelligence sharing and repatriation protocols.

UPSC Mains Practice Question

Ques: "The increasing trend of illegal immigration via the Donkey Route reveals a deeper socio-economic and governance crisis." Analyze the issue with reference to recent investigations and suggest a multi-pronged strategy to tackle the menace of human trafficking and money laundering. **(150 Words)**

India will host the first International Manuscript Heritage Conference from September 11–13, 2025, in New Delhi. The event aims to revive, digitise, and integrate India's rich manuscript tradition into contemporary academic and cultural discourse under the umbrella of the Gyan Bharatam Mission.

India to host international conference on manuscript heritage on September 11-13

Sreeparna Chakrabarty
NEW DELHI

India will host the first international Manuscript Heritage Conference in September, which will be attended by global scholars, thought leaders, and cultural custodians in the subject.

The three-day conference, titled “Reclaiming India’s knowledge legacy through manuscript heritage”, is being organised from September 11 to 13 in the national capital as part of the launch of the “Gyan Bharatam Mission”.

The conference will also commemorate Swami Vivekananda’s Chicago address (September 11, 1893), symbolising India’s intellectual and spiritual global vision, official sources said.

The Centre had announced the Gyan Bharatam Mission in the Union Budget, 2025-26, for reviving and expanding the vi-



The conference will be graced by eminent dignitaries of India, global scholars, thought leaders, and cultural custodians. FILE PHOTO

sion of the National Mission for Manuscripts launched in 2003. The Gyan Bharatam Mission seeks to preserve, digitise, and disseminate manuscript knowledge, integrate it with modern technologies, and foster a new generation of scholars and institutions to carry the legacy forward.

The conference will be graced by eminent dignitaries of India, and will feature keynotes and participation by global scholars,

thought leaders, and cultural custodians. There will be numerous side events such as an exhibition on Indian manuscripts, one on manuscripts inscribed in the UNESCO Memory of the World, live demonstrations, and workshops, and a special space for startups in the field.

The Union Culture Ministry has also invited original research papers, case studies, and conceptual frameworks to be presented on themes.

Key Highlights:

- **Theme:** “Reclaiming India’s Knowledge Legacy through Manuscript Heritage”

- **Occasion:** Commemorates Swami Vivekananda's iconic address at the World Parliament of Religions (Sept 11, 1893).
- **Organiser:** Ministry of Culture, Government of India
- **Mission involved:** Launch of the Gyan Bharatam Mission, announced in Union Budget 2025–26.
- **Activities:**
 - Keynote sessions by Indian and international scholars
 - Exhibitions (including UNESCO-registered manuscripts)
 - Live manuscript restoration workshops
 - Platform for manuscript-tech startups

Significance of the Initiative:

1. Revival of Intellectual Heritage:

- Indian manuscripts in Sanskrit, Pali, Prakrit, Tamil, Persian, and other languages preserve knowledge in philosophy, science, medicine, astronomy, and literature.
- The conference underscores efforts to reclaim traditional knowledge systems as part of India's civilizational identity.

2. Boost to Cultural Diplomacy:

- The international nature of the event promotes India's soft power, echoing Vivekananda's vision of spiritual universalism and intellectual leadership.

3. Integration with Technology:

- Emphasis on digitisation, AI indexing, and public access to manuscripts underlines the move to make ancient knowledge accessible and research-friendly.

4. Institutional Reforms:

- The Gyan Bharatam Mission will act as an umbrella for:
 - Preservation of rare manuscripts
 - Setting up manuscript universities/research centers
 - Integrating traditional knowledge in school/university curricula

Challenges in Manuscript Preservation:

- Fragmentation of collections in private and institutional hands
- Poor physical condition of manuscripts due to neglect or climate
- Lack of trained conservators and paleographers

- Underfunded digitisation efforts in rural/small archives

Way Forward:

- Establish national manuscript registry and database
- Provide grants and fellowships for manuscript-related research
- Collaborate with UNESCO and global universities for conservation and studies
- Integrate manuscript studies into NEP 2020 and encourage interdisciplinary research

UPSC Mains Practice Question

Ques: India's manuscript tradition is a storehouse of ancient wisdom, but its preservation faces multifaceted challenges. Examine the role of recent government initiatives in reviving India's manuscript heritage.

On July 12, 2025, UNESCO inscribed the "Maratha Military Landscapes" on the World Heritage List during its 47th session in Paris. This global recognition highlights the military ingenuity and architectural excellence of the Maratha Empire.

Key Facts for UPSC Prelims:

What is the "Maratha Military Landscapes"?

- A serial nomination comprising 12 forts that represent the defense strategies, fortification techniques, and landscape adaptation used by Marathas (17th–19th century).
- These sites illustrate the guerrilla warfare tactics and self-sufficient fort ecosystems developed under leaders like Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj.

List of Forts (12 Components):

Located in Maharashtra:

1. Salher Fort
2. Shivneri Fort
3. Lohgad
4. Khanderi Fort
5. Raigad
6. Rajgad
7. Pratapgad
8. Suvarnadurg
9. Panhala Fort
10. Vijay Durg
11. Sindhudurg

Located in Tamil Nadu:

12. Gingee Fort (the only one outside Maharashtra)

Maratha fort systems get UNESCO heritage tag

Press Trust of India

NEW DELHI

‘Maratha Military Landscapes’, representing extraordinary fortification and military system envisioned by the Maratha rulers, was on Friday inscribed on the coveted UNESCO World Heritage List, the UN body announced in a post on X.

The decision was taken during the ongoing 47th session of the World Heritage Committee (WHC) being held in Paris. “New inscription on the @UNESCO #WorldHeritage List: Maratha Military Landscapes of India, #India,” UNESCO said. The nomination for the UNESCO tag was for the 2024-25 cycle.

Its 12 components are – Salher Fort, Shivneri Fort, Lohgad, Khanderi Fort, Raigad, Rajgad, Pratapgad, Suvarnadurg, Panhala Fort, Vijay Durg, and Sindhudurg in Maharashtra, and Gingee Fort in Tamil Nadu.

Prelims Fact:**World Heritage Sites in India (UNESCO):**

- India now has 42 UNESCO World Heritage Sites (as of July 2025).
- This is the first time Maratha-era military architecture has been recognized by UNESCO.
- Gingee Fort, in Tamil Nadu, was used by Shivaji during his southern campaigns.
- These forts reflect hill, coastal, and island fortification systems.

UPSC Prelims Practice Question

Ques: Which of the following forts is part of the 'Maratha Military Landscapes' recently added to the UNESCO World Heritage List?

- A) Red Fort
- B) Raigad Fort
- C) Gwalior Fort
- D) Chittorgarh Fort

Ans : B)

Page 06 : GS 2: Social Justice

The issue of language as a medium of instruction in Indian schools has come under renewed scrutiny amidst the implementation of the National Education Policy (NEP) and the Centre's push for a three-language formula. This has sparked debates on linguistic imposition, individual rights, social justice, and the aspirations of Indian families, particularly from disadvantaged groups.

Core Issues

1. **Medium of Instruction vs. Aspirations** :While pedagogical research supports teaching in the mother tongue at early stages for better learning outcomes, this often clashes with the widespread societal aspiration for English-medium education. English is increasingly seen as a tool of empowerment and social mobility, especially for lower-caste and marginalized communities.
2. **Constitutional and Legal Dimensions** : The Supreme Court's 2014 ruling invalidated Karnataka's 1994 order mandating Kannada as the medium of instruction up to Class 4, affirming children's and parents' rights to choose their medium of education. This judgment reinforced that the state cannot impose a language, respecting individual freedom and constitutional rights under Article 19 (freedom of expression) and Article 21 (right to education).
3. **NEP and Its Political Undertones** :Critics argue that the NEP has an "anti-English" bias, even as demand for English-medium instruction continues to grow. Several states, including Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, Kerala, and Tamil Nadu, have supported English-medium aided schools despite their regional linguistic pride.
4. **Social Equity and Inequality**:The absence of English-medium instruction in government schools forces aspirational families to depend on private schools — often expensive and of poor quality — thereby exacerbating social and educational inequalities. Richer families can afford better access, while poorer families are left with limited or subpar options.
5. **Mother Tongue Dilemma** :In a linguistically diverse country like India, even defining a child's mother tongue is not straightforward. Multilingual households and inter-state

English dreams

Imposing any language as the medium of instruction is unacceptable

English medium education is an aspiration for many Indians, but state policy regarding the medium of instruction has been uneven across time and regions. The ongoing language debate in India, which stems from the renewed efforts of the Bharatiya Janata Party to enforce a three-language policy, has many components, the medium of instruction being one. Educationists generally argue that instruction in the mother tongue helps children achieve better learning goals in their early stages of development. This view is supported by pedagogical research, but it cannot, and does not, operate in isolation from other factors such as constitutional rights and ground realities. India's linguistic diversity and distribution is such that even the question of what is a child's mother tongue can often be a contested one. There is also the constitutional question of freedom of expression and choice. In 2014, after a protracted legal tussle, the Supreme Court of India held that a Karnataka government order of 1994 that made instruction in Kannada mandatory until Class four was not valid under the Constitution. For, children have a right to choose, and the state cannot enforce its view on what is good for them. The rights of private educational institutions to offer education as per market demand is another related issue.

The National Education Policy that is being aggressively pushed by the Centre has a particularly anti-English edge, which is not in line with popular aspiration. Many States that want to promote their local language and culture also want to promote English education and English as a medium of instruction. In Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, Kerala and Tamil Nadu, there are aided English medium schools. The demand for English medium education is growing — this includes the Hindi-speaking regions — which is met largely by sub-standard and expensive private institutions. English skills help individuals and the country in gaining a place in the global services sector. India's subaltern caste groups in particular seek to empower themselves through English education, which remains a currency for upward mobility. If state schools do not offer English medium instruction, relatively richer families could still access it through private schools. In this context, education becomes a continuing reproduction and even aggravation of social inequalities, which is the exact opposite of its purpose. The fact is that knowledge of English is empowering and convertible for other outcomes. There can be a debate on whether it should be the medium of instruction at the primary level, but a basic test of any policy is in how it advances the ambitions of the most disadvantaged sections.

migration make it hard to enforce a single language policy uniformly.

Critical Analysis

- The push to mandate regional languages as the sole medium of instruction in early education overlooks ground realities. Aspirations tied to English proficiency are legitimate and stem from the socio-economic mobility it offers in the globalized world.
- Education policy should reflect both pedagogical wisdom and social ambition. A rigid, top-down imposition of language undermines the democratic and pluralistic fabric of Indian society.
- The NEP's goals must be balanced with practical execution that does not penalize the already disadvantaged. Promoting regional languages should not mean sidelining English, especially when it acts as a bridge to global opportunities.
- Policy must aim for inclusive access to quality English education within public schools, rather than ceding that space entirely to private players.

Conclusion

Language in education is not just a cultural or pedagogical question; it is deeply political and social. Any effective policy must account for India's diversity, constitutional values, and the legitimate aspirations of its citizens. The real test lies in whether such policies uplift the most marginalized or further entrench inequities in access and opportunity.

UPSC Mains Practice Question

Ques: The imposition of any language as a medium of instruction violates the constitutional spirit of choice and diversity. Critically examine this statement in the context of India's National Education Policy. (150 Words)

Artificial Intelligence (AI) is redefining the contours of India's manufacturing sector. From predictive maintenance to generative design, AI is no longer a futuristic tool but a transformative force deeply embedded in factory floors and supply chains. This evolution is aligned with India's broader goals of digital transformation, industrial competitiveness, and economic self-reliance.

Smarter, faster, stronger: how Artificial Intelligence is transforming the manufacturing landscape

The Hindu Bureau

Step inside a modern factory and you might find something quietly extraordinary. Machines no longer wait to fail; they signal in advance. Robots don't just repeat tasks; they adapt and respond. And decisions once made on instinct are now driven by real-time data.

This is the new face of manufacturing, where artificial intelligence (AI) is not just an upgrade but a fundamental shift in how things are made, moved and managed.

Across India, from long-established facilities to newly-built plants, AI is being integrated into every layer of production. It is helping manufacturers increase output, reduce waste, adapt to shifting demands and even design more intelligently. Backed by national policy and rising enterprise ambition, India's factories are becoming more agile, more precise and more globally competitive.

Sector on move

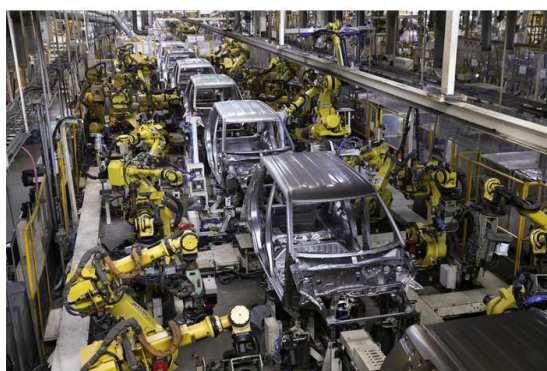
The global AI-in-manufacturing market is projected to grow from \$4.1 billion in 2024, to \$5.8 billion in 2025, and is expected to surpass \$25 billion by 2029, according to The Business Research Company.

A survey found 44% of manufacturing leaders were cautious about scaling generative AI

In India, adoption is accelerating. TeamLease data shows AI use across industries stood at 48% in FY2024, with manufacturing alone rising from 8% to 22% in just one year. This is supported by policy initiatives like the Government of India's ₹10,372 crore AI Mission, which is investing in infrastructure, talent and indigenous models.

"From predictive maintenance to intelligent automation, AI and GenAI are turning manufacturing industries into self-optimising systems. Real-time data is being leveraged to drive smarter decisions, higher throughput and more sustainable, customer-centric outcomes. When combined with responsible AI frameworks, this shift drives both operational excellence and enhanced customer value," says Sanjay Mittal, senior partner and industrial sector leader, IBM Consulting India & South Asia.

Intelligence across floor
AI is powering improvements across every layer of the factory. On the shop



Vaulting to the future: Artificial Intelligence will be central to India's ambition of becoming a \$5 trillion economy.

floor, predictive maintenance uses sensor data to anticipate equipment failures, reducing downtime by up to 30%, according to McKinsey. AI vision systems identify micro-level defects in real time, improving quality assurance.

Cobots—collaborative robots guided by AI—support workers in physically demanding or repetitive tasks. These machines respond to human cues, enabling safer, more efficient man-machine collaboration.

"Today, CPCL generates about 1 TB of data daily. AI-powered CCTVs are helping

ensure SOP compliance, while machine learning supports predictive maintenance and smart procurement. Digital twins and centralised safety monitoring are our focus to steadily transform our operations," says H. Shankar, managing director, Chennai Petroleum Corporation Limited.

Further upstream, generative AI accelerates product development.

Digital twins simulate layouts, energy use and asset health, helping engineers optimise operations virtually. In planning and logistics, AI enhances forecasting

and enables more agile scheduling. IBM estimates that AI-led planning improves responsiveness by over 20%.

"At ZF Group in India, we're integrating smart manufacturing technologies like AI, robotics, and automation to transform our operations.

"AI is helping us redesign workflows by reducing task complexity and enhancing labour flexibility, empowering shop-floor teams to manage more intricate processes.

"AI-powered vision systems are also improving quality control by eliminat-



ing fatigue-related errors and increasing inspection efficiency," says Akash Passey, president, ZF Group India

Digital backbone

AI draws strength from a wider digital ecosystem that enables speed, scale, and integration.

At the edge, IoT sensors capture real-time data from machines, materials, and the environment. Edge computing allows instant responses for tasks like robotic actuation and safety control.

Cloud platforms provide the scale to train models, run digital twins, and coordinate cross-site operations.

These platforms allow AI to be deployed flexibly and integrated into existing enterprise systems.

Emerging technologies such as autonomous control systems and agentic AI

offer even more adaptability. These systems learn, plan and optimise processes with minimal human input. Crucially, these layers are connected through APIs and integration hubs that link AI with ERP, supply chain, and production systems. This ensures insights are shared across the organisation to enable better decision-making.

More than efficiency

AI creates value at two levels. First, through operational hygiene.

Predictive maintenance, automated inspections, and real-time stock tracking are fast becoming industry norms. These improvements lower costs and improve compliance, but are no longer enough to differentiate.

"We are now exploring AI-driven process optimisation to improve yields and reduce energy use, de-

playing drones for safer inspections, and planning AI-driven logistics.

"As AI and automation evolve, the opportunity to unlock smarter, safer, and more efficient operations continues to grow," adds Mr. Shankar of CPCL.

Second, AI is unlocking innovation. Generative tools speed up design.

AI-driven customisation enables personalisation at scale. Companies that embed AI across their value chain—from R&D to delivery—are more agile, responsive, and future-ready.

Looking ahead

Challenges persist. Integration costs, talent shortages and concerns over data governance and model transparency are slowing broader adoption.

Note of caution

A 2024 Reuters/Ipsos survey found that 44% of manufacturing leaders remain cautious about scaling generative AI due to concerns around hallucinations and explainability.

Still, the direction is clear. AI will be central to India's ambition of becoming a \$5 trillion economy. With the right mix of strategy, skills, and Indian manufacturers are well positioned to lead the next wave of global industrial transformation.

Key Highlights

- AI as a Structural Shift, Not Just a Tool** : AI is revolutionizing manufacturing processes—enhancing decision-making, reducing human error, optimizing resources, and driving innovations in product development and quality control.
- Growing Adoption in India**
 - AI usage in manufacturing rose from 8% to 22% within a year (FY2024).
 - National policies like the ₹10,372 crore AI Mission aim to build infrastructure, promote R&D, and support skill development.

- AI applications range from real-time data analytics, predictive maintenance, automated inspections, to smart logistics.

3. **Operational Impact**

- Predictive maintenance reduces downtime by 30%.
- Cobots enhance human-robot collaboration and workplace safety.
- AI vision systems detect micro-defects, improving quality assurance.
- Digital twins simulate and optimize factory operations virtually.
- AI-led planning boosts agility in supply chain and resource management.

4. **Industrial Examples**

- Chennai Petroleum Corporation Limited (CPCL) uses AI-powered CCTV and machine learning for compliance and predictive maintenance.
- ZF Group India applies AI to simplify workflows, improve inspection quality, and empower its shop-floor teams.

5. **AI's Digital Ecosystem**

- Integration with IoT, cloud computing, and edge devices ensures real-time data exchange and scalability.
- AI works alongside ERP, SCM, and robotics systems through APIs, creating an intelligent and connected manufacturing environment.

6. **Beyond Efficiency – Innovation and Customisation**

- Generative AI supports faster product design and personalised manufacturing.
- AI-driven logistics and drone inspections represent a shift from efficiency-centric to innovation-driven operations.

Challenges and Cautions

- Cost of integration, lack of skilled talent, and data governance issues are barriers to full-scale adoption.
- Concerns persist about AI hallucinations and lack of explainability, particularly with generative models.
- A 2024 Reuters/Ipsos survey noted that 44% of leaders are hesitant about scaling GenAI.

Critical Analysis

- **Strategic Relevance:** AI adoption aligns with India's Make in India and Industry 4.0 ambitions, enhancing global competitiveness and digital maturity.
- **Social and Economic Equity:** By modernizing traditional industries, AI can open up new employment opportunities, though there is a risk of job displacement that must be addressed through upskilling and policy support.
- **Sustainability:** AI can help optimize energy use and resource efficiency, contributing to green manufacturing goals.

- **National Security and Data Sovereignty:** With increasing digital dependence, India must ensure ethical AI frameworks and protect industrial data from exploitation or misuse.

Conclusion

AI is not just improving India's manufacturing sector; it is fundamentally reshaping it. The synergy of AI with digital infrastructure, human capital, and policy direction can place India at the forefront of global manufacturing transformation. However, ensuring inclusive growth, responsible innovation, and long-term sustainability must remain central to this evolution.

UPSC Mains Practice Question

Ques: AI in manufacturing can accelerate India's green transition. Explain how AI contributes to sustainable and energy-efficient production systems. **(150 Words)**

Page : 06 Editorial Analysis

View India's Gender Gap Report ranking as a warning

India is now a global economic power, a digital innovator, and home to the world's largest youth population. But the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Report (2025) is a sobering reminder that when it comes to gender equality, India remains far behind.

Structural issues

India ranks 131 out of 148 countries, with particularly low scores in economic participation and health and survival – the pillars essential for meaningful gender parity. These are not just social indicators. They are signs of a structural failure holding back national progress.

Despite progress in educational attainment, India continues to struggle in ensuring women's health and autonomy. The report shows that India's sex ratio at birth remains among the most skewed in the world, reflecting a persistent son preference. The healthy life expectancy for women is now lower than men's.

Such outcomes point to chronic neglect in reproductive health, preventive care and nutrition, especially for women from lower-income and rural backgrounds. Increased Budget allocations for health, especially at the primary care level, are a necessity to improve women's well-being and their access to basic services, such as education and health care. Without good health, economic inclusion becomes impossible. Nearly 57% of Indian women in the 15 to 49 age group are anaemic – as reported by National Family Health Survey (NFHS)-5 – which reduces their ability to learn, work, or carry pregnancies safely. Such a widespread and correctable issue is emblematic of the broader failure to treat women's health as a national development priority.

India ranks 143rd on the Economic



Poonam Muttreja

is the Executive Director at the Population Foundation of India



Martand Kaushik

is Senior Specialist – Media and Communications at the Population Foundation of India

India must treat gender equality as central to its economic and demographic future

Participation and Opportunity subindex. Women continue to earn less than a third of what men do, and female labour force participation remains stubbornly low. The McKinsey Global Institute, in 2015, had projected that closing gender gaps could add \$770 billion to India's GDP by 2025. Yet, in 2025, India appears to have lost out on the opportunity. At the current pace of progress, it may take over a century to close the global economic gender gap – and India lags behind even that trajectory.

A sidelining

This is not just about employment numbers. Women remain busy in informal and subsistence work and are grossly under-represented in decision-making spaces – from boardrooms to budget committees. The result is a policy ecosystem that repeatedly sidelines women's lived realities. The burden of unpaid care work continues to be a major drag on women's time and agency. Indian women perform nearly seven times more unpaid domestic work than men, as highlighted by the Time Use Survey. Yet, this critical labour remains invisible in national accounting and underfunded in public policy.

Investing in care infrastructure such as childcare centres, elder care services and maternity benefits would not only ease this burden but also enable millions of women to enter or re-enter the workforce. The vacuum in these services reflects both a gender and an economic blind spot.

Central and State governments must begin to account for unpaid care work in their economic and social policy frameworks through time-use surveys, gender budgeting, and direct investment in care infrastructure. India can look to countries such as Uruguay and South Korea, which have

begun integrating care economies into their development plans, with positive results.

Supporting senior citizens

India is at a demographic turning point. While it continues to draw benefits from a young population, its percentage of senior citizens is expected to nearly double by 2050, reaching close to 20% of the population. This demographic shift will predominantly comprise very old women, especially widows, who often experience high dependency. At the same time, fertility rates have already fallen below replacement level, as noted in the NFHS-5. This means that the working-age population will shrink and the care needs of the elderly will rise. The only way to sustain economic growth in this context is to ensure women – half the population – are healthy, supported, and economically active. Gender equality is no longer just a rights issue. It is a demographic and economic necessity.

If women continue to exit or be excluded from the workforce, the dependency ratio will rise even faster, placing greater strain on fewer workers and undermining fiscal stability. Reversing this trend demands integrated policies that connect health, labour and social protection.

India does not lack frameworks or ambition – the slogans are there. What is required is real investment: in public health systems that prioritise women's needs; in care services that redistribute unpaid work, and in policies that see women not as beneficiaries, but as builders of the economy.

The Global Gender Gap Report is not just a ranking. It is a warning: unless India treats gender equality as central to its economic and demographic future, it risks squandering the gains it has worked so hard to achieve.

Paper 02 Social Justice

UPSC Mains Practice Question: "India's low rank in the Global Gender Gap Report reflects systemic neglect rather than policy absence. Critically examine the structural challenges to achieving gender equality in India.(150 words)

Context :

India's ranking of 131 out of 148 in the Global Gender Gap Report 2025 serves as a stark reminder of the systemic inequalities that continue to hamper half the population. Despite being a rising global economic power with a youthful demographic advantage, India is underperforming on critical dimensions like economic participation, health, and survival of women.

Key Concerns Highlighted

1. Low Economic Participation

- India ranks 143rd in economic participation and opportunity.
- Women earn less than one-third of what men do.
- Female labour force participation remains abysmally low, and informal work dominates.

2. Health and Survival Gaps

- India continues to have one of the most skewed sex ratios at birth, indicating deep-rooted son preference.
- Women's healthy life expectancy is now lower than that of men.
- 57% of women aged 15–49 are anaemic (NFHS-5), affecting productivity, health, and safe motherhood.

3. The Care Work Crisis

- Indian women spend nearly 7 times more time on unpaid domestic work than men.
- This labour remains invisible in national economic data and ignored in budgetary allocations.
- Lack of investment in care infrastructure like crèches, elder care, and maternity benefits is a policy blind spot.

4. Demographic Implications

- India's senior population is projected to double by 2050, with elderly women (especially widows) forming a large part of it.
- As fertility declines and the working-age population shrinks, economic growth becomes unsustainable without women's full participation.
- Ignoring this trend could increase the dependency ratio and burden the economy.

Critical Analysis

- **Structural Neglect:** The gender gap is not due to lack of awareness or legal frameworks but failure of implementation and prioritization. Despite schemes and slogans, outcomes remain poor.
- **Economic Opportunity Lost:** A 2015 McKinsey report had estimated that closing the gender gap could add \$770 billion to India's GDP by 2025. That window of opportunity is closing without significant gains.

- **Rights vs. Necessity:** Gender equality must shift from being framed as a social justice issue to a strategic economic imperative. Healthy, empowered women are crucial for sustaining India's demographic dividend and ensuring long-term growth.
- **Policy Disconnect:** The absence of gender-disaggregated data in economic planning leads to ineffective and gender-blind policies. This results in persistent exclusion of women from decision-making spaces.
- **Global Best Practices:** Countries like Uruguay and South Korea have shown success by integrating care economy investments into national plans. India must follow suit with gender budgeting, time-use surveys, and public investment in care systems.

Way Forward

1. **Prioritise Women's Health:** Strengthen primary healthcare, with a special focus on reproductive health, nutrition, and anaemia control.
2. **Formalise and Recognise Unpaid Work:** Use Time Use Surveys and include care work in national GDP accounting. Provide social security to women engaged in unpaid labour.
3. **Invest in Care Infrastructure:** Create childcare centres, elder care, and maternity support systems, especially in rural and semi-urban areas.
4. **Boost Female Workforce Participation:** Encourage flexible employment, skill development, and safe workspaces. Policies must enable entry and re-entry of women into the formal economy.
5. **Integrate Gender in Economic Planning:** Gender budgeting must become mandatory across departments, and women's representation in economic and governance institutions must be increased.

Conclusion

India stands at a crucial crossroads. While its demographic and digital progress is noteworthy, it risks undermining its own future by sidelining half its population. The Global Gender Gap Report should not be dismissed as just a poor ranking — it is a strategic warning. If India fails to make gender equality a core economic priority, it risks squandering the gains of its demographic dividend and economic growth.
