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In a landmark achievement for Indian chess, 19-year-old Divya Deshmukh won the Women's Chess World Cup 2025, held in Batumi, Georgia. She triumphed over Koneru Humpy, a seasoned Indian grandmaster and World No. 5, in the tiebreakers of the final. This marks India's first Women's World Cup win and only the second World Cup win overall — after Viswanathan Anand in 2002.

Teenager Divya outlasts Humpy, emerges India's first women's World Cup winner

P.K. Ajith Kumar

Indian chess recorded yet another great moment on Monday, as Divya Deshmukh won the women's World Cup in the Georgian city of Batumi.

In the final, the 19-year-old defeated fellow-Indian Koneru Humpy in the tiebreakers.

While Humpy contesting the final wasn't much of a surprise – she is the World No. 5 and has been one of the best female players for the last couple of decades – not many would have anticipated Divya's stunning show. But, given her obvious talent and the way she has been playing for the past two years, it didn't come as a big surprise.

By winning the World Cup, one of the biggest events organised by the



Grand finish: Divya Deshmukh prevailed in the tiebreakers to win the women's chess World Cup in Batumi, Georgia, on Monday. FIDE

world chess governing body FIDE, Divya also achieved another significant milestone.

India's 88th GM

She became India's 88th Grandmaster and is only the fourth Indian woman after Humpy, D. Harika and R. Vaishali to get that coveted

title. Last year, Divya had won the World junior championship at Gandhinagar with a dominant display. She also played a key role in India's historic gold in the Chess Olympiad at Budapest. India was the top seed there, though.

At the World Cup, the Indian women exceeded

expectations, with four of them making it to the quarterfinals.

Emulating Anand

Only one Indian had won the World Cup before: Viswanathan Anand in Hyderabad, 2002.

By reaching the final, Divya and Humpy also booked tickets for the Candidates tournament, the qualifying event for the World championship.

Last year, five Indians, – three men and two women – featured in the Candidates at Toronto.

D. Gukesh won the open event, and went on to become, at 18, the youngest World champion in history by dethroning Ding Liren in an exciting finale in Singapore.

GIRL WHO CAN BE THE QUEEN

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Significance of the Victory

1. Milestone in Women's Sports in India

- Divya's win is not just a personal achievement, but a symbol of rising women's participation and success in competitive sports, particularly in intellectual games like chess.
- She joins an elite league as the fourth Indian woman Grandmaster, showcasing the growing depth in women's chess.

2. Boost to Youth Aspirations and Sports Culture

- At 19, Divya embodies the success of India's youth in global arenas.
- Her victory echoes the broader narrative of Indian youngsters excelling on international platforms (like Gukesh becoming the youngest World Champion).
- Encourages investment in youth training and talent identification in lesser-highlighted sports.

3. National Pride and Soft Power

- Her win enhances India's soft power through sports, demonstrating excellence beyond traditional domains like cricket.
- It builds on India's legacy in chess — the game originated in India (as *Chaturanga*), and players like Viswanathan Anand, R. Praggnanandhaa, and D. Gukesh have continued this legacy globally.

4. Institutional Support and Emerging Infrastructure

- The consistent performance of Indian women (four reaching quarterfinals) indicates the success of chess academies, government schemes, and FIDE-supported events in India.
- Also reflects the gender parity efforts in sports promotion and training.

Ethical and Emotional Dimensions

- **Perseverance and Humility:** Despite being younger and relatively less experienced, Divya's composed and determined gameplay reflects ethical values such as resilience, focus, and respect for mentors (Humpy).
- **Mentorship and Role Models:** Humpy's presence in the final reflects the importance of having positive female role models and healthy competition within the country.

Future Implications

- Candidates Tournament Qualification: Both Divya and Humpy have qualified for the FIDE Candidates Tournament, paving a path to the World Championship title.

- Chess Ecosystem Growth: Momentum from this win could translate into more government funding, private sponsorship, and popular interest in chess.
- Women in STEM and Logic-Driven Fields: Her victory subtly reinforces the importance of women excelling in logic, decision-making, and strategy — traits also valued in STEM careers.

Conclusion

Divya Deshmukh's victory is not merely a sports headline — it's a reflection of India's rising global confidence, gender progress, youth empowerment, and sporting diversification. It serves as a case study in what happens when talent, opportunity, and dedication converge — a story that resonates with the aspirational India of today.

UPSC Prelims Practice Question

Ques: With reference to Divya Deshmukh, recently seen in news, consider the following statements:

1. She became the first Indian woman to win the Women's Chess World Cup.
2. She is the youngest Indian to have become a Grandmaster.
3. She defeated Koneru Humpy in the final held in Georgia.

Which of the statements given above is/are correct?

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

Ans: B)

Page 07: GS 1&3 : Indian Society & Disaster Management

A new study published in *Nature Cities* (July 2025) reveals that India has the world's highest number of slum dwellers living in flood-prone areas — over 158 million people, primarily in the Ganga Delta. The findings underline an alarming intersection of urban poverty, climate risk, and planning failure across the Global South.

India has the highest number of slum clusters in flood-prone areas

According to a new study, around 445 million people in the Global South live in areas that have already been exposed to floods; countries like India and Brazil also have a disproportionately high number of floodplain settlements, because the people who choose to live there lack viable options

Sandhya Ramesh

Flooding events are a major hazard worldwide. According to a 2024 Moody's report, more than 2.3 billion people are exposed to flooding every year. In India, more than 600 million people are at risk of coastal or inland flooding. However, there is a lack of comprehensive data on vulnerable communities' flood exposure risk, especially in the Global South.

A new study has attempted to bridge exactly this gap by analysing satellite images of informal settlements or slum dwellings in 129 low- and middle-income countries and comparing them with maps of 343 well-documented large-scale floods.

The study found that India has the world's largest number of slum dwellers living in vulnerable settlements in floodplains — over 158 million, more than the population of Russia — with most of them concentrated in the naturally flood-prone delta of the Ganga river.

The largest concentrations and largest numbers of such people are in South Asian countries; northern India leads in absolute numbers, followed by Indonesia, Bangladesh, and Pakistan. Other notable 'hotspots' include Rwanda and its neighborhood, northern Morocco, and the coastal regions of Rio de Janeiro.

Overall, in the Global South, 33% of informal settlements, making up around 445 million people living in 908,077 households within 67,568 clusters, lie in areas that have already been exposed to floods. Countries like India and Brazil also have a disproportionately high number of floodplain settlements despite also having suffered many large floods.

The study, published in *Nature Cities* in July, highlights the lack of risk management strategies that prioritise vulnerable communities, including those that have already experienced floods, beyond population-level approaches.

Risk and settlement

The researchers classified human settlements as rural, suburban, and urban, and found that Latin America and the Caribbean had high rates of urbanisation (80%), and thus more than 60% of settlements were in urban areas. In contrast, Sub-Saharan Africa had the lowest rates of urbanisation and nearly 63% of informal settlements were rural. In Sierra Leone and Liberia, informal settlements hosted most of the population.

In India, at the time of the study, 40% of slum dwellers resided in urban and suburban areas.

People settle in, or are forced to settle in, floodplains due to a combination of factors including access to jobs, social vulnerability, and financial constraints. In India and Bangladesh, the low lying Gangetic delta and the large national population contribute to the numbers.

The study also highlighted inequities in access to resources and thus local responses to flooding. These vulnerable residents also suffer the loss of jobs and access to services among the indirect consequences of floods.

Exposed populations' vulnerability was found to depend on socioeconomic factors like education level and institutional factors like flood insurance.



Aerial shot of a large slum in Bandra, a suburb in Mumbai. Both slum-dwellers and non-slum residents live in floodplains around the world, but for different reasons. GETTY IMAGES

The authors of the study wrote that both slum-dwellers and non-slum residents live in floodplains around the world, but for different reasons. In wealthier regions like Europe, subsidised flood insurance premiums in high risk areas promotes the desirability of floodplain areas like beachfronts and water views.

Infrastructure like levees also exist to protect people and houses. However, in the Global South, flood zones offer cheaper land and housing, pushing low income households into more vulnerable areas.

Data reveal that patterns of informal settlements also have a distinct bias towards settling in floodplains, with slum dwellers being 32% more likely to settle in a floodplain than outside due to lower costs, as evidenced in cities like Mumbai and Jakarta. In fact, the higher the risk of flood, the higher the chance of people settling there.

"In cities like Bengaluru, there definitely is a very strong correlation between informal settlements and their vulnerability to flood," Aysha Jennath, climate mobility researcher and post-doctoral fellow at the Indian Institute for Human Settlements, Bengaluru, said.

"Flood-prone localities are not preferred by large builders for gated communities or IT parks, so those areas are available for migrant workers and informal settlements as they are cheaper." Informal settlements in such urban



In cities like Bengaluru, there definitely is a very strong correlation between informal settlements and their vulnerability to floods

AYSHA JENNATH
CLIMATE MOBILITY RESEARCHER AND POST-DOCTORAL FELLOW AT THE INDIAN INSTITUTE FOR HUMAN SETTLEMENTS

areas are typically tin-sheet, tent or tarp housing, with rent paid to owners through land contractors.

SDG deadline looms

The researchers specified the need to act on flood vulnerability risk for poorer populations as the 2030 deadline for the United Nations' Agenda for Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) nears. The goal number 17, including eliminating poverty and hunger, availing clean water and sanitation, and taking climate action. They apply to all the UN's member countries and focus on vulnerable communities.

The study also articulated the importance of taking a human-centric approach (instead of location-focused) to improve inadequate infrastructure.

Data show large concentrations of settlements in smaller areas, indicating gaps in housing, infrastructure, and basic services. Often, even gated communities

gentrify flood-prone areas, pushing vulnerable communities to areas of higher risk exacerbated by failing infrastructure and lack of drainage, Jennath said.

"Real estate plays a huge role in how these informal settlements come up."

Finally, the researchers also discussed the need for the government to collaborate with communities instead of banking only on traditional disaster preparedness. Skill improvement in areas like sanitation, waste management, and installing drainage systems could enhance the resilience to not just floods but also other risks like infectious disease, while providing jobs.

"These data-driven insights highlight the disproportionate flood exposure faced by slum dwellers in the Global South and underscore the need for just and equitable flood adaptation management," they wrote.

The findings are also a proof-of-concept for using machine learning, which can process large quantities of data, to analyse satellite imagery and extract nuanced insights, like socioeconomic data embedded in population densities. As a follow-up, the authors have said they plan to study timewise processes such as slum expansion, climate change, and human migration to effectively predict future flood risk.

(Sandhya Ramesh is a freelance science journalist. sandhyrsm@gmail.com)

Key Findings of the Study

- Over 445 million people in the Global South live in areas already exposed to floods.
- India leads globally, followed by Indonesia, Bangladesh, and Pakistan.
- In India, 40% of slum dwellers live in urban and suburban areas, such as Mumbai, Delhi, Bengaluru.
- Slum dwellers are 32% more likely to reside in floodplains than in non-flood zones, primarily due to lower housing costs.
- Factors driving settlement in flood zones include:
 - Access to employment
 - Lack of affordable housing
 - Exclusion from formal city planning
 - Failure of institutional protections (e.g., flood insurance)

Significance and Implications

Urbanisation and Informal Settlements

- Rapid, unplanned urbanisation has resulted in expansion of slums into floodplains.
- Cities like Mumbai, Bengaluru show a pattern of "climate gentrification" — wealthier communities avoid high-risk zones or use infrastructure protection, while the poor are pushed to the periphery.

Disaster Risk and Climate Vulnerability

- Floods are no longer rare events; they are now frequent, intense, and systemic due to climate change.
- Informal settlements face compounded vulnerabilities: poor housing, lack of sanitation, drainage failure, and disaster unpreparedness.

Governance and Data Gaps

- Lack of flood exposure data on vulnerable populations has hindered policy design.
- The study's use of satellite imagery and machine learning shows how technology can aid evidence-based policymaking.
- The findings urge a shift from location-centric to human-centric planning that focuses on inequality, resilience, and participation.

SDG Commitments and Equity

- The situation contradicts the spirit of the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs):
 - Goal 1: No Poverty
 - Goal 6: Clean Water and Sanitation
 - Goal 11: Sustainable Cities and Communities
 - Goal 13: Climate Action

- Failure to address these disparities may derail India's SDG achievements.

Ethical and Institutional Responsibility

- The disproportionate burden of disaster on slum dwellers reflects a failure of distributive justice.
- There is a moral obligation for urban planners and policymakers to engage communities, respect climate justice, and enable inclusive adaptation strategies.

Way Forward

Inclusive Urban Planning

- Recognise informal settlements in city master plans.
- Implement affordable housing schemes with a climate-resilient lens.

Community-Led Adaptation

- Promote participatory governance, involving slum residents in risk assessments and local infrastructure projects.
- Decentralise disaster management and build capacities in local governments.

Technology and Predictive Tools

- Use machine learning and satellite data to map vulnerabilities dynamically.
- Integrate this into urban flood early warning systems and zoning laws.

Flood-Resilient Infrastructure

- Upgrade drainage, sanitation, and housing in at-risk areas.
- Invest in nature-based solutions (e.g., mangrove restoration, sponge cities).

Conclusion

India's challenge is not just managing floods but redefining urban equity. The slum-floodplain crisis is a symptom of deeper spatial injustice and planning exclusion. As the 2030 SDG deadline looms, India must act decisively — not only to protect its most vulnerable but also to demonstrate leadership in equitable, climate-resilient urban development.

UPSC Mains Practice Question

Ques: The concentration of slum clusters in flood-prone zones is a failure of urban planning." Discuss in the context of Indian cities. **(150 Words)**

Page : 08 :GS 3 : Disaster Management

Two back-to-back stampedes during religious pilgrimages in North India (Haridwar's Mansa Devi temple and Barabanki's Avsaaneshwar temple) resulted in 10 deaths, triggered by panic over electrocution rumours. These events highlight India's chronic neglect of safety norms during mass gatherings.

Core Issues and Analysis

Culture of Risk and Normalisation of Hazard

- Despite the National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA) issuing clear guidelines, most religious venues lack infrastructure like:
 - Automatic power cut-off systems
 - Public-address systems
 - Redundant escape routes
 - Real-time voltage or crowd monitoring
- Makeshift wiring, untrained personnel, and absence of drills create high-risk environment, especially during peak pilgrim seasons or festivals.

Governance Gaps and Regulatory Loopholes

- Safety compliance is optional at many religious sites due to their classification under charitable exemptions in building codes.
- Disaster drills, mandated under the Disaster Management Act, 2005, are often ignored for daily worship activities.
- States respond with compensation, not with systemic reforms or enforcement of safety protocols.

Implementation Failures

- Carrying capacity limits are rarely enforced or communicated.
- The entry-exit design at many temples (e.g., single stairways at Mansa Devi) violates NDMA norms.
- Safety funds are often diverted to festival preparations rather than permanent infrastructure.

Culture of risk

The notion of a routinely planned mass gathering should be done away with

A day apart, two pilgrimages in North India have endured chaos. Eight people died on the steep stairway to Haridwar's Mansa Devi shrine on July 27 after a rumour spread that a snapped power line was live. The next day, at Avsaaneshwar temple in Barabanki, monkeys reportedly damaged an overhead cable, sparking panic that killed two persons. Both incidents were triggered by fears of electrocution. Such hazards at temples are not new: makeshift wiring draped over stalls and overloaded transformers are common sights at melas. However, neither shrine had an automatic power cutoff or a public-address system capable of debunking misinformation. The Haridwar probe will almost certainly reiterate older recommendations such as underground cabling and real-time voltage monitoring. However, the threat is incidental. Except for two major stampedes in recent memory (in Bengaluru and Hyderabad), all such tragedies have occurred at religious mass gatherings or in the course of attending them. They occur despite multiple guidelines and court orders due to authorities' collective desensitisation to risk. On paper, Uttarakhand has a crowd-management manual for the Char Dham and the NDMA's guidelines say that every event must calculate carrying capacity, stagger entry, maintain redundant escape routes, and hold drills. Yet, at Mansa Devi, the stairway that doubles as entry and exit was used without scheduling, and the only alternative route had much lower carrying capacity.

In Uttarakhand and Uttar Pradesh, the response centred on compensation rather than structural reform. The NDMA norms need to be legally binding, with severe consequences for persons, enterprises or businesses that fail to protect lives. At present, States choose provisions from the norms and temple trusts often treat them as optional because pilgrim facilities fall under charitable exemptions in many building codes. Routine 'darshan' does not require safety certification even when daily footfall exceeds that of a sports stadium. States also bank on ad hoc volunteers and under-trained guards to manage surges. However, annual drills mandated under the Disaster Management Act are rarely held for regular worship, while funds earmarked for permanent infrastructure are often diverted to festivals. The time has come to eradicate the notion of a simply planned or cheap mass gathering event, religious or otherwise. When footfall exceeds a preset threshold, a single incident-command structure must come into effect. Authorities must deploy overhead LiDAR and AI cameras to calculate crowd density, with real-time alerts to help divert or throttle traffic. Finally, States must ensure that venues publish capacity charts at entrances, conduct and livestream quarterly drills to normalise a safety culture, and certify volunteers in basic life support and crowd psychology.

Ethical and Administrative Dimensions

- There is an ethical lapse in treating mass gatherings as "cheap and routine," with lives of poor pilgrims not valued equally.
- It reflects a failure of accountability, as temple trusts and local administrations often evade responsibility through lack of enforcement.

Recommendations for Reform

Make NDMA Guidelines Legally Enforceable

- Create penal provisions for non-compliance by temple trusts, contractors, and local bodies.
- Mandate safety certification for all public venues exceeding certain footfall thresholds.

Strengthen Structural Safety

- Use overhead LiDAR, AI-based crowd density cameras, and real-time alert systems.
- Publish capacity charts at venue entrances, similar to stadium safety protocols.

Institutionalise Risk Culture

- Conduct quarterly safety drills and livestream them to instill awareness.
- Certify volunteers in basic life support, emergency evacuation, and crowd psychology.

Create Single Incident-Command System

- Ensure a centralised authority takes charge when pilgrim footfall exceeds critical limits.
- Implement temporary planning cells for festivals and pilgrimages with engineering and medical support teams.

Conclusion

The tragic events at Mansa Devi and Avsaaneshwar temple are not anomalies but symptoms of a deep-seated governance and ethical crisis. As India hosts some of the world's largest religious gatherings, it must shed the complacency around routine risk and build a professional, technology-driven, and legally accountable safety framework. Mass gatherings are not optional rituals—they are mass responsibilities.

UPSC Mains Practice Question

Ques: Despite comprehensive guidelines issued by the National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA), incidents of stampedes and crowd disasters continue to occur at religious gatherings. Critically examine the gaps in implementation and suggest a framework for ensuring crowd safety at mass gatherings in India.

Page 08 : GS 1 &2 : History &Governance

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Gangaikonda Cholapuram during the Aadi Thiruvathirai festival marked the 1,000th anniversary of Rajendra Chola's maritime expedition and the construction of the grand Chola temple. While the focus was on heritage, the Chola dynasty's administrative excellence and civic planning hold vital lessons for modern India.

Core Themes and Their Contemporary Relevance

1. Beyond Temples: Chola Governance Model

- **Decentralised Administration:** Cholas had well-documented village assemblies (sabhas), often elected, responsible for local taxation, irrigation, and education.
- **Land and Revenue Management:** Detailed land surveys, classification, and tax collection ensured transparent and efficient governance.
- **Lesson:** Despite the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments, many local bodies today function without elected representatives, undermining grassroots democracy.

2. Water Resource Management

- The Cholas constructed sophisticated tanks, canals, and sluices to manage the Cauvery delta's seasonal floods and droughts.
- **Present Challenge:** Large volumes of floodwater in the delta still drain into the sea due to poor water retention infrastructure.
- **Lesson:** Reviving traditional systems and integrating them with modern technology can enhance climate resilience and water security.

3. Infrastructure and Seismic Resilience

- The Brihadisvara temples, built over 1,000 years ago, still stand despite the region being earthquake-prone.
- Their architecture and load-distribution mechanisms are seen as models of seismic stability.
- **Lesson:** Studying ancient temple engineering could help address India's recurring infrastructure failures and poor urban structural safety.

Lessons from past

The Chola legacy includes good governance, not just grand temples

The visit of Prime Minister Narendra Modi to Tamil Nadu had a subtle political message. In his address at the valediction of the annual Aadi Thiruvathirai festival at Gangaikonda Cholapuram to mark the birth anniversary of Rajendra Chola I, he focused on the legacy of the Chola emperor and his father Rajaraja Chola I to underline that contemporary India would be as enterprising as ancient India under the imperial Cholas, in expanding trade, and in guarding India's sovereignty. The festival was also organised to commemorate 1,000 years of the maritime expedition of Rajendra Chola to south-east Asia as well as the construction of the iconic temple, a World Heritage Site. The grandeur of the Chola dynasty is fascinating to recall, but there are other mundane facets of the Chola rule which are of modern relevance – its water management, tax and land revenue collection, and democratic processes.

In creating infrastructure, especially, the Cholas hold many lessons. In recent months, there have been fatal accidents involving civic structures. The resilience of the Brihadisvara temples, which have stood tall for over 1,000 years, could provide learnings. Studies show that the southern peninsula was the epicentre of several earthquakes in the last 200-odd years. Archaeologists are of the view that the superstructure of the temples holds the key to modern building techniques when it comes to seismic resilience. A close study of the temples for structural stability can be of immense value in the contemporary context. Apart from focusing on the heritage and culture of the Cholas, India could try and replicate their success in administration. Management of water resources, especially, could be an important learning. The Cauvery delta, where Gangaikonda Cholapuram is located, may experience floods, with a large volume of water draining into the sea without being harnessed for periods of scarcity. More than 30 years have passed since the adoption of the 73rd and 74th Amendments to the Constitution, but a large number of local bodies, even in the major cities, are functioning without elected representatives. The celebration is an opportunity for an analysis of the functioning of grassroots-level democratic bodies. Mr. Modi announced that the Centre would install the statues of Rajaraja Chola and Rajendra Chola to remind the country of its historical consciousness. But this exercise would have greater purpose if it reminds the country of the administrative acumen of the Cholas, and nudges those in governance to address many of the chronic flaws and problems.

4. Cultural Nationalism and Historical Consciousness

- Installation of Chola statues promotes historical pride.
- However, true homage lies not just in memorialising history, but in mainstreaming the best aspects of ancient governance into modern systems.

Challenges Highlighted

- **Tokenism vs Substance:** Celebrating cultural icons without learning from their systems creates symbolic but ineffective gestures.
- **Neglect of Local Governance:** Despite constitutional backing, urban and rural local bodies often remain politically sidelined.
- **Water Mismanagement:** India faces both floods and droughts, largely due to fragmented water governance and lack of integrated planning.
- **Infrastructure Collapse:** Poorly designed civic structures, unlike Chola-era monuments, show India's present vulnerability to natural and man-made disasters.

Way Forward

Area	Modern Application of Chola Legacy
Water Governance	Restore tanks, promote rainwater harvesting, use floodwaters efficiently
Local Governance	Empower panchayats and municipal bodies with funds, functions, and functionaries
Infrastructure Design	Study Chola temples for insights into sustainable and resilient construction
Civic Consciousness	Promote historical literacy alongside civic responsibility and disaster preparedness

Conclusion

The grandeur of the Chola empire was not limited to temples and conquest, but extended to visionary civic management, participatory governance, and sustainable infrastructure. India's future development must learn from these civilisational strengths, ensuring that cultural celebrations translate into administrative reforms. Merely honouring the past with statues is insufficient unless accompanied by a revival of ethical and efficient governance models.

UPSC Mains Practice Question

Ques: The legacy of the Chola dynasty extends beyond grand temples to administrative brilliance and civic planning. Discuss the relevance of Chola-era governance practices in contemporary India. **(250 words)**

Page 09:GS 2 : Indian Polity

India's judiciary faces an overwhelming backlog of over 5 crore pending cases across the Supreme Court, High Courts, and District/Subordinate courts. The crisis has reached such proportions that delayed justice is now systemic, particularly in civil litigation at the district level.

Justice on hold: India's courts are clogged

Civil cases in district courts face the longest delays, exposing a stark mismatch between caseload and capacity

DATA POINT

Kartkey Singh

Timely justice is a cornerstone of public trust in the legal system, as captured by the classic maxim 'justice delayed, is justice denied'. Prolonged delays often deter people from approaching courts. Last year, President Droupadi Murmu termed this hesitation the 'black coat syndrome'.

Although this has been a perpetual issue in India, the scale is now striking. Over 86,700 cases are pending in the Supreme Court (SC), over 63.3 lakh cases in High Courts (HCs), and 4.6 crore cases in district and subordinate courts. Added up, the total number of pending cases in India amounts to more than 5 crore (Chart 1).

While the principal actors in the judicial process – judges, lawyers, litigants and witnesses – generally act in good faith and with rational intent, their functioning is often hindered by structural bottlenecks, procedural delays, and systemic constraints. These constraints in case resolution arise from several interlinked factors, including inadequate infrastructure and court staff, complex case facts, the nature of evidence, and degree of cooperation from key stakeholders. Delays are exacerbated by the lack of mandated timelines for different case types frequent adjournments, and weak mechanisms to monitor, track, and bunch cases for hearing. A major contributor is the absence of effective case management and scheduling, with no clear timelines for filings, witness examinations, or hearings.

An analysis of the justice delivery timeline in Indian courts reveals stark disparities across court levels and case types (Chart 2). Criminal cases, generally considered as offences against the State, are resolved faster than civil ones, such as property, family or con-

tractual disputes at every tier. HCs lead by disposing of 85.3% criminal cases within a year, followed by the SC at 79.5%, and district courts at 70.6%. The real concern lies in civil litigation at the district level, which handles the bulk of India's pending cases, where only 38.7% civil cases are resolved within a year, and nearly 20% stretch beyond five years. This means that courts serving the most litigants are the least equipped to ensure timely justice.

Although the judiciary and the government consistently introduce various reforms, a major systemic cause of judicial delay is the persistent gap between the sanctioned and actual strength of judges across courts (Chart 3). India's judiciary functions at just 79% of its capacity. Out of 26,927 sanctioned posts, 5,665 are vacant, resulting in overwhelming workloads. District and subordinate courts, which handle the bulk of litigation, have a sanctioned strength of only 25,771 judges, averaging 18 judges per 10 lakh population. India operates with just 15 judges per 10 lakh population. Even at full sanctioned strength across all courts, it would reach only 19 judges per 10 lakh population – far below the 1987 Law Commission's recommendation of 50.

Alongside broader legal and procedural reforms, alternative dispute resolution offers a promising way forward to ease the burden on traditional courts and deliver quicker, more affordable, and citizen-friendly justice. Mechanisms such as mediation, arbitration, and Lok Adalats provide flexible alternatives for resolving disputes outside the traditional courtroom. The success of National Lok Adalats, which are organised simultaneously in all taluks, district courts, and HCs on a pre-fixed date (Chart 4), demonstrates this potential: between 2021 and March 2025, they resolved over 27.5 crore cases, including 22.21 crore pre-litigation and 5.34 crore pending court cases.



Chart 1: Number of pending cases across courts in crore, as per latest data

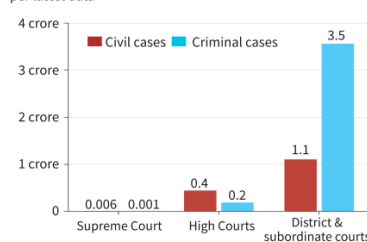


Chart 2: Time taken to resolve/dispose of cases across courts in civil and criminal cases, as per latest data

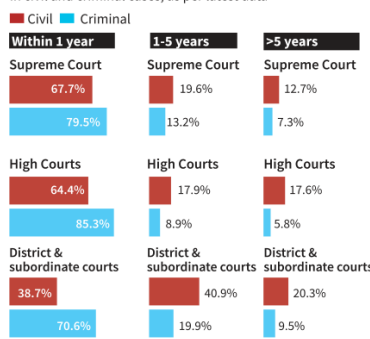


Chart 3: The % of vacant posts of judges across courts, as per latest data

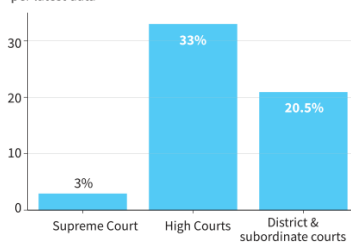
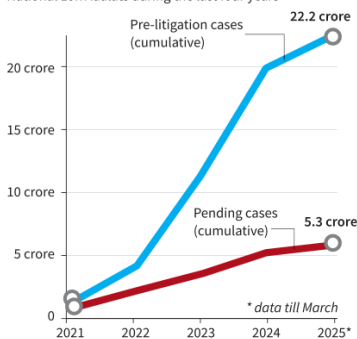


Chart 4: Cumulative number of cases disposed of in National Lok Adalats during the last four years



Kartkey Singh is a lawyer based in New Delhi

Key Data Highlights

- **Total pending cases:**
 - SC: 86,700+

- HCs: 63.3 lakh
- District/Subordinate courts: 4.6 crore
- Total: Over 5 crore
- **Vacancies:**
 - Out of 26,927 sanctioned posts, 5,665 are vacant
 - Effective strength = ~79% operational
- **Judge-to-population ratio:**
 - Current: 15 judges per 10 lakh population
 - Even at full strength: 19 per 10 lakh
 - Recommended by 1987 Law Commission: 50 per 10 lakh
- **Civil case delays:**
 - District courts resolve only 38.7% of civil cases within a year
 - 20% of civil cases remain pending for over 5 years
- **Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR):**
 - Between 2021–2025, National Lok Adalats resolved 27.5 crore cases
 - 22.21 crore pre-litigation
 - 5.34 crore pending cases

Issues Identified

1. Structural Bottlenecks

- Judge vacancies and low judge-to-population ratio create unsustainable workloads.
- Infrastructure gaps in courtrooms, digital systems, and support staff slow down proceedings.

2. Procedural Inefficiencies

- No mandated timelines for different case stages: filing, examination, final hearing.
- Frequent adjournments, poor case scheduling, and lack of modern case management systems.
- Absence of real-time case tracking leads to inefficient courtroom management.

3. Uneven Justice Delivery

- District courts, which serve the largest volume of litigants, are least equipped.
- Civil cases, especially involving property or family disputes, face decade-long delays — eroding public trust and increasing extra-judicial conflict.

4. Public Trust Deficit

- The 'black coat syndrome' (as called by the President) reflects citizen hesitation in approaching courts, fearing delay and complexity.

- Justice is increasingly seen as inaccessible, especially for the poor and marginalised.

Reform Suggestions

Area	Reform Recommendation
Judicial Capacity	Fill vacancies immediately; increase sanctioned posts to meet Law Commission standards
Digital Transformation	Use AI-enabled scheduling, e-courts, and case tracking for efficient management
Procedural Efficiency	Mandate time-bound case resolution, limit adjournments, and standardise court processes
ADR Mechanisms	Institutionalise mediation, arbitration, and Lok Adalats within the mainstream judicial system
Grassroots Awareness	Promote legal literacy and paralegal services, especially in rural areas
Judicial Accountability	Introduce performance-based monitoring of courts, with transparency in judicial productivity

Ethical Dimension

- Justice is a public good, and its delay harms not just the individual, but the collective moral foundation of a democratic society.
- Ensuring speedy, equitable, and affordable justice is an ethical obligation of the state and judiciary.

Conclusion

The Indian judiciary stands at a crossroads: it can either embrace reform and innovation, or continue to be paralysed by its own inertia. A citizen-centric, time-bound, and digitally enabled justice delivery system is no longer a luxury — it is a constitutional necessity. The judiciary must shift from being a passive respondent to an active agent of institutional transformation.

UPSC Mains Practice Question

Ques: “Justice delayed is justice denied.” In light of the rising pendency in India’s courts, critically examine the structural and procedural issues responsible for delays in the justice delivery system. Suggest reforms to address them. **(250 words)**

Page : 08 Editorial Analysis

The medical boundaries for AYUSH practitioners

The recent controversy on X between a hepatologist and an Indian chess Grand Master, on whether practitioners of traditional medicine can claim to be doctors, has sparked much commentary on the role and the status of practitioners of traditional Indian medicine systems such as Ayurveda and Unani, in India.

Committees, governments, perspectives

The burning issue here is not merely whether practitioners of Ayurveda can refer to themselves as doctors, but rather the scope of medical activities permitted under Indian law. This is an issue which has consequences for public health. A starting point for this discussion is to understand the framing of the debate over the last 80 years, beginning 1946, when the Health Survey and Development Committee, better known as Bhore Committee, batted in favour of modern scientific medicine based on evidence. The committee had pointed out that other countries were in the process of phasing out their traditional medicine systems and recommended that states take a call on the extent to which traditional medicine played a role in their public health systems.

The Bhore committee's lack of enthusiasm for the traditional medicinal system did not go unnoticed by practitioners of traditional Indian medicine who mounted a vocal protest. They managed to convince the Government of India to set up the Committee on Indigenous Systems of Medicine, which submitted its report in 1948. This committee unabashedly wrapped up its conclusions in communal language, framing the issue in terms of Hindu nationalism by linking Ayurveda to the Vedas and its decline to "foreign domination".

While the Nehru government took no action to formally recognise these practitioners of traditional medicine, the Indira Gandhi government in 1970 enacted a legislation called The Indian Medicine Central Council Act recognising and regulating the practitioners of Ayurveda, Siddha and Unani. This law was replaced in 2020 with a new law called The National Commission for Indian System of Medicine Act.

The syllabus for aspiring practitioners of Ayurveda is an absolute mish-mash of concepts that span everything from *doshas*, *prakriti*, *atmas* (which includes learning the difference between *paramatma* and *jivatma*) with a sprinkling of modern medical concepts such as cell physiology and anatomy. These are irreconcilable concepts – the theory of *tridosha* attributes all ills to an imbalance of doshas, while modern medicine locates the concepts of some diseases such as infections in "germ theory", among others. There is no middle ground between both systems of



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The core issue is whether they can refer to themselves as doctors and the scope of their medical activities, as this is a subject with consequences for public health in India

medicine which is why concepts such as integrative medicine make no sense.

Point of friction

Nevertheless, the legal recognition of this new class of practitioners led to questions on the exact boundaries between the practice of traditional and modern medicine. The major point of friction has been the prescription of modern medicines by the practitioners of traditional medicine. Ayurvedic practitioners, in particular, while claiming the superiority of their art over modern medicine, have consistently demanded the right to prescribe modern medicines developed by evidence-based modern science.

Pertinently, this dispute revolved around the interpretation of Rule 2(ee) of the Drugs and Cosmetics Rules, 1945 which defined the class of "registered medical practitioners" who can prescribe modern medicine. This definition is complicated since it is not limited to doctors with a MBBS degree. It delegates a certain amount of power to State governments to pass orders declaring medical practitioners on their State medical registers as persons "practising the modern scientific system of medicine for the purposes of ..." the Drugs & Cosmetics Act, 1940.

Many State governments have used this power under Rule 2(ee) to allow registered practitioners of Ayurveda and Unani to prescribe modern medicine such as antibiotics. The constitutionality of these orders was challenged before the courts and the first round of litigation concluded in 1998 with the judgment of the Supreme Court of India in *Dr. Mukhtiar Chand & Ors vs The State Of Punjab & Ors*. The Court concluded that "the right to prescribe drugs of a system of medicine would be synonymous with the right to practise that system of medicine. In that sense, the right to prescribe allopathic drug cannot be wholly divorced from the claim to practice allopathic medicine". Simply put, Ayurvedic practitioners had no right to prescribe modern medicine.

That judgment never stopped the lobbying by Ayurvedic and Unani practitioners with State governments for the promulgation of orders under Rule 2(ee) allowing them to prescribe modern medicine. Several State governments have continued passing these orders in defiance of the Court's judgment. This inevitably leads to litigation before the High Courts, usually by the Indian Medical Association, which often wins these cases.

Unsuspecting patients too have often sued practitioners of Ayurveda before consumer courts on the grounds that they were deceived into believing that they were being treated by a doctor with a MBBS degree who can prescribe modern medicine.

While much of the litigation has revolved

around the right to dispense modern medicine, there is also the issue regarding the medical procedures that can be conducted legally by practitioners of Ayurveda and Unani. For example, can a registered Ayurvedic practitioner "intubate" a patient? This is an important question to ask since it is an open secret that many hospitals purporting to practise modern medicine are hiring Ayurvedic practitioners with Bachelor of Ayurvedic Medicine and Surgery (BAMS) degree at lower pay in place of graduates with a MBBS degree.

Further, a notification by the Indian government in 2020 has allowed Ayurvedic practitioners (post graduates) to perform 58 minor surgeries, including the removal of the gall bladder, appendix and benign tumours. The constitutionality of this notification is pending before the courts.

If the notification is upheld, the question that arises is whether these Ayurvedic practitioners can now use anaesthetic agents and antibiotics required to conduct surgeries. The stakes are high for public health in India since the likely strategy of Ayurvedic practitioners will be to argue that these surgeries were known in traditional Indian medicine. In these times of heady Hindutva, it will be difficult to find a judge who will ignore these claims.

The political factor

The larger political backdrop to this entire debate regarding Ayurvedic practitioners is "Hindu pride", which has fuelled claims of fantastical achievements by ancient Indian civilisation, be it the *pushpaka vimana* or the claims of the Kauravas being test tube babies. When a policy issue such as Ayurveda is cynically draped in the language of "Hindu pride", it is not just the Bharatiya Janata Party but also the Indian National Congress which feels compelled to support an obviously dangerous approach to public health. The last election manifesto of the Indian National Congress, in 2024, promised that the party would "support" all systems of medicines instead of a promise to support only rational, evidence-based medicine.

This blind faith in traditional medicine is going to cost every citizen in the future since the government is actively considering the inclusion of AYUSH (Ayurveda, Yoga and Naturopathy, Unani, Siddha and Homeopathy) treatments under the Ayushman Bharat insurance scheme funded by tax-payers. This is in addition to approximately ₹20,000 crore of tax-payer money spent on research councils functioning under the Ministry of AYUSH with a mandate to research AYUSH. They have very little to show for in terms of scientific breakthroughs. Twitter outrage notwithstanding, the joke at the end of the day is on the tax-payer.

GS. Paper 02 Social Justice

UPSC Mains Practice Question: The intersection of traditional medicine and modern healthcare in India poses legal, ethical, and public health challenges. Discuss with reference to the regulation of AYUSH practitioners. (250 words)

Context :

India's healthcare system is witnessing a contentious overlap between modern medicine and traditional systems such as Ayurveda, Unani, Siddha, and Homeopathy (AYUSH). While the National Commission for Indian System of Medicine Act, 2020 legitimizes AYUSH systems, ongoing debates center around the legal scope of practice, including prescription rights and surgical procedures by AYUSH practitioners. This controversy raises critical questions regarding public health, patient safety, and medical ethics, especially when traditional practices seek to assume roles historically reserved for evidence-based medicine.

Key Analysis

1. Historical and Legal Context:

- The Bhore Committee (1946) advocated for evidence-based modern medicine, downplaying traditional systems.
- In response, the 1948 Committee on Indigenous Systems of Medicine used a communal-nationalistic lens, framing Ayurveda as a legacy of Hindu heritage.
- Legal recognition arrived with the Indian Medicine Central Council Act, 1970, and later the 2020 Act, establishing a regulated AYUSH framework.

2. AYUSH vs. Modern Medicine: Conceptual Divergence:

- Ayurveda is based on metaphysical concepts such as doshas, prakriti, and atma, while modern medicine relies on germ theory, anatomy, and clinical trials.
- The irreconcilability between both systems makes the idea of integrative medicine scientifically weak and practically ambiguous.

3. Prescription and Procedure Rights:

- Rule 2(ee) of the Drugs and Cosmetics Rules (1945) grants state governments power to recognise non-MBBS practitioners for prescribing drugs, leading to legal loopholes.
- The 1998 Supreme Court judgment (Dr. Mukhtiar Chand case) ruled that AYUSH practitioners cannot prescribe modern medicine, yet state-level violations persist.
- Consumer court cases highlight patient deception when Ayurvedic doctors practice allopathy.

4. Expansion into Surgery and Critical Procedures:

- A 2020 notification allowed Ayurvedic postgraduates to perform 58 types of minor surgeries, raising alarm over their training adequacy and access to modern surgical tools like anesthesia and antibiotics.
- This has also led to economic substitution, where hospitals employ BAMS graduates over MBBS doctors to cut costs.

5. Politicisation of Traditional Medicine:

- Hindutva narratives and a misplaced sense of cultural pride have led to policies that prioritize symbolism over safety.
- Both the BJP and Congress have supported AYUSH promotion without critically examining evidence-based efficacy.
- The proposed inclusion of AYUSH treatments under Ayushman Bharat could misallocate taxpayer funds and dilute healthcare outcomes.

Conclusion:

The blurring of lines between traditional and modern medical systems, driven by legal ambiguities and political appeasement, poses a serious threat to public health and patient safety. While India must preserve its traditional knowledge, this must not come at the cost of scientific rigour, rationality, and ethics. A clear demarcation of medical boundaries, strict enforcement of court verdicts, and evidence-based policymaking are essential to uphold the integrity of healthcare in India. Ultimately, healthcare must be about healing — not about ideology.
