

DAILY **CURRENT AFFAIRS**

SPECIAL FOR UPSC & GPSC EXAMINATION

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Page 01 : GS 3 – Environment /Prelims

The Supreme Court, in a recent 2–1 majority judgment, has recalled its earlier May 2024 verdict that had declared *ex post facto* (retrospective) environmental clearances (ECs) as illegal. The new judgment allows retrospective ECs in “exceptional circumstances,” arguing that stopping major public infrastructure projects would have a devastating impact on economy and development. Justice Ujjal Bhuyan issued a strong dissent, calling the move a retreat from environmental jurisprudence and a “benefit to violators.”

SC recalls verdict rejecting green clearances

The majority 2-1 verdict upholds pleas in public interest; CJI says it would have ‘devastating’ effect

Justice Bhuyan records a sharp dissent, says court is backtracking for the sake of violators

In May, the court said retrospective clearances to regularise constructions were clearly illegal

Krishnadas Rajagopal
NEW DELHI

A three-judge Bench of the Supreme Court, in a majority judgment on Tuesday, recalled its May 16 verdict declaring the Centre’s grant of *ex post facto* or retrospective environmental clearances (ECs) to building projects and constructions a “gross illegality” and an “anathema”.

Chief Justice of India B.R. Gavai, who is retiring on November 23, said in his separate opinion that the May 16 judgment, if allowed to continue to operate, would have a “devastating effect” and “thousands of crores of Rupees would go to waste”.

Justice Ujjal Bhuyan recorded a sharp dissent in

his 97-page opinion. He termed the review judgment an “innocent expression of opinion” which overlooked the “very fundamentals of environmental jurisprudence”.

The separate individual opinions of the Chief Justice and Justice Bhuyan clashed, with the latter saying he was pained to see the country’s highest court “backtracking on sound environmental jurisprudence” for the sake of violators, even as the “deadly Delhi smog reminds us everyday about the hazards of pollution”.

Justice Bhuyan was a member of the two-judge Bench, headed by the now-retired Justice A.S. Oka, which had delivered the May 16 judgment.

‘Crafty drafting’

The May judgment had held that granting retrospective clearances in any

form to regularise illegal constructions was clearly illegal. The court had struck down a 2017 notification and 2021 office memorandum (OM) of the Union government, which in effect recognised the grant of *ex post facto* ECs.

It had found the Centre guilty of “crafty drafting” to clear illegal constructions through retrospective ECs.

The two-judge Bench had concluded that the government was only protecting the illegal actions of project proponents who started building or operations in these illegal constructions without obtaining the prior EC mandated by environmental protection laws.

The Chief Justice reasoned that striking down retrospective ECs would lead to the demolition of multi-crore private and public projects either in use

Divergent views

The Supreme Court’s majority verdict and dissenting voice focus on different aspects of retrospective environmental clearances

CJI B.R. Gavai, Justice K. Vinod Chandran uphold review petitions: Continuation of the May 16 verdict striking down *ex post facto* EC, will have a “devastating” impact on economy and development

Justice Ujjal Bhuyan finds no case for review: *Ex post facto* EC is anathema to the environment. Upholding the review would seem like the SC backtracking when a deadly smog is choking Delhi. A false narrative is being created, pitting the environment against development

Projects likely to be affected:

■ 24 Central projects worth ₹8,293 crore

■ 29 State-level projects worth ₹11,168 crore

■ Loss to public exchequer to the tune of nearly ₹20,000 crore

or under construction, employing hundreds.

Chief Justice Gavai questioned the need for demolition of these structures when they could continue by paying heavy penalties. Many projects, including an investment by the Steel Authority of India (SAIL), a

962-bed AIIMS hospital in Odisha, a greenfield airport in Karnataka, and the Central Armed Police Forces Institute of Medical Sciences in Delhi, were pending as a result of the May 16 judgment, he wrote. The CJI said judicial precedents of the court

have held that *ex post facto* ECs cannot be declined with “pedantic rigidity”.

Ex post facto approval should not be withheld only as a penal measure, he said, adding that projects can be cleared retrospectively in exceptional circumstances and not as a routine. The top judge asked himself the question of whether it would be in public interest to demolish all these projects and throw the money spent on them into the dustbin.

“The question, therefore, is whether such a modus operandi of demolition and re-construction would be in the larger public interest or would in fact be counter-productive to the public interest?” the CJI asked.

Justice Bhuyan dismissed the CJI’s “dustbin” query, saying it was founded on erroneous logic. He said the “question” should be

why the review judgment is so keen to “virtually prod” the Centre to grant *ex post facto* ECs to violators of the law.

‘False narrative’

“It is unfortunate that a false narrative is being created pitting the environment against development... Environment law cannot countenance the notion of an *ex post facto* clearance. This is contrary to both the precautionary principle as well as the need for sustainable development,” Justice Bhuyan observed.

Ecology and development are not adversaries, he stressed, adding that both were part of the Constitutional construct of sustainable development. Retrospective ECs, however, are an anathema – “a thing devoted to evil” – thrust on the environment, said Justice Bhuyan.

Static Context

(A) What is Environmental Clearance (EC)?

- A statutory approval under the Environment Impact Assessment (EIA) Notification, 2006.
- Required before construction/operation of major projects.
- Ensures:
 - Environmental impact assessment
 - Mitigation measures
 - Public consultation

(B) What is Ex-post Facto Clearance?

Approval granted after a project has already begun construction or operation.

Traditionally considered against:

- Precautionary principle
- Environmental rule of law

Current Context

May 2024 Judgment (Two-judge bench: Justice A.S. Oka)

Held that:

- Starting construction without EC is a gross illegality
- Retrospective ECs are clearly illegal
- 2017 and 2021 government notifications enabling retrospective ECs were struck down

New November 2024 Judgment (Three-judge bench)

Majority: CJI B.R. Gavai & Justice K. Vinod Chandran

- Recalled the May 2024 judgment
- Allowed retrospective ECs for exceptional situations
- Stated that stopping major central and state projects would harm public interest
- Around 24 central projects (₹8,293 crore) and 29 state projects (₹11,168 crore) were at stake

Justice Bhuyan's Dissent

- Strongly opposed retrospective ECs
- Warned that SC is "backtracking" and weakening environmental jurisprudence
- Said environment and development are being wrongly portrayed as opposing forces
- Called retrospective ECs an "anathema"

(A) Environment vs Development Debate

- Majority: Developmental projects cannot be halted entirely
- Dissent: Long-term environmental harm outweighs short-term economic gains

(B) Precautionary Principle

- Core of Indian and international environmental law
- Retrospective EC contradicts this principle

(C) Polluter Pays Principle

- Retrospective ECs may allow violators to regularise illegal construction by paying penalties
- Weakens deterrence

(D) Integrity of EIA Process

- Ex-post facto approval enables:
 - Bypassing environmental due process
 - Legalising illegalities
 - Weakening community participation

(E) Sustainable Development

- Both sides agree on sustainable development
- But differ on:
 - "Development first" vs
 - "Environment-centric compliance"

Key Facts

1. Environmental Clearance: EIA Notification, 2006
2. Ex-post facto EC: Previously held illegal by SC in May 2024
3. Constitutionally relevant doctrines:
 - Precautionary principle
 - Polluter pays principle
 - Sustainable development
4. Authorities involved:
 - MoEFCC
 - State Environment Impact Assessment Authority (SEIAA)
5. 2017 & 2021 Government Notifications: Enabled retrospective ECs

Potential MCQs

1. Ex-post facto EC relates to?
→ EIA Notification 2006
2. "Precautionary principle" is associated with?
→ Environmental protection and sustainability
3. Retrospective ECs were earlier declared illegal by?
→ May 2024 verdict of Supreme Court

Conclusion

The Supreme Court's recall of its earlier judgment marks a significant shift in India's environmental jurisprudence. While the majority prioritises economic development and public interest, the dissent highlights the erosion of environmental rule of law.

The debate illustrates the need for a regulatory framework that ensures strict environmental compliance while facilitating sustainable and inclusive development.

UPSC Prelims Practice Question

Ques: Consider the following statements regarding Ex-post facto Environmental Clearance (EC):

1. It is granted before the start of construction or project operations.
2. The Supreme Court (May 2024) held that ex-post facto ECs are illegal and violate the precautionary principle.
3. Environmental clearance is governed under the Environment Impact Assessment (EIA) Notification, 2006.

Which of the statements given above is/are correct?

- (a) 1 and 2 only
- (b) 2 and 3 only
- (c) 1 and 3 only
- (d) 1, 2 and 3

Ans: (b)

UPSC Mains Practice Question

Ques: "The debate over retrospective environmental clearances in India reflects a deeper conflict between environmental jurisprudence and development imperatives." Discuss in the light of the Supreme Court's recent judgments. **(150 Words)**

The Ministry of Electronics and IT has revised the draft Digital Personal Data Protection (DPDP) Rules, 2025 by creating a separate category for persons with disabilities in the consent mechanism. This change comes after concerns were raised that persons with disabilities (PwDs) were earlier clubbed with children, requiring guardian consent, which activists termed problematic and discriminatory.

While disability groups welcomed the separation, they flagged persisting issues such as unclear guardianship laws, lack of implementation illustrations, and language inconsistencies with the DPDP Act.

Separate Section for disabled persons made in DPDP Rules

In the draft rule regarding consent mechanism, persons with disabilities had been clubbed with children; activists hail change but raise concern over lack of clarity on laws of guardianship

Aroon Deep
Abhinav Lakshman
NEW DELHI

Following pushback from disability rights activists, the Electronics and Information Technology Ministry has made changes to the Digital Personal Data Protection Rules, 2025, to separate persons with disabilities from a rule that, in a draft, clubbed them with children over consent from a guardian.

While activists hailed this change, they said concerns over the provisions remain. The notified rules do not contain illustrations on implementation to cover a range of instances where disabled persons may or may not be able to use the Internet freely. Further, the language of the DPDP Act, 2023, continues to group children and persons with disabilities together.

The DPDP Act, 2023, and the rules significantly restrict what minors can do online, such as setting up a social media account, without a parent's consent. In the draft rules, this requirement was spelled out in a section that included persons with disabilities, caus-

Step by step

Some helpful reforms have come through in the Digital Personal Data Protection Rules, 2025, to benefit persons with disabilities

REVISED TERMS

- Separation from children in consent rules termed a major win for disability rights
- The restrictions relating to behavioural monitoring, tracking, targeted advertising that apply to children do not apply to persons with disabilities anymore



REMAINING CONCERNS

- No illustrations for implementation scenarios
- Language in DPDP Act still groups children & persons with disabilities
- Guardianship laws unclear (NT Act vs RPWD Act)

ing concern among disability rights groups.

Nipun Malhotra, of the Nipman Foundation, which has been advocating for changes to the Act and rules, said it was a "major victory" to have the Sections governing consent mechanisms for children and persons with disabilities separated. "The restrictions relating to behavioural monitoring, tracking, targeted advertising that apply to children do not apply to persons with disabilities any more. These are useful features for persons with disabilities," he said. However, he

noted that concerns remain regarding the practicalities of implementing the rules and the language in the principal Act, where children and persons with disabilities are included in the same Section.

The part of the rules that deals with consent for children's data includes multiple illustrations of different scenarios under which consent should be obtained, along with a Schedule that exempts and clarifies these requirements. While the separation of the Sections has clarified that these restrictions will not be applicable to persons

with disabilities, the Section for persons with disabilities does not have any illustrations to capture the nuances of how guardianship operates, a key issue with the draft rules as pointed out in a report by the policy think tank PAC-TA and the NGO Saksham Disability.

Another issue pointed out by activists and civil society organizations was that the draft rules did not clarify which law of guardianship for persons with disabilities – either the National Trust for Welfare of Persons with Autism, Cerebral Palsy, Mental Retardation, and Multiple Disabilities Act, 1999, or the Right of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016 – would be considered for implementation.

The Saksham report raised concerns about this, given that under the NT Act, the need for guardianship is partly determined by a person's "decision-making capacity", a term that the 1999 law does not clearly define. This, activists say, is not in consonance with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, while guardianship under the RPWD Act aligns with it.

Static Context

(A) Digital Personal Data Protection Act, 2023

- Governs processing of digital personal data
- Key principles: Consent, purpose limitation, data minimisation
- Special protections for children and certain categories of vulnerable persons

(B) Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016 (RPwD Act)

- Defines 21 categories of disabilities
- Ensures equality, dignity, and non-discrimination
- Introduces "limited guardianship" based on supportive decision-making

(C) National Trust Act, 1999

- Applicable for persons with
 - Autism
 - Cerebral palsy
 - Mental retardation
 - Multiple disabilities
- Deals with legal guardianship

(D) UN Convention on Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD)

- India is a signatory
- Emphasises autonomy, consent, independence

Current Context

Earlier Issue

- Draft DPDP Rules treated PwDs the same as children → needed parental/guardian consent
- Seen as discriminatory and against the principles of independence & autonomy

New Revised Rules

1. Separate section for PwDs
2. Restrictions on behavioral tracking, targeted advertising will not automatically apply to PwDs (these applied only to children)
3. Clarification that PwDs may consent independently depending on their capacity
4. Remaining Concerns

(A) No Illustrations or Practical Scenarios

Rules lack clarity on:

- When a PwD can give consent independently
- When guardian consent is needed
- How online services should verify consent

(B) Language inconsistency

The DPDP Act still clubs:

- PwDs
 - Children
- in certain sections, which contradicts the new rules.

(C) Guardianship remains unclear

- NT Act (1999) uses “decision-making capacity”
- RPwD Act (2016) uses “limited guardianship”
- DPDP Rules do not clarify which law applies
- UNCRPD discourages absolute guardianship

(D) No clear process for “consent managers” in case of PwDs

Especially for:

- Online banking
- Social media
- Government digital services

(1) Autonomy vs Protection

- Overregulation infringes autonomy
- Under-regulation risks exploitation

(2) Lack of Harmonisation Across Laws

Conflict between:

- DPDP Act
 - RPwD Act
 - National Trust Act
- Creates operational confusion.

(3) Accessibility of Digital Services

PwDs often face:

- Poor interface design
- Unclear consent forms
- Lack of accessible modes (audio, braille, simple texts)

(4) Implementation Challenges

- Who determines a PwD's capacity?
- How will platforms verify guardianship?
- What protections exist against misuse of guardian powers?

Possible MCQs may be asked on:

- DPDP Act, 2023 purpose & scope
- Special provisions for children
- RPwD Act definition & rights
- National Trust Act, 1999 → Guardianship
- UNCPRD principles (autonomy, non-discrimination, inclusion)

Conclusion

The creation of a separate category for persons with disabilities in the DPDP Rules is a positive step toward greater autonomy and digital inclusion. However, substantial challenges remain regarding interpretation, guardianship clarity, and implementation mechanisms.

For genuine protection and empowerment of disabled individuals, India needs a harmonised legal framework, clearer procedural guidelines, and inclusive digital infrastructure aligned with the UN Convention on Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

UPSC Prelims Practice Question

Ques : With reference to the Digital Personal Data Protection (DPDP) Rules, 2025, consider the following statements:

1. In the revised draft rules, persons with disabilities (PwDs) are no longer clubbed with children for obtaining consent.
2. The DPDP Act, 2023 places identical restrictions on behavioural tracking for both children and persons with disabilities.
3. The rules derive legal backing from the DPDP Act, 2023.

Which of the above statements is/are correct?

- (a) 1 and 3 only
- (b) 2 and 3 only
- (c) 1 and 2 only
- (d) 1, 2 and 3

Ans: (a)

UPSC Mains Practice Question

Ques : "The separation of persons with disabilities from children in the DPDP Rules is a welcome reform, but the absence of clarity on guardianship continues to pose major implementation challenges." Discuss. **(250 words)**

The QS World University Rankings for Sustainability 2026 were released by Quacquarelli Symonds (QS), showing that 103 Indian universities featured in the list—the fourth-highest globally, behind the U.S., China and the U.K.

The rankings assess institutions on their environmental and social sustainability performance, reflecting global focus on climate action, ethical governance, employability, and social impact. Top Indian performers include IIT Delhi, IIT Kharagpur, and Delhi University, though many Indian institutions saw declines in their indicator-level ranks.

Over 100 Indian universities make it to QS sustainability rankings

Abhinay Lakshman

NEW DELHI

The London-based QS Quacquarelli Symonds on Tuesday released its QS World University Rankings for Sustainability 2026, showing that India, with 103 universities, had the fourth-highest number of institutions in the list, behind the United States, China, and the United Kingdom.

The QS sustainability rankings, established in 2023, assess institutions across environmental and social sustainability categories such as environmental impact, social impact, and governance. These include indicators covering environmental research, sustainability, and education, along with equality, employability, knowledge exchange, and health and wellbeing.

Report card

India, with 103 universities, has the fourth-highest number of institutions on the list, behind the U.S., China, and the U.K.

■ Total Institutions Ranked: ~2,000 from 100+ locations	■ Top university globally: Lund University (Sweden)
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TOP PERFORMERS IN INDIA

- **IIT Delhi:** 93rd in Employability & Outcomes
- **IIT Kharagpur:** 96th in Employability & Outcomes
- **Delhi University:** 94th in Knowledge Exchange



The rankings released on Tuesday showed institutions from the U.K., Canada, Sweden, and the U.S. dominating the top 15, with Lund University in Sweden taking the top position. This year's edition features close to 2,000 institutions from over 100 locations worldwide.

Of the 103 Indian universities featured, the Indian Institute of Technology,

Delhi was the best performing, placed at 205. Overall, QS noted that India had 12 universities in the top 500, matching the number for countries such as China and the Netherlands.

While this is IIT, Delhi's highest position in the sustainability rankings since their inception, it is lower in relative terms compared to its performance last year, when around 1,700

institutions were ranked. Among the top 15 Indian universities in this year's sustainability rankings, nine saw their positions drop from the previous year's. These included Jadavpur University, IIT, Kanpur, IIT, Madras, the Indian Institute of Science, and others.

Across the 103 Indian institutions ranked, 30 saw their positions decline, 32 improved, and 15 remained unchanged. At the indicator level, IIT, Delhi (93rd) and IIT, Kharagpur (96th) made it to the top 100 globally for Employability and Outcomes. The University of Delhi entered the top 100 for Knowledge Exchange, at 94.

In a statement, Jessica Turner, CEO of QS, said "Overall, Indian universities excel in knowledge exchange and environmental sustainability."

Static Context

A. What are QS Sustainability Rankings?

Initiated in 2023, the QS Sustainability Rankings evaluate universities across:

1. Environmental Impact

- Sustainability research
- Environmental education
- Climate action
- Resource efficiency

2. Social Impact

- Employability & outcomes
- Knowledge exchange
- Social justice
- Health & well-being

3. Governance Indicators

- Ethical policies
- Institutional transparency

B. Why is this important for India?

- Supports NEP 2020 goals of internationalization
- Boosts global recognition of Indian HEIs
- Encourages sustainability-oriented reforms across campuses

C. Related Static Topics

- SDG 4 (Quality Education) and SDG 13 (Climate Action)
- India's progress in global education rankings
- Governance & autonomy of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs)
- Environmental sustainability in campuses

Current Context

A. India's overall performance

- 103 Indian universities ranked
- India stands 4th globally in number of institutions
- 12 Indian institutes in top 500

B. Top-performing Indian institutions

- IIT Delhi → 93rd in Employability & Outcomes
- IIT Kharagpur → 96th in Employability & Outcomes

- Delhi University → 94th in Knowledge Exchange

C. Global Trends

- Top universities: Lund University (Sweden)
- Dominated by institutions of U.K., Canada, Sweden, U.S.

D. Mixed results for India

- Among 103 Indian institutes:
 - 30 declined in rank
 - 32 improved
 - 15 unchanged

E. Declines among top 15 Indian performers

Includes:

- IISc
- IIT Madras
- IIT Kanpur
- IIT Kharagpur
- Jadavpur University

Issues + Analysis

(A) Strengths

1. Large participation shows improvement in India's global academic presence
2. Reflects alignment with sustainability goals
3. Indicates growing emphasis on research output and knowledge exchange
4. Boosts global perception of Indian degrees

(B) Concerns

1. Quality vs Quantity

- Despite 103 institutions ranked, only a few reach top global tiers

2. Decline in performance

- 30 institutions dropped, showing stagnation

3. Low scores in Environmental Impact indicators

- Indian HEIs still lag in climate research intensity

4. Funding & Infrastructure Gaps

- Research funding remains 0.7% of GDP (low)

5. Limited international collaboration

- Affects global perception and sustainability outcomes

(C) Way Forward

- Greater investment in R&D
- Sustainable campuses (solar, waste mgmt., water conservation)
- Improving global collaborations
- Focus on employability + industry linkages
- Strengthening governance and transparency

Conclusion

India's strong presence with over 100 institutions in the QS Sustainability Rankings is an important milestone for the higher education ecosystem.

However, improvement in ranks and sustainability scores requires deeper structural reforms—better funding, stronger research culture, environmental responsibility, and global collaborations.

With strategic focus, India can transition from quantity-driven participation to quality-driven global leadership in sustainability-focused higher education.

UPSC Prelims Practice Question

Ques: Consider the following indicators used in the QS Sustainability Rankings:

1. Employability & Outcomes
2. Knowledge Exchange
3. Climate Action
4. Institutional Transparency

How many of the above are included in the QS Sustainability Rankings?

- A. Only two
- B. Only three
- C. Only four
- D. None of the above

Ans: C.

UPSC Mains Practice Question

Ques : "India's large presence in the QS Sustainability Rankings 2026 reflects progress, but declining quality among top institutions highlights structural weaknesses." Discuss. **(150 words)**

In News : GS 3 : Science & Technology

Modern medicine increasingly explores non-pharmacological interventions to reduce drug dependency and improve patient outcomes.

A recent Delhi-based randomised controlled trial at Lok Nayak Hospital and Maulana Azad Medical College found that listening to Hindustani ragas (Yaman & Kirvani) during surgery reduced the need for anaesthesia by 15%, lowered cortisol levels, and stabilised vital signs.

This offers a strong intersection of science & technology, public health, and behavioural medicine.

In Delhi study, ragas in the operation theatre cut anaesthesia use

Even under anaesthesia, the brain doesn't shut down; the auditory cortex still registers sound; as surgery begins, the body's stress systems stir and the levels of cortisol and other hormones rise, pushing up blood pressure to cope with the strain; the person feels nothing but the body still braces; music seems to mellow this response

Anupama Chandrasekaran

At first glance, the photograph looks like a scene from a science-fiction film or one of those viral, digitally altered images. A woman lies calm on an operating table under bright white lights, a headset snug over her ears. But it's real and was taken inside a hospital in New Delhi more than a year ago.

It's a snapshot of an unusual clinical trial by a group of anaesthesiologists from Lok Nayak Hospital and Maulana Azad Medical College. They wanted to investigate if music flowing through headsets during a minor surgery could soften the blow of strong medicines.

"All our surgeries are in completely new environments for patients and we give them general anaesthesia to produce unconsciousness," Sonia Wadhavan, director professor of Anaesthesia and Intensive Care at Maulana Azad Medical College, said. "But since all these groups of drugs come with some amount of side effects, we asked: if we integrate music therapy with our anaesthetic agents, can it help us reduce the requirement of these drugs?"

Dr. Wadhavan and her team designed a randomised controlled trial, which is a kind of experiment where people are split into groups by chance, like drawing names from a hat, to see if something truly works. One group listened to slow, soothing ragas for the entire surgery; the other did not. The results were telling: people who heard the music needed 15% less anaesthetic. Their heart rates stayed steady, their blood pressure held firm, and stress hormone levels fell. The study suggested that music helps patients heal with less strain and less medicine.

Soundtrack under the scalpel

The study, published in the October 2025 edition of the journal *Music and Medicine*, ran over 11 months. Fifty-six adults planning gallbladder removal, a common surgery to take out the small organ that holds digestive fluid used to break down fats, volunteered for this research.

The patients were split into two groups: one listened to soft flute and piano music during surgery; the other wore identical noise-cancellation headphones and were in silence.

The music the researchers chose wasn't random. It featured two Hindustani ragas: the bright, uplifting tones of Raga Yaman and the calm, soothing notes of Raga Kirvani. They chose these ragas because they believed the tones could gently steer the body's "fight or flight" system, which raises heart rate and blood pressure under stress, towards a calmer and steadier state.

"Since the ability to hear remains intact even under anaesthesia, we used



Every drop of drug and every minute saved can ease costs, speed recovery, and free beds. DR. FARAH HUSAIN/SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

music therapy to study its effect on the sympathetic system and stress modulators like cortisol," Dr. Wadhavan said.

And it worked. Patients who listened to the music needed, on average, about 15% less propofol, a fast-acting anaesthetic that puts you under in seconds and keeps you pain-free and perfectly still. Not only that: their levels of cortisol, a hormone the body releases when it's stressed, were lower. The participants also needed fewer painkillers and had steady blood pressure throughout the surgery.

"It was a eureka moment," said Tanvi Goel, principal investigator and anaesthesiologist at Lok Nayak Hospital and Maulana Azad Medical College. "The music group not only required less anaesthesia but their stress levels were significantly lower."

Even under anaesthesia, the brain doesn't shut down. The auditory cortex still registers sound, catching rhythm and tone. As surgery begins – with its pokes, pricks, and cuts – the body's stress systems stir. The levels of cortisol and other hormones rise, pushing up blood pressure and blood sugar to cope with the strain. The person feels nothing but the body still braces. Music seems to mellow this response, releasing endorphins and oxytocin to steady the heart, ease stress, and support healing.



Since all these anaesthetics come with side effects, we asked: could music reduce the dosage required?

SONIA WADHAVAN
PROFESSOR OF ANAESTHESIA AND INTENSIVE CARE
AT MAULANA AZAD MEDICAL COLLEGE

"It's non-pharmacological, low-cost, and safe," said Farah Husain, co-investigator and a certified music therapist. "All it needs is a Bluetooth device and a pair of headphones. There's no side-effect, only potential benefits."

'Complementary approaches'

Alex Street is a senior research fellow at the Cambridge Institute for Music Therapy Research in the UK. He studies how music stirs the brain, the nervous system, and emotions, and how it can be used in real therapy.

"What needs to happen is medicine always has to have a non-medical adjunct," Dr. Street said.

"Complementary approaches like music can reduce the need for medications that often have nasty side effects."

For instance, fentanyl is a synthetic

opioid often used to control severe pain during surgery. But just 2 mg of fentanyl can kill an adult human. It has become the leading cause of death for Americans aged 18 to 45, surpassing car accidents and gun violence. This is part of the opioid crisis, driven by the overuse of powerful painkillers. The epidemic shows why gentler ways to ease pain and stress are needed now more than ever.

In the Lok Nayak Hospital study, patients who listened to soothing music needed less fentanyl during surgery, signalling that non-drug approaches could reduce reliance on powerful painkillers.

Dr. Street added a practical reminder: that patients still need to hear the surgical team, even when the music plays.

"You can't just block everything out with noise-cancelling headphones," he said. "The patient needs to be able to hear what people are saying."

The Delhi team now hopes to test their music experiment with more surgeries and larger groups. In a country where hospitals overflow and resources are stretched thin, every drop of drug and every minute saved can ease costs, speed recovery, and free beds.

That image of a patient on an operating table with headsets on may soon feel less like science fiction and more like standard care.

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THE GIST

People who heard the music needed about 15% less anaesthetic, their heart rates stayed steady, their blood pressure held firm, and stress hormone levels fell; this suggested that music helps patients heal with less strain and less medicine

According to the researchers involved, music therapy is non-pharmacological, low-cost, and safe; all it needs is a Bluetooth device and a pair of headphones; there are no side effects, only potential benefits

Patients who listened to soothing music also needed less fentanyl, a potent opioid, during the surgery, signalling that non-drug approaches could help reduce reliance on powerful painkillers

Current Affairs Highlights

1. 15% reduction in propofol requirement during surgery.
2. Lower stress hormones (cortisol) and steadier heart rate & blood pressure.
3. Reduced need for opioid painkiller fentanyl, which is significant amid the global opioid crisis.
4. Use of Raga Yaman and Raga Kirvani—chosen for their calming physiological effects.

5. Trial published in Music and Medicine (Oct 2025).
6. Shows feasibility of low-cost, safe, complementary therapy in resource-stressed Indian hospitals.

Static Context

- Music therapy = A clinical & evidence-based use of music interventions to accomplish individualized therapeutic goals.
- Works through:
 - Auditory cortex activity even under anaesthesia
 - Reduction in sympathetic (fight-or-flight) response
 - Release of endorphins and oxytocin
- Non-pharmacological pain management:
 - Meditation, breathing techniques, cognitive therapy, physiotherapy, music.
- Opioids like fentanyl have high dependence potential; India too faces rising misuse concerns.

1. Significance for Healthcare System

- Cost reduction: Less anaesthesia + fewer opioids = lower treatment cost.
- Faster recovery → reduces hospital stay and frees beds in overburdened public hospitals.
- Enhances patient experience and reduces perioperative anxiety.
- Can integrate into Ayushman Bharat, National Health Mission, and patient-centric care frameworks.

2. Technological & Ethical Aspects

- Incorporating audio devices, patient monitoring, and ensuring communication with medical staff.
- Ethical requirement: the patient must hear essential instructions despite music.

3. Public Health Importance

- Helps reduce dependency on drugs with side effects.
- Aligns with global shift towards integrative medicine.
- Provides evidence for integrating behavioural medicine in routine care.

4. Implications for India

- Low-cost model suitable for resource-constrained public hospitals.

- Encourages research in neuro-musicology, medical humanities, and Indian classical music in therapy.
- Supports India's goal of reducing opioid misuse and improving holistic healthcare.

Conclusion

The Delhi trial shows that music therapy can serve as an effective, safe, and economical complement to anaesthesia, lowering stress and drug use during surgery.

With rising healthcare demands and limited resources, integrating such non-pharmacological, evidence-based interventions can enhance India's medical system, improve patient well-being, and reduce the burden of drug-based procedures.

Music—rooted deeply in India's cultural heritage—appears ready to become a mainstream healthcare tool.

UPSC Mains Practice Question

Ques: Discuss the significance of non-pharmacological interventions such as music therapy in public healthcare, in light of the recent Delhi study showing reduced anaesthesia requirement. **(250 Words)**

In news : Prelims

The 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments were landmark steps to strengthen grassroots democracy by empowering panchayats and municipalities. However, in practice, local bodies remain financially weak and excessively dependent on higher governments.

With the 16th Finance Commission (FC) submitting its report (Nov 17, 2025), there is renewed expectation that it will finally provide a stable, predictable, and performance-sensitive fiscal framework to empower local governments.

What can local bodies expect from the 16th FC?

What do the 73rd and 74th constitutional amendments mandate? What have multiple State Finance Commission reports recommended? How have Union Finance Commissions failed to bring about substantial changes, especially with respect to performance-linked grants?

EXPLAINER

V. N. Alok

The story so far:

On November 17, the 16th Finance Commission (FC) submitted its report to the President of India.

What are the expectations?

Main expectations include a percentage share for vertical transfer of resources from the Central revenue pool to the States for the next five years and the formula of its horizontal distribution among States. This is mandated under Article 280 of the Constitution.

What about panchayats, municipalities?

The other expectation is the recommendation to improve the finances of panchayats and municipalities as mandated under Article 280 (3) bb and c.

Like many other federations, local governments are the ones rendering essential public services, including drinking water, sanitation, public health, rural roads, maintenance of community assets etc. For this purpose, panchayats and municipalities are mandated to collect certain taxes like property tax, advertisement tax and non-taxes such as market fee, toll etc. However, a huge gap between revenues and expenditure responsibilities can be seen across States and Union Territories (UTs).

As per the 73rd and 74th constitutional amendments, State governments have the power to assign revenue handles and expenditure responsibilities to various rungs of panchayats and levels of municipalities. Due to this reason, there is a wide variation in fiscal powers of panchayats, municipalities across States.

In an ideal scenario, functional responsibilities should be closely linked to the financial powers delegated to local governments. However, there is no separate list for either functional responsibilities or revenue handles that



A major revamp: Collector S. Saravanan taking part in a gram sabha meeting held at Adiyanothu panchayat near Dindigul, Tamil Nadu, on October 11. KARTHIKEYAN G

should be assigned to panchayats and municipalities. While the 11th and 12th Schedules enumerate on 29 broad subjects for panchayats and 18 matters for municipalities respectively, they are merely illustrative and not binding. Moreover, it is the Union and State governments that are expected to design vertical schemes on economic development and social justice, while local governments implement them.

State governments tend to assign responsibilities to local governments without concomitant revenue handles or officials. As a result, panchayats and municipalities bear the financial brunt which not only affects their development but operational efficiency as well.

What is the role of the SFC?

Every five years, States constitute a State Finance Commission (SFC) which can make recommendations to State legislature. The recommended

devolutions by SFC could be, *inter alia*, that panchayats and municipalities should have a share in the revenue pool of the State; be assigned revenue handles; receive both conditional and unconditional grants-in-aid; that local governments be assigned civic functions and functionaries; and various other administrative measures. More than a hundred SFC reports have been submitted across States, but hardly a few have been respected.

In such a situation, the local government must count entirely on fiscal transfers from the Union government. For this purpose, the Constitution mandates the Union Finance Commission (UFC) to suggest measures to augment State finances for local governments.

What did the previous UFCs do?

So far, recommendations of six UFCs have been implemented. However, they weren't able to quantify the resource

requirements of local governments, and made ad hoc arrangements and recommended lump sum grants. The 13th UFC, however, suggested calculating the grant as a percentage share in the union tax divisible pool. The 13th UFC did this consciously after a round of consultations with top legal experts and at the demand of the Union Ministry and several State governments. Neutrality to inflation was the first advantage of the proposal and share of local government in high buoyancy of union tax proceeds was the second major benefit. Sadly, the subsequent UFC took a complete U-turn and recommended lump sum grants. The 15th UFC followed its immediate predecessor in its route of fiscal transfers to local governments. This was not the only discontinuity in the recommendations made by the three successive bodies. The other major anomaly was in the form of conditional grants. In their zeal to reform panchayat and municipal administration, all these UFCs divided the grants into two components – basic and performance-based. While basic grants were unconditional, performance grants were tied to certain conditions identified by these UFCs as reform instruments. However, each UFC ensured to discontinue the line of reform initiated by the previous UFC. To illustrate, the 13th UFC stipulated six conditions for performance grants. None of the conditions could be fulfilled by most States. The 14th UFC refused to acknowledge any merit in the previous reform agenda and recommended fresh conditional performance grants. The conditions put forth by the 15th UFC were again of a different variety.

The 16th UFC, it is expected, must have gone beyond the oft-beaten approach and assessed the resource requirements of 2.7 lakh panchayats and about 5,000 municipalities, which would enable them to act as institutions for economic development and social justice.

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THE GIST

As per the 73rd and 74th constitutional amendments, State governments have the power to assign revenue handles and expenditure responsibilities to various rungs of panchayats and levels of municipalities.

Every five years, States constitute a State Finance Commission (SFC) which can make recommendations to State legislature.

So far, recommendations of six UFCs have been implemented. However, they weren't able to quantify the resource requirements of local governments, and made ad hoc arrangements and recommended lump sum grants.

Static Context

1. 73rd & 74th Constitutional Amendments

- Gave constitutional status to Panchayats (Part IX) and Municipalities (Part IX-A).
- Added 11th Schedule (29 subjects) and 12th Schedule (18 subjects) — but these are illustrative, not binding.
- States decide:
 - Functional responsibilities
 - Taxation powers

- Staffing & administrative control
 - Mandated State Finance Commissions (SFCs) every 5 years.
 - Mandated the Union Finance Commission (UFC) to recommend measures to augment state finances for local bodies (Art 280(3)(bb) & (c)).
-

2. State Finance Commissions (SFCs)

SFCs may recommend:

- Share of state revenues for local bodies
 - Assignment of taxes
 - Grants (conditional/unconditional)
 - Devolution formula
 - Administrative reforms
-

Problem:

Despite 100+ SFC reports, most States ignore their recommendations.

3. Union Finance Commissions (UFCs) and Local Bodies

- UFCs have implemented grants for local bodies since 1995.
 - 13th FC—only one to recommend percentage share of divisible pool for local bodies.
 - 14th & 15th FCs—returned to lump-sum grants, not linked to buoyancy or inflation.
 - Basic vs Performance Grants:
 - 13th FC: 6 conditions → largely unfulfilled
 - 14th FC: new conditions (ignored previous reform agenda)
 - 15th FC: again fresh conditions, causing policy instability
-

Current Affairs Analysis

1. What the 16th FC is expected to deliver

- A vertical share of taxes to States (core FC mandate).
- A horizontal distribution formula among States.
- But crucially:
Clear measures to strengthen panchayat and municipal finances under Article 280(3).

Because the fiscal gap between local revenues and their expenditure responsibilities is huge across India.

2. Why are local bodies so weak?

- States assign functions to local bodies without assigning revenue handles.
 - No fixed list of revenue powers for local governments.
 - Local bodies must implement Union/State schemes without matching funds or staff.
 - This creates:
 - High burden
 - Low autonomy
 - Poor service delivery
-

3. Failure of past UFCs

a. Failure to assess actual resource needs

Most UFCs used ad hoc, lump-sum grants instead of quantifying local government needs.

b. Constant changes in performance grant conditions

Every FC discarded the previous one's reform agenda —

- 13th FC: 6 performance conditions
- 14th FC: new set of reforms
- 15th FC: completely different conditions

This led to:

Policy discontinuity

Zero long-term reform

States unable to meet shifting conditions

c. No linkage with tax buoyancy

Only the 13th FC tied local body grants to the divisible pool — neutral to inflation & benefited from higher tax growth.

But later FCs reverted to static lump-sum grants → erosion of real value.

4. What the 16th FC should ideally do (as per experts)

- Estimate real expenditure needs of:
 - 2.7 lakh panchayats

- 5,000 municipalities
- **Provide:**
 - Stable formula
 - Inflation-neutral transfers
 - Predictable performance-linked grants
- **Encourage States to:**
 - Strengthen SFCs
 - Assign tax powers
 - Rationalize local property tax & user charges

Conclusion

Strengthening local bodies is vital for effective public service delivery and deepening grassroots democracy. Past Finance Commissions have failed to provide consistent, adequate, and performance-linked support due to ad hoc grants and shifting conditions.

The 16th Finance Commission now has the opportunity to correct these long-standing weaknesses by assessing real local needs and establishing a stable fiscal framework. A robust design can transform panchayats and municipalities into true institutions of economic development and social justice, fulfilling the intentions of the 73rd and 74th Amendments.

UPSC Prelims Practice Question

Ques: Which of the following statements is/are correct regarding the 13th Finance Commission (FC)?

1. It recommended grants to local bodies as a percentage of the divisible pool of Union taxes.
2. It introduced performance-based grants with six reform conditions.
3. It discontinued the practice of linking local grants to inflation.

Select the correct answer:

- (a) 1 and 2 only
- (b) 2 and 3 only
- (c) 1 and 3 only
- (d) 1, 2 and 3

Ans: (a)

Unpacking the global 'happiness' rankings

Why is Finland the happiest country in the world for the eighth year in a row while India languishes at 118? How can Pakistan, which is struggling with political instability and recurring International Monetary Fund (IMF) bailouts score higher than India, the world's fastest-growing major economy? What does this really say about how we define "happiness"?

The World Happiness Report 2025, by the Wellbeing Research Centre at Oxford, again places Finland, Denmark, Iceland and Sweden at the top. India's score is 4.389 of 10, averaging 124 over the years; Pakistan is 109. The contrast seems puzzling against the economic and social realities of both nations.

India, with a \$3.7 trillion GDP, is the world's fifth-largest economy; Pakistan's \$375 billion GDP is barely 10% of that. India's digital economy is booming, and its infrastructure is expanding, whereas Pakistan survives on repeated bailouts. Yet, Pakistan appears "happier"?

Is happiness an economic measure, a perceptual one, or a proxy for something else?

The mirage of metrics

The report relies on the Gallup World Poll's Cantril Ladder, where people rate their lives from 0 to 10, linked with six variables – GDP per capita, social support, life expectancy, freedom, generosity and corruption perception. But perceptions are slippery.

Societies with low expectations often report higher happiness because people adapt to hardship. In vibrant democracies such as India, rising aspirations and constant media scrutiny can lower perceived satisfaction even as well-being improves. When citizens expect better governance or cleaner cities, dissatisfaction reflects higher expectations, not misery.

That paradox explains why the United States has fallen to 24 despite record wealth, while the Nordic nations with high taxes but deep social trust dominate.

The report itself admits that "belief in community kindness" and social trust predict

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Dissatisfaction, for instance, could reflect higher expectations, and not misery

happiness better than income.

India's challenge, then, is not growth but connection. Nearly 19% of young adults globally say they have no one to rely on – up 39% since 2006. With migration and digital life reshaping relationships, Indians too face shrinking real-world networks and expanding virtual ones – prosperity without proximity.

The politics of perception

Critics note that global indices rest on perception-based biases. A 2022 paper by the Economic Advisory Council to the Prime Minister (Sanjeev Sanyal and Aakanksha Arora) showed that indices such as Freedom House and V-Dem depend on small, opaque pools of western "experts". Their subjective views skew results.

A one-party state may appear freer simply because dissent is absent; media-controlled regimes look "stable" because citizens voice fewer complaints. Democracies, by contrast, are penalised for openness. The World Happiness Report risks repeating that error – valuing calm conformity over democratic cacophony. India's low score may reflect self-critical awareness – a maturing democracy unwilling to be complacent.

India's rank has swung between 94th and 144th in a decade. The best phase came in 2022 with post-COVID-19 pandemic recovery and welfare programmes such as Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Yojana. The worst was in 2012 amid corruption scandals and slowdown. But happiness rarely tracks fiscal performance. Studies show that social trust, fairness and community matter far more.

In Finland, people believe a lost wallet will be returned – a proxy for institutional trust. In India, governance unevenness erodes that confidence, though local and familial trust remain strong. The COVID-19 lockdown exposed this: millions returned to villages not only for work loss but because community bonds offered the security absent in cities. Such informal trust, ignored by global metrics, sustains resilience.

The report's behavioural framework also carries the WEIRD bias – Western, Educated,

Industrialised, Rich and Democratic. It privileges institutional trust that is typical of individualistic societies and overlooks collective trust networks in countries such as India, where family and community are the real safety nets.

Even so, institutional trust is evolving. Campaigns around mental health, workplace wellbeing and inclusion mark a cultural shift. Programmes such as Tele-MANAS (Tele Mental Health Assistance and Networking Across States) and Mind India place emotional resilience on the policy map. Happiness, once dismissed as a luxury, is now a governance concern.

Aspirations to empathy

To climb the happiness ladder, India must pair economic ambition with empathy infrastructure – investing not only in GDP but also in GNH (Gross National Happiness) through three pathways. First, rebuild social capital. Create community spaces, shared meals and inter-generational ties. The report finds that household size and belief in community kindness significantly raise happiness.

Second, restore institutional trust. Simplify citizen-state interactions. When public services – from ration cards to railway tickets – work transparently, trust follows.

Third, recognise mental health as economic policy. Productivity gains mirror psychological wellbeing. The World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that every \$1 spent on mental health yields \$4 in returns – an investment no economy should ignore. As *The Pursuit of Happiness* reminds us, happiness is not something we possess. It is something we pursue. India's restlessness – its debates, innovations and demands for better lives – may be the clearest sign of wellbeing. Less satisfaction does not mean unhappiness. It signals ambition.

If rank 118 means that Indians still seek cleaner air, fairer governance and fuller lives, perhaps the nation is not unhappy but just unfinished, still chasing a truer idea of happiness.

The views expressed are personal

GS. Paper 2 Governance

UPSC Mains Practice Question : "India's lower ranking in the World Happiness Report reflects perception issues rather than actual societal wellbeing." Discuss in the light of rising aspirations, institutional trust, and social capital. (250 words)

Context :

The World Happiness Report 2025, released by the Wellbeing Research Centre, Oxford, once again ranks Finland as the happiest country for the 8th consecutive year, while India stands at 118. This paradox — a wealthy, fast-growing India ranking below crisis-ridden Pakistan — raises deeper questions about whether "happiness" is an economic measure, a sociological one, or simply a perception-based construct

Static Context

What is the World Happiness Report?

- Published annually since 2012.
- Based on Gallup World Poll using the Cantril Ladder (0–10 scale).
- Key indicators:
 1. GDP per capita
 2. Social support
 3. Healthy life expectancy
 4. Freedom to make choices
 5. Generosity
 6. Perception of corruption

WEIRD Bias (Western, Educated, Industrialised, Rich, Democratic)

- The index assumes that Western-style institutional trust = universal happiness standard.
- Collective trust societies like India often get undervalued.

Why Nordic Countries Always Top?

- High institutional trust
- Social welfare
- Low corruption
- Strong community networks
- Predictable governance

Current Context

India's Paradox: Fast Growth, Low "Happiness" Rank

- India: \$3.7 trillion economy, booming digital sector, rapid infrastructure growth.
- Yet, score = 4.389/10, rank = 118.
- Pakistan: economic crisis + IMF bailouts → yet ranked higher at 109.

Why? Because happiness scores measure perception, not actual well-being.

Key Reasons for India's Lower Rank

1. Aspirations Rising Faster than Satisfaction

- Democracies generate higher expectations → more criticism → lower reported satisfaction.

- People expect better governance, cleaner cities, fairness — so dissatisfaction ≠ unhappiness; it reflects ambition.

2. Social Trust Deficit

- Nordic example: If you drop your wallet, people believe it will be returned.
- India: Uneven governance reduces institutional trust.

3. Digital Isolation

- Global rise: 19% young adults say they have “no one to rely on”.
- India also faces shrinking real-life social networks.

4. Perception-Based Indices Penalise Democracies

- As EAC-PM study shows, indices rely on small Western expert pools.
- Countries with restricted media appear “stable” because fewer complaints are reported.
- Democracies voice problems → rank lower.

Strengths Ignored by Global Metrics

- India has strong familial and community bonds, especially visible during COVID-19 migration.
- These informal trust networks aren’t captured by Western-style surveys.

Positive Shifts in India

- Mental health initiatives:
 - Tele-MANAS
 - Workplace wellbeing, inclusion
 - Community mental health push
- The idea of “Gross National Happiness” gaining policy traction.

What India Needs To Do

1. Rebuild Social Capital

- Community spaces, shared events, inter-generational ties.
- The report shows household size & community kindness correlate strongly with happiness.

2. Strengthen Institutional Trust

- Simplify citizen-state interactions.
- Transparent public services → trust → happiness.

3. Treat Mental Health as Economic Policy

- WHO: \$1 on mental health = \$4 productivity gain.
- Create emotional resilience frameworks.

Conclusion

India's low rank does not indicate national unhappiness; it reflects a society with rising aspirations and self-critical awareness. Unlike conformist societies that score higher due to low expectations, India's "dissatisfaction" may reflect its ambition for better lives, cleaner governance, and fuller rights.

If rank 118 means Indians want more — more fairness, more trust, more wellbeing — then India is not unhappy; it is unfinished, still pursuing a deeper, more genuine idea of happiness.