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Edition: International Table of Contents

Page 01 Syllabus : GS 3 : Indian Economy	GDP growth at 6.5%, the slowest since pandemic
Page 03 Syllabus : GS 2 & 3 : Governance & Environment	Protests spread in Arunachal Pradesh against new hydroelectric projects
Page 03 Syllabus : GS 2 : International relations	Working closely with India on defence, security matters: New Zealand Deputy PM
Page 06 Syllabus : GS 2 : Governance	Rebuilding J&K : Civilians need physical and economic security to recover from the shelling
Page 07 Syllabus : GS 2 : Governance	A nine-year-old bonded labourer
Page 06 : Editorial Analysis: Syllabus : GS 2 : Governance & Social Justice	Don't merely enrol students, but equip them with skills

India's provisional GDP growth for FY 2024–25 has been pegged at 6.5%, marking the slowest pace since the pandemic year (2020–21). While Q4 growth accelerated to 7.4%, it remains lower than the 8.4% recorded in Q4 of the previous fiscal. This slowdown, despite robust quarterly numbers, flags structural and global challenges affecting the Indian economy.

GDP growth at 6.5%, the slowest since pandemic

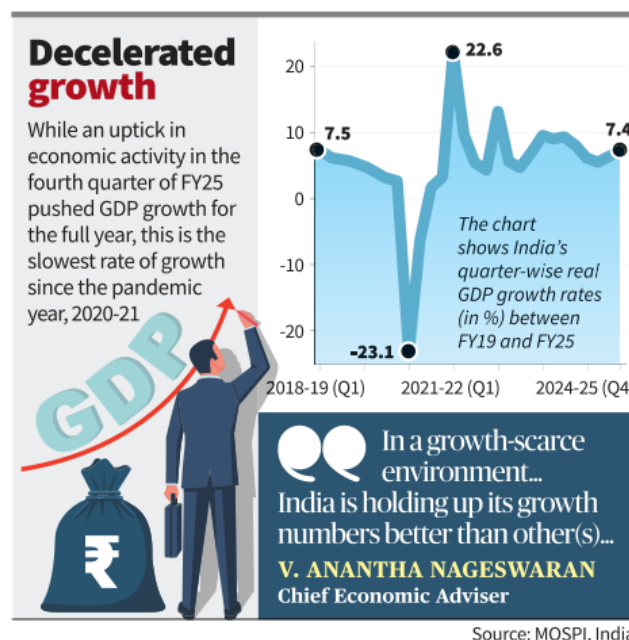
Though real GDP growth in Q4 accelerated to 7.4%, the fastest quarterly growth in 2024-25, it was still slower than 8.4% in Q4 of the previous fiscal; quarterly GDP growth in Q3 stood at 6.4%

T.C.A. Sharad Raghavan
NEW DELHI

While a significant uptick in economic activity in the fourth quarter (Q4) of financial year 2024-25 pushed Gross Domestic Product (GDP) growth for the full year to 6.5%, as per the provisional estimates for 2024-25 released by the government on Friday, this is the slowest since the pandemic year 2020-21.

As per data released by the Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, real GDP growth in Q4 of 2024-25 accelerated to 7.4%, the fastest quarterly growth in the year. It was still slower than 8.4% growth seen in Q4 of the previous financial year. Quarterly GDP growth in Q3 stood at 6.4%.

'India held its own'
Chief Economic Adviser V. Anantha Nageswaran, in a press briefing following the release of the data, sought



to downplay the post-COVID slowdown of the economy, saying that India has held its own in a "growth-scarce" global environment. "If you look in real terms, India's growth rate differential in comparison to the average growth rate of advanced economies was on the lower side dur-

ing the 'boom era' between 2003 and 2010," Mr. Nageswaran explained. "The growth differential post-COVID is higher than the growth differential in the 'boom era'." "In other words, in a growth-scarce environment post COVID and despite the rising uncertainties due to political

conflicts and trade tensions, India is holding up its growth numbers better than many advanced economies," he added.

The agriculture sector continued its strong performance in Q4, leading to a relatively strong showing for the full year. The manufacturing sector's growth stood at 4.8% in Q4 of FY25, the second fastest quarterly growth in the year, on a high base of 11.3% in Q4 of the previous year. The sector grew 4.5% in the full financial year 2024-25. The construction sector returned to double-digit growth of 10.8% in the fourth quarter, the fastest in the year, and faster than the 8.7% seen in Q4 of 2023-24. The sector's full-year growth stood at 9.4% in 2024-25, down from 10.4% in 2023-24.

The data released on Friday showed that growth in household consumption quickened to 7.2% in 2024-25 from 5.6% in the previous year.

Key Highlights of the Economic Performance:

1. Quarterly Growth Trends:

- **Q4 FY25:** 7.4% (highest for the year but below last year's Q4)
- **Q3 FY25:** 6.4% This shows an upward trajectory in the latter half of the year but signals a moderation from the previous fiscal.

2. Sectoral Insights:

- **Agriculture:** Continued to be a consistent performer, aiding overall stability.
- **Manufacturing:** Grew by 4.8% in Q4, despite a high base of 11.3% in Q4 of FY24, suggesting resilience but slower momentum.
- **Construction:** Witnessed strong double-digit growth in Q4 (10.8%), indicating infrastructure-led demand, though the annual growth slowed from 10.4% to 9.4%.

3. **Private Consumption:** Growth in household consumption improved to 7.2%, from 5.6% in the previous year — a crucial sign of reviving domestic demand, especially in a scenario of subdued exports and global uncertainty.

4. **Government Standpoint:** Chief Economic Adviser V. Anantha Nageswaran defended the slowdown, citing global headwinds, post-COVID uncertainties, and geopolitical tensions. He emphasized that India's growth differential with advanced economies is higher now than during the 2003–2010 boom era, showcasing India's relative strength in a "growth-scarce" world.

Critical Analysis:

- **Growth Slowdown with Pockets of Strength:** While the headline number is lower than previous years, strong Q4 figures and improved consumption suggest domestic recovery is underway. Yet, manufacturing and export vulnerabilities remain critical constraints.
- **Global Context Matters:** In a period marked by geopolitical strife, protectionism, and inflationary pressures, India's ability to maintain above 6% growth places it among the better-performing large economies.
- **Need for Reforms:** The slowdown signals the need for supply-side reforms, labour market **flexibility, and support for MSMEs, especially in manufacturing, to sustain long-term momentum.**
- **Rural vs Urban Divide:** The growth in agriculture and construction sectors reflects rural and semi-urban demand, while urban-centric manufacturing and services need renewed policy focus.
- **Policy Implications:** Fiscal policy must remain growth-supportive but prudent, and the government must balance inflation concerns with growth imperatives, especially with upcoming elections and external pressures.

UPSC Mains Practice Question

Ques : India's GDP growth rate for 2024–25 has been the slowest since the pandemic, yet it reflects resilience amid global uncertainties. In this context, analyze the key drivers and constraints of India's economic growth in the current fiscal. Also, suggest measures to ensure sustained and inclusive growth. (250 words)

Page 03: GS 2& 3: Governance&Environment

Recent protests across Arunachal Pradesh, particularly against mega-dams in the Siang, Dri, and Lohit River basins, have reignited concerns around hydroelectric development, tribal rights, ecological vulnerability, and cultural heritage. This unfolding resistance showcases the conflict between national energy security and local environmental-social concerns, making it a significant issue for governance and environmental policy discourse.

Protests spread in Arunachal Pradesh against new hydroelectric projects

The Hindu Bureau
GUWAHATI

An intense opposition to a proposed mega-dam in the Siang River belt has set off a chain of protests against other hydropower projects in Arunachal Pradesh.

A society representing several villages wrote to the Dibang Valley district authorities on May 29, voicing its “strong and reasoned objection” to the 400 megawatt Mihundo (Mihumdon) Hydroelectric Project proposed on the Dri River. Scheduled to be commissioned in 2026, this run-of-the-river project was assigned to the Satluj Jal Vidyut Nigam.

The Ekhomey Mowo Welfare Society, based in Anini, the district headquarters, said the project was illegal as the mandatory free, prior, and informed consent was not obtained from the Gram Sabha or the residents of Angrim Valley who would be affected.

The society’s general se-



Opposition to the projects was triggered by protests against the proposed mega-dam in the Siang River belt. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

cretary, Morey Molo, and treasurer Aisi Mow underlined the district’s seismic and ecological vulnerability, asserting that the locals “do not want dam-based development on our ancestral lands”.

Opposition to the Dri River project came a day after residents of the remote Nukung and Mla villages voiced their resistance to the proposed 1200 MW Kalai-II Hydroelectric Project on the Lohit River in Anjaw district during a public consultation and so-

cial impact assessment review.

According to the social impact assessment report prepared by the GB Pant National Institute of Himalayan Environment, Nukung and Mla villages would be severely affected by the project.

In a letter to the Anjaw Deputy Commissioner, the Nukung Welfare Society said that the project was unacceptable to the indigenous communities in the area.

“The total obliteration

of our ancestral land by a project we did not consent to is unacceptable and illegal,” Roshan Tawsik, the society’s chairman, said.

The villagers pointed out that the potential submergence of sacred Mishmi tribal cultural and spiritual sites by the mega-dam was of particular concern. These sites include Kutung Graam, the abode of the community’s supreme deity and Parshuram Kund downstream.

Meanwhile, the Siang Indigenous Farmers’ Forum vowed to intensify its agitation against the proposed 11,000 MW Siang Upper Multi-purpose Project and the “militarisation” of the targeted sites along the Siang River.

The government has been pushing this project to be executed by the NHPC, arguing that it would help minimise the adverse impact of a 60,000 MW hydroelectric project China has been planning on the Yarlung Tsangpo River upstream.

Key Developments:

1. **Triggering Incident:** Protests against the 11,000 MW Siang Upper Multipurpose Project have spread to other proposed projects. This particular project is being pushed by the government due to China's plans to construct a 60,000 MW hydro project on the Yarlung Tsangpo upstream, raising fears of water diversion.
2. **Protests Across the State:**
 - **Dibang Valley:** Opposition to the 400 MW Mihundo (Mihumdon) Hydroelectric Project by the Ekhomey Mowo Welfare Society centers on the lack of consent from local Gram Sabhas, violation of the PESA Act, and seismic risk.
 - **Anjaw District:** Protests against the 1200 MW Kalai-II Project highlight cultural and spiritual loss, including sites like Kutung Graam and Parshuram Kund—sacred to the Mishmi tribe.
3. **Legal and Ethical Concerns:** The villagers argue that no Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC) was obtained, a violation of both Constitutional rights under Schedule VI, the Forest Rights Act (2006), and international norms under UNDRIP (United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples).
4. **Ecological and Cultural Sensitivity:**
 - Arunachal Pradesh is part of a fragile Himalayan ecosystem, prone to landslides, earthquakes, and biodiversity loss.
 - Indigenous communities emphasize that ancestral lands and sacred sites are not merely property but repositories of cultural identity and spiritual continuity.
5. **Strategic and National Interest Dimension:** The government's push is driven by strategic concerns, especially to counterbalance Chinese hydro plans on the upper Brahmaputra (Yarlung Tsangpo), citing national water security and energy self-reliance.

Critical Analysis:

- **Development vs. Rights Conflict:** The recurring conflict reflects a deep-rooted governance challenge—pursuing energy goals without undermining tribal rights and ecological integrity. Legal safeguards are often bypassed in the name of "national interest".
- **Social Impact Assessment (SIA) Flaws:** Despite being mandatory, SIAs often remain a tick-box exercise. The failure to conduct genuine, participatory consultations erodes trust and leads to resistance.
- **Policy Gaps:** While India has ambitious hydro targets, especially for clean energy transitions, the lack of a comprehensive framework for indigenous participation in such projects is evident.
- **Need for Alternatives:** Instead of mega-dams, the government should explore decentralized renewable energy, micro-hydro, and solar energy suited to fragile terrains, aligning sustainability with inclusion.

UPSC Mains Practice Question

Ques:Hydroelectric projects in the North-East are essential for India's energy security but have sparked widespread opposition from local communities. Critically examine the environmental, cultural, and strategic dimensions of such projects. Suggest a balanced approach to resolve these conflicts. **(250 Words)**

Page : 03 :GS 2 : International relations

New Zealand's Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister, Winston Peters, during his India visit, highlighted a strategic shift in his country's foreign policy — signaling closer defence and security cooperation with India. Against the backdrop of rising geopolitical instability, New Zealand's renewed engagement with South and Southeast Asia marks a significant pivot in its traditionally Pacific-focused diplomacy.

Working closely with India on defence, security matters: New Zealand Deputy PM

Kallol Bhattacharjee
NEW DELHI

In the current era of “great uncertainty”, New Zealand has started working “more closely” with India in the fields of defence and security, said Winston Peters, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs of New Zealand here on Friday.

Speaking at an event, Mr. Peters gave an overview of his country's foreign policy, and said that freedom of navigation in the Indo-Pacific region is “crucial” for New Zealand.

“During a time of great uncertainty, instability and disorder, we have taken steps to work more closely on matters of defence and security with India. A recently signed Defence Cooperation Arrangement will facilitate closer links between our militaries,” Mr. Peters said, speaking at a fireside chat organised by



Winston Peters

the Ananta Aspen Centre.

Mr. Peters, who was among the global leaders who had joined India in condoling the loss of lives in the April 22 terror attack in Pahalgam, said that security cooperation between the two sides is increasing. “The New Zealand Navy is leading Combined Task Force 150, charged with securing trade routes and counter-terroring terrorism, smuggling, and piracy in the Indian Ocean and Gulf of Aden,” he added.

To deal with the uncer-

tain and unpredictable conditions in the fields of security and economy, New Zealand has “reset” its foreign policy and is “significantly increasing” its “focus and resources” on South and Southeast Asia, Mr. Peters said. Describing India as a “geopolitical giant”, he said that India has emerged as an “indispensable security actor in both regional and global spheres. In the prevailing international circumstances, he argued in favour of giving space to diplomacy.

“Since war and instability is everyone's calamity, diplomacy is the business of us all. We have observed that at this moment in time the ability to talk with, rather than at, each other has never been more needed,” Mr. Peters said, arguing in favour of safeguarding rights of countries like New Zealand that he described as a “small state”.

Key Highlights:

1. Defence Cooperation Agreement: A recently signed Defence Cooperation Arrangement (DCA) will enhance military linkages between India and New Zealand. This move marks a departure from New

Zealand's traditional low military engagement in the Indo-Pacific and signifies recognition of India as a key security partner.

2. **Freedom of Navigation and Maritime Security:** New Zealand emphasized the importance of secure sea lanes, especially in the Indo-Pacific, for its trade and economic interests. With the New Zealand Navy leading Combined Task Force 150 (focused on counterterrorism, piracy, and smuggling in the Indian Ocean and Gulf of Aden), collaboration with India enhances shared maritime security objectives.
3. **India as a "Geopolitical Giant":** Peters acknowledged India's growing influence in regional and global affairs, calling it an "indispensable security actor." This recognition aligns with India's Act East Policy and its growing role in the Quad, IOR security architecture, and global South partnerships.
4. **New Zealand's Strategic Reset:** In response to rising uncertainty and the changing global power dynamics, New Zealand is expanding diplomatic, economic, and defence focus on Asia, especially South and Southeast Asia. This includes both multilateral engagement and bilateral cooperation, with India at the core.
5. **Diplomacy as a Tool for Peace:** Mr. Peters strongly advocated for dialogue-based conflict resolution, emphasizing the need for smaller states to safeguard their autonomy through collective diplomacy rather than isolationism.

Critical Analysis:

- **Shift in New Zealand's Geopolitical Posture:** Traditionally neutral and focused on the Pacific, New Zealand's increasing strategic convergence with India is a response to China's assertiveness, regional disruptions, and the global reordering of alliances.
- **India's Expanding Indo-Pacific Role:** This development reflects India's success in projecting itself as a credible maritime and strategic power, capable of balancing regional security interests, particularly in the face of China's naval expansion and infrastructure projects across the Indian Ocean.
- **Mutual Interests:** Both countries share an interest in rule-based international order, secure maritime commons, climate cooperation, and counter-terrorism. Enhanced defence cooperation complements growing ties in education, trade, and diaspora relations.
- **Challenges Ahead:** Despite strategic intent, the limited scale of New Zealand's military capabilities and geographical distance could restrict tangible outcomes. However, sustained cooperation in maritime awareness, joint exercises, and multilateral forums can yield long-term dividends.

Conclusion:

New Zealand's strategic outreach to India underlines a new era of middle-power collaboration in the Indo-Pacific. For India, it affirms its emergence as a regional stabilizer and a preferred security partner. Going forward, a balanced, inclusive and rule-based engagement with nations like New Zealand will bolster India's maritime diplomacy and reinforce its position in the evolving Indo-Pacific security architecture.

UPSC Mains Practice Question

Ques: With rising uncertainty in global geopolitics, countries like New Zealand are forging closer defence ties with India. Examine the strategic significance of such partnerships for India's Indo-Pacific vision and maritime diplomacy. (250 Words)

Page 06 : GS 2 : Governance

The recent cross-border shelling by Pakistan, in response to Operation Sindoor, has inflicted significant civilian casualties and infrastructural damage in Jammu & Kashmir, particularly in Poonch, Uri, Kupwara, Baramulla, and Rajouri. The incident underscores the vulnerability of border populations, the necessity of robust civil defence mechanisms, and the importance of integrating relief with long-term development in conflict-prone regions.

Key Highlights:

1. Civilian Losses and Infrastructure Damage:
 - At least 1,500 houses damaged (690 in Poonch, 534 in Uri).
 - 18 civilians killed, with Poonch being the most severely affected.
 - Significant damage to residential and community infrastructure across the border districts.
2. Government Response:
 - Union Home Minister's visit to the affected areas provided political reassurance and symbolic support.
 - Distribution of job letters to victims' families aimed at economic relief and morale restoration.
 - A relief package is in the pipeline, though the ₹1.2 lakh compensation for fully damaged homes has been criticized as insufficient.
3. Security Measures and Civil Defence:
 - Construction of 9,500 underground bunkers (8,000 in Jammu, 1,500 in Kashmir) as part of proactive civil defence.
 - Rising demand for individual bunkers, especially in sparsely populated and remote border villages of the Kashmir Valley.
4. Psychosocial Impact and Political Outreach:
 - Visits by opposition leaders, including Rahul Gandhi and TMC representatives, conveyed bipartisan solidarity.

Rebuilding J&K

Civilians need physical and economic security to recover from the shelling

Jammu and Kashmir bore the brunt of Pakistan's response to Operation Sindoor, and Union Home Minister Amit Shah rightly focused on both security and development during his visit to Poonch, where residential areas were hit by shelling from across the border. A comprehensive relief package is planned alongside the construction of more underground shelters for civilians. The J&K government is still in the process of assessing damages, but Poonch was by far the worst-affected district. A preliminary report submitted by a committee set up by the BJP to the Ministry of Home Affairs identified 1,500 houses – 690 in Poonch and 534 in Uri – that were damaged in the indiscriminate shelling. At least 18 civilians – 14 in Poonch alone – lost their lives. Pakistani shelling hit towns in Poonch, Baramulla, Kupwara and Rajouri, and the damage to civilian infrastructure was considerable. Mr. Shah on Friday visited the affected regions, expressed solidarity with the people, and handed out job appointment letters to the kin of those who lost their lives. Earlier, the Leader of the Opposition, Rahul Gandhi, and representatives of the Trinamool Congress visited the victims.

These border residents felt heard, their sense of fear dissipated to some extent, and their morale boosted by these visits. The Indian Army's statement on the India and Pakistan ceasefire "not having an expiry date" is reassuring for the border residents. Life is limping back to normalcy with residents returning to their homes, many of them shattered by the shelling. The J&K government is struggling to meet the demands of the affected population. This was evident from the relief amount approved up to ₹1.2 lakh to fully damaged houses. The affected and displaced residents described it as "insufficient" for them to return to their once-concrete and multi-storey houses. Against this backdrop, Mr. Shah's promise of a relief package is a ray of hope. Around 9,500 bunkers – 8,000 in the Jammu division and 1,500 in the Kashmir Valley – have been built by the Centre so far. However, there is a growing demand for individual bunkers in sparsely located populations in border areas of J&K, especially in the Kashmir Valley, to ensure civilians manage to shift to safer locations immediately in case of shelling by Pakistan. The Centre and the elected government in J&K should work in tandem to help border residents who are in distress.

- Army's statement that the India–Pakistan ceasefire has "no expiry date" provided psychological assurance to residents.

Critical Analysis:

- **Security–Development Nexus:** Security and economic stability must go hand-in-hand. Rebuilding homes alone is not enough; the government must also provide livelihood security, trauma counseling, education continuity, and agricultural assistance to ensure holistic recovery.
- **Inadequacy of Relief Measures:** The compensation offered is grossly inadequate, especially for multi-storey concrete homes, reflecting the need for context-sensitive relief planning. A graded compensation policy based on damage extent and local construction norms should be adopted.
- **Gap in Civil Defence Infrastructure:** While bunkers have been constructed, their distribution is uneven, and individual safety solutions are necessary due to the scattered nature of border habitations. Real-time alert systems, community drills, and evacuation protocols must also be institutionalized.
- **Federal–State Coordination:** With the ongoing political transition in J&K, effective Centre–UT coordination is essential for timely aid disbursement, implementation of relief schemes, and restoration of public services.
- **Need for a Long-Term Peace Strategy:** Shelling incidents like these remind us of the fragile ceasefire arrangement with Pakistan. India must invest in both military preparedness and diplomatic channels to prevent escalation and protect civilians.

Conclusion:

The rebuilding of Jammu & Kashmir's border areas must not be reduced to a relief-centric exercise. It requires a comprehensive and empathetic approach that integrates physical safety, economic rehabilitation, and emotional healing. The Centre and J&K's local administration must act decisively and collaboratively to restore trust, dignity, and security to the affected residents. Only then can lasting peace and resilience be achieved in this geopolitically sensitive region.

UPSC Mains Practice Question

Ques: In the wake of cross-border hostilities, ensuring civilian security and economic rehabilitation in border areas is as critical as military preparedness. Discuss with reference to recent events in Jammu & Kashmir. (250 words)

The tragic death of nine-year-old Venkatesh, allegedly kept as collateral for a loan and later murdered while working in a bonded labour setup in Tamil Nadu, lays bare the continuing prevalence of bonded and child labour in India, particularly among vulnerable tribal communities like the Yanadis. Despite the existence of strong legal frameworks like the Bonded Labour System (Abolition) Act, 1976, the practice continues unabated in parts of rural and semi-urban India, exposing systemic failures in law enforcement, victim protection, and rehabilitation.



Manneppalli Anandam holds her employer's daughter. Anandam's nine-year-old son was taken away from her as collateral for a debt and was later found dead. (A. K. Iyer)

A nine-year-old bonded labourer

Last week, a duck farmer was arrested on charges of keeping a child from Andhra Pradesh as collateral for a loan and then killing him in Tamil Nadu. Though bonded labour has long been banned by law, it continues to be practised, say activists. **Nidheesh Narayani** reports on how the boy's mother, Anandam, a woman from a tribal community, tried in vain to bring her child back home.

Two years ago, Manneppalli Anandam, a woman from a tribal community in Andhra Pradesh, who does not know her age, decided to work for R. Mathu, a 60-year-old duck farmer. He promised her a salary of ₹24,000 a month for herding ducks and helping him run a sweet shop in Satepudi, a town in the Tirupati district of Andhra Pradesh. Anandam took an advance of ₹15,000 from him. When she was unable to repay the amount, Mathu took away her youngest son, M. Venkatesh, as collateral. He also allegedly inflated the amount she owed him to ₹42,000.

On April 9, Anandam spoke to Venkatesh over the phone. The nine-year-old boy told her that he was busy tending to Mathu's ducks in Kancheepuram district in Tamil Nadu. Anandam lives in Tharavakula village in Dantamala mandal of Nellore district in Andhra Pradesh, where she works in her current employer's six-acre orchard on a daily wage. She wanted her child back but she would be there in two days with ₹42,000 of cash in hand. She promised that he would be home soon.

Before ending the call, Anandam asked Venkatesh what he had for lunch. And rice, he said, an improvement over the previous day's meal of rice mixed with water.

That was the last time Anandam spoke to him. **Disturbed by the silence**

A week later, clutching wads of cash, Anandam travelled to Satepudi, about 270 kilometres from her village. But Mathu refused the money. "He used to eat alone against me," she recalls. "He also told me that my son had run away with his phone and some cash." Dejected, Anandam returned home.

When a month passed and there was still no word from Venkatesh, Reddy helped her file a First Information Report (FIR) at the Satepudi police station on May 25.

The police began their investigation. On being questioned, Mathu told them that Venkatesh had died of cholera on April 12 at a private hospital at Pukapattanam in Tirumala district of Tamil Nadu. He confessed that he had buried the boy near the police station.

The police found Venkatesh's decomposed body and informed Anandam. "I knew it was him. He was wearing a vest and shorts. I knew it was my boy though he had become unrecognisable," says Anandam, her cheeks wet with tears.

While the medical officer from the Chengalpattu Government Medical College declined to share the post-mortem report, the Police posted the report and said that the stated cause of death was "blunt force injury to the head by a heavy weapon". The injuries were "sufficient to cause death in ordinary course of nature".

At first, Mathu, his wife, and son were arrested under the provisions of the Bonded Labour System (Abolition) Act, 1976, and Child Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Act, 1986, the Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2001, and the Scheduled Caste and the Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989. On May 24, Deputy Superintendent of Police G. Ravi Kumar, who probed the case, and Section 103 (b) (murder) under the Bharatya Nyaya Sanhita, 2023, was also added to the FIR.

Bonded labour is a system where creditors force debtors to repay debts through labour. The Act prohibits any person from making advances

under, or in pursuance of, the bonded labour system. It also prohibits compelling a person to render bonded or forced labour. However, the practice continues till date, say activists.

A debt that cost a son
A debt that cost a son
Sitting on a flat rock outside Reddy's house on the outskirts of Tharavakula village, Anandam cries softly. Tharavakula is 8 km from Tharavakula town. A narrow muddy pavement leads to the village. The silence of the surroundings is broken by the crying of mothers.

Reddy's house stands in the middle of a vast expanse of lemon orchards. Anandam and her husband Prabhakar get paid ₹15,000 a month for taking care of Reddy's 12-acre orchard, tending to 30 buffaloes, and doing other odd jobs for him. Anandam and Prabhakar do not have a house.

"This is home," she says, pointing to a small hut like structure, perched precariously on four logs. The logs are covered on top by a tarpaulin sheet. There is just enough space for them to sleep.

When Reddy is around, Prabhakar and Anandam sit on the ground. They are Reddika Reddy. They are "bad people," Anandam says with a resentful tone. She believes that what happened was all her fault. "We will not know this Reddy until our last breath. We had left him to pay for Mathu and that is why this happened to us. From now on, we will be kept in him."

Two years ago, Anandam and Prabhakar went to work for Mathu after Anandam's mother told her that he may pay more. Taking an advance of ₹15,000 from Mathu, they began taking his ducks for grazing. Though he promised them a salary of ₹24,000 a month, Mathu did not give them anything more than the advance amount.

The couple stayed in the fields under the sky. They often stayed awake at night, fearing snakes and scorpions. They moved from place to place every week, bringing her food. They offered to repay the debt in instalments, but Mathu refused. Anandam has three children. From her previous marriage — Chenchu Krishna (5), Ravi

Lakshmanam (12), and Venkatesh. When her first husband died last year, she and Prabhakar left for Gudur, near Tirupati district, for his final rites. When they did not return, an enraged Mathu went in search of them. He took Venkatesh and, saying the boy was rebellious,

"Everyone says we will get some cash (compensation)," says Anandam. "But we will not demand anything except justice for my son."

The Central Sector Scheme for Rehabilitation of Bonded Labourers, 2010 states that immediate financial assistance of up to ₹10,000 is guaranteed to individuals rescued from bonded labour. Once the accused is convicted, the aid can go up to ₹12 lakh, depending on the severity of the case.

Ravi Kumar, the administrative officer at the Revenue Divisional Officer's (RDO) office in Jalapet, says the Tirupati administration is considering providing a housing site and compensation to the family. Satepudi falls under the purview of the Jalapet RDO.

Activists say the administration should also issue a "release certificate" to Anandam's family. "Release certificates can be issued only to those bonded labourers. Technically, only the boy was a bonded labourer. Since he is dead, his family is not eligible for the certificate," Kumar explains.

Peace, unfettered, and fearful?
Andhra Pradesh is both a source and a destination state for bonded labour. "The problem is not as prevalent as it used to be, but many cases do not come to light these days. In addition to many labourers from Odisha, Madhya Pradesh, West Bengal, and Chhattisgarh, the most marginalised local tribals fall prey to the system," says Ravi Kumar. Satepudi is a village in the Vengaluru mandal, a group of 12 villages working on bonded labour issues. According to data compiled by the group, 402 people have been rescued from bonded labour in the state from January 2017 to date. Most of them, including Anandam, belong to the tribal community.

A report from the National Commission for Scheduled Tribes and Scheduled Caste Tribes, published in 2008, says the Yanadis are one of the 10 Scheduled Tribes and 100 Scheduled Tribes of Andhra Pradesh. As per the 2011 Census, there were more than 5 lakh Yanadis in the composite state of Andhra Pradesh and Telangana.

Norfolk University, a research assistant at the Centre for Study of Social Inclusion at Andhra University in Visakhapatnam, says the Yanadis are extremely poor. Only 25-30% of them are literate. "They have been exploited as they don't know about the legal system. Their fear of custody keeps them away from the mainstream. They don't own any assets and stay on the canal banks and in hilly areas." Anandam says she did not know that rent-charged bonded labour is illegal.

"Many Yanadis do not open up to strangers even if they are offered help," says Ch. Venkatesh, a local leader from Athani, a village near Gudur in Prakasam district. "Unlike Anandam,

In addition to migrant labourers from Odisha, Madhya Pradesh, West Bengal, and Chhattisgarh, the most marginalised local tribals fall prey to the system.

Activists' warning
Communities of tribal Yanadis live in the hills.

others do not share their troubles. They fear being beaten up by their employers."

He recalls another incident in which two bonded labourers died of electrocution while working in a field in Prakasam district. "Though this happened a few months ago, the labourers' families still work as bonded labourers," he says.

Kotatala's escape
Ravi Kotatala, 56, who also belongs to the Yanadi community, escaped the clutches of his employer at Chidambaram town.

Kotatala lives in a Yanadi colony at Athani, a village near the Karimnagar branch in Prakasam district, about 400 Yanadis live in the colony. At least 10 members live in one hut.

Like Anandam, Kotatala blames himself for what happened. "It was my fault that I accepted a loan of ₹15,000 as a creditor in Chidambaram in Prakasam district. At the time, we had no work, no food, and no access to drinking water. So, I took the money," he says.

To repay that amount, his family of seven, including three children, had to work as bonded labourers for around 20 years. "We set out to work when my son's three children were toddlers. Now they are between 16 and 20," he says. By the time of their release last year, that debt of ₹15,000 had risen to ₹15 lakh. The family was sold more than three, and worked as bonded labourers under different employers, says Kotatala.

His spouse's job was to run fishponds, used primarily in the pulp and paper industry. He and his wife cut three tonnes of logs every day. "In a week, if we cut 10 tonnes, we would get ₹1,500," he says. As per current rates, a worker is supposed to get around ₹150 for cutting one tonne.

"These jobs were always fine in the first few months. Then, our employers would not give us wages daily. They would give us just ₹1,000 a week. We had to work even when we fell sick. They restricted our movements," he says.

Kotatala says a policeman asked him to leave the employer during the pandemic. "But I told him that I owed my employer ₹12 lakh," he says. Kotatala sold his house, received as part of a government scheme, for ₹1 lakh to clear the debt.

It was only when Kotatala's friend died that he decided to leave. "We sold our employer that we had to vote in the election (June 2024). He let us go. We never went back, despite warnings. This year too, the employer created an issue in Athani demanding that they all come back. He recalls, district officials of Prakasam intervened and gave the family protection and release certificates.

Venkatesh says that while the government hands out release certificates to survivors, the rehabilitation takes place as per to some cases that a few people, who find themselves without land, go back to their old employers.

But, Kotatala lives in a spacious hut with a sofa, cot, and cooler. He says the ₹12 lakh money must have got him these necessities. Kotatala still feels for a being. "Some days, I get ₹200 and some days I make ₹400. Today I got only ₹100. But at least no one is torturing me," he says.

No action plan in place
"Apart from duck-rearing units, bonded labour cases are reported from areas where scheduled is grown extensively," says Narasim, who belongs to the Rural Organisation for Poverty Eradication Services, a registered NGO.

In duck-rearing units, children are mostly hired as labourers. "You have to be agile and quick to stop the ducks from escaping. Duck farmers, mostly Yanadis, are from Scheduled Tribes community, but Yanadis to work there. The conditions are hard, with no electricity and no proper food," says Narasim.

In his report, Bonded Labour in India: Its Incidence and Pattern, former Jyotsnabati Nehru University professor Ravi S. Srinivasan says that the Supreme Court directed all the states to collect information on the prevalence of bonded labour in India. The survey was held in 1996. No cases were identified in Andhra Pradesh. However, the government subsequently identified and released 1,708 bonded labourers till 2004.

"Since then, no systematic survey has been carried out. Bonded labour persists both in the agricultural and non-agricultural sector, although wages of bonded labourers are low in traditional sectors," he says.

Of the 402 people who have been rescued in the past two years by the Vengaluru Coalition, members say 100 have been bonded only in farm cases. "There is no standard Operating Procedure or State action plan for the identification, rescue and rehabilitation of bonded labourers in Andhra Pradesh. On the other hand, States such as Tamil Nadu and Odisha have a robust system in place," explains Narasim.

While the Bonded Labour Act provides for punishment for up to three years, there is no data on how many people have been punished. The law mandates a district-level vigilance and monitoring committee to be in place. "This was formed in Prakasam each last year," Kumar says. Officials of the Revenue, Tribal Welfare, Social Welfare, and Labour Departments say they are not sure which of them is responsible for enforcing the law.

"It is important to identify bonded labour as an organised crime," says Venkatesh. "The government should have a nodal department to deal with pre- and post-rescue operations. It should also have a toll-free number for people in distress. If there had been one, Anandam would not have lost her son."

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Key Issues Highlighted:

1. Persistence of Bonded Labour:

- Bonded labour, though outlawed, continues in both agricultural and non-agricultural sectors, including duck rearing and timber cutting.
 - Victims, like Venkatesh and his family, are often poor, unlettered, landless, and socially excluded—fitting the profile of classic victims of exploitative labour practices.
2. Violation of Multiple Laws:
- The case involved violations of multiple legislations, including the Bonded Labour Act, Child Labour Act, SC/ST Atrocities Act, and now murder charges under Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, 2023.
 - However, the enforcement of these laws is weak. Only 7 FIRs filed out of 402 rescued cases in Andhra Pradesh in two years.
3. Ineffectiveness of Rescue and Rehabilitation Mechanisms:
- The Central Sector Scheme for Rehabilitation of Bonded Labourer (2021) promises compensation up to ₹3 lakh, but in practice, relief is delayed or denied, especially posthumously, as in Venkatesh's case.
 - Lack of release certificates, poor inter-departmental coordination, and absence of a nodal agency or standard operating procedure in Andhra Pradesh hampers effective response.
4. Marginalisation of Yanadi Community:
- The Yanadi tribe, with low literacy and high social isolation, remains trapped in cycles of poverty, debt, and bonded labour.
 - Cultural deference to landlords (like Reddys), lack of awareness of rights, and fear of retribution contribute to their continued exploitation.
5. Systemic Gaps and Accountability Failures:
- Andhra Pradesh has no recent comprehensive survey to assess the scale of bonded labour.
 - District-level vigilance and monitoring committees are either missing or functionally inactive, and role confusion among government departments persists.

Critical Analysis:

- **Legal Framework vs Ground Reality:** India has an extensive legal framework, but its implementation is fragmented. Victims often lack access to justice, and exploiters operate with impunity due to poor monitoring and prosecution.
- **Invisible and Unorganised Exploitation:** Bonded labour today is more disguised than hereditary, making detection difficult. Exploitation is often tied with migration, informal employment, and inter-state movement, complicating jurisdiction and rescue efforts.
- **Need for Institutional Mechanisms:** The absence of dedicated nodal bodies, trained personnel, and real-time grievance mechanisms weakens the response to bonded labour. States like Tamil Nadu and Delhi have shown that institutional will can make a difference.
- **Human Tragedy Beyond Law:** The psychological trauma, social stigma, and inter-generational poverty suffered by families like Ankamma's call for a rehabilitation strategy that goes beyond compensation—focusing on housing, education, livelihood, and dignity.

Conclusion:

The case of Venkatesh is a haunting reminder that bonded labour in India is not a relic of the past, but a living reality for thousands. To end this practice, India needs a cohesive policy, robust enforcement, inter-state coordination, and most importantly, a rights-based approach to protect the voiceless. The death of a child should not merely be an isolated headline—it should be the trigger for systemic reform in how India identifies, rescues, and rehabilitates victims of modern-day slavery.

UPSC Mains Practice Question

Ques: Despite legal prohibitions, bonded labour continues to persist in India, especially among marginalised communities. Examine the socio-economic factors contributing to this practice and suggest a comprehensive strategy for its elimination. (250 words)

Page : 08 Editorial Analysis*Don't merely enrol students, but equip them with skills*

As the admission season for colleges and universities begins, institutions across India are once again promoting their programmes under banners promising knowledge, transformation, and research excellence. This growth in enrolment at the undergraduate, postgraduate, and PhD levels suggests a dynamic academic landscape full of potential. Yet, beneath this expansion lies an important challenge: degrees are proliferating faster than meaningful job opportunities.

A gap that needs attention

According to data released by the Ministry of Statistics, the unemployment rate in India tends to increase with higher education levels. This paradox reveals a critical gap between academic achievement and employability – a gap that requires urgent attention.

This challenge is particularly acute in India's vast network of non-elite institutions in Tier 2 and tier 3 colleges, where most students pursue BA, BCom, or BSc degrees and their corresponding master's programmes. These institutions often face resource constraints and limited industry connections, operating with curricula that have not kept pace with the evolving job market. While elite colleges make headlines for placement challenges, the gradual erosion of employability in everyday colleges often goes unnoticed.

In many such institutions, instruction remains largely theoretical, with limited emphasis on real-world skills. For example, an English literature student might study Shakespearean tragedy yet miss out on learning practical skills such as writing professional emails. Similarly, an economics graduate may understand complex



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Viewing education as a social contract that guarantees a meaningful connection between learning and livelihood is essential

theories but struggle with everyday tools such as Excel. This disconnect means millions of educated young people find it difficult to translate their degrees into career opportunities.

This situation stems partly from a deeply entrenched academic culture that values scholarship and abstraction over practical application. Within many academic circles – even prestigious ones – higher education is often celebrated as an end in itself, while immediate employment is sometimes subtly undervalued. Postgraduate degrees and PhDs are frequently pursued not just for intellectual fulfilment but as a refuge from the job market, creating a cycle where many graduates end up teaching in the very colleges that perpetuate the same system.

It is important to recognise that successive governments have acknowledged this issue. Initiatives such as Skill India, Start-Up India, and the National Education Policy have pushed for skill development, vocational training, and entrepreneurship. However, the transformation remains incomplete. Many undergraduate and postgraduate programmes continue to emphasise rote learning over practical skills. While new courses in AI or entrepreneurship are being introduced, they often lack depth, and integration into the broader curriculum.

A broader societal challenge

Countries such as China and Japan have successfully aligned education with economic strategies by elevating technical and vocational education to a central role in workforce development. In India, vocational training is still often perceived as a fallback option, both within academia and society. This stigma limits the

appeal and effectiveness of skill-based education, despite its vital role in economic empowerment.

This contradiction highlights a broader societal challenge: degrees are highly valued as symbols of upward mobility, but they increasingly fail to guarantee it. This is not a call to abandon liberal education or abstract learning – they remain essential for critical thinking and creativity. However, education must also provide tangible economic benefits. Degrees should offer pathways to agency and dignity, especially for students from smaller towns and under-resourced institutions.

A way forward lies in integrating practical skill modules – communication, digital literacy, budgeting, data analysis, hospitality, tailoring, and health services – into general degree programmes as core elements, not optional extras. Doctoral education should be diversified to prepare candidates for policy, analytics, consulting, development, and industry roles, not solely academia. Research remains vital, but it must be pursued by those inclined towards it.

Finally, the widespread aspiration for government jobs reflects the limited opportunities graduates currently perceive. While these roles remain important, expanding private sector and entrepreneurial pathways through improved employability will offer youth a broader range of options. Enhancing skills and opportunities can reduce the over-dependence on competitive exams. India's growing economy demands an education system that not just enrolls students, but equips students with skills. Viewing education as a social contract that guarantees a meaningful connection between learning and livelihood is essential.

Paper 02: Governance & Social Justice

UPSC Mains Practice Question: India's higher education system is witnessing increased enrolment, yet employability remains a major concern. Critically examine the causes of this paradox and suggest measures to bridge the gap between education and employment. (250 words)

Context :

As higher education enrolment in India surges, a paradoxical trend has emerged — unemployment rates are often higher among the educated, especially those with postgraduate and PhD degrees. This commentary by an academic at IIT Kharagpur exposes the growing disconnect between academic learning and employment readiness, particularly in non-elite Tier 2 and Tier 3 institutions, where most Indian **students study**.

Key Issues Highlighted:

1. Education-Employment Disconnect:
 - The current system prioritizes degrees over skills, with traditional curricula lacking alignment with real-world job requirements.
 - Students, despite academic achievements, often struggle with basic workplace tools (e.g., Excel, communication, budgeting), especially in general degree programmes (BA, BCom, BSc).
2. Theoretical Focus over Practicality:
 - Higher education remains focused on abstraction, theory, and rote learning, undervaluing vocational relevance and practical application.
 - Postgraduate education is often pursued as an escape from the job market, which in turn reproduces the same outdated academic culture.
3. Uneven Reform Implementation:
 - Government initiatives like Skill India, Start-Up India, and the National Education Policy (NEP) have attempted reform but suffer from patchy execution.
 - New courses in AI or entrepreneurship are introduced but lack integration and practical depth.
4. Societal Stigma Around Vocational Training:
 - Unlike countries such as Japan and China, India views vocational training as inferior or a fallback, limiting its mainstream adoption.
 - This cultural mindset prevents a structural shift toward employability-based education.
5. Need for Inclusive Skill Integration:
 - There is an urgent need to embed communication, digital literacy, data analysis, financial skills, and entrepreneurship into general degree programmes as core components.
 - PhD training should be diversified to prepare students for non-academic careers in policy, consulting, development, and private sectors.
6. Overdependence on Government Jobs:
 - The narrow focus on competitive exams and government employment is a symptom of limited private sector pathways and poor employability.
 - Empowering students with skills will reduce over-reliance on government jobs and expand **livelihood options**.

Critical Analysis:

- **Degrees vs Capabilities:**The obsession with formal degrees has overshadowed the need for functional and transferable skills. An education system that fails to provide economic agency risks becoming socially regressive, especially for students from underprivileged backgrounds.
- **Role of Non-Elite Institutions:**Most students study in ordinary colleges, which lack funding, industry linkages, and updated syllabi. Any reform must focus on revitalizing these institutions through faculty training, curriculum overhaul, and institutional-industry partnerships.
- **Reimagining Education as a Social Contract:**Education must shift from being a credentialing exercise to a means of securing dignity and livelihood. This requires policy-level commitment and social acceptance of diverse learning paths beyond traditional degrees.

Conclusion:

India's higher education system is at a crossroads. While enrolment is rising, employability remains stagnant. If education is to be truly transformative, it must bridge the learning-livelihood gap by equipping students with practical skills, not just academic degrees. Reform must be inclusive, skill-focused, and socially empowering, especially for those in under-resourced settings. Only then can India's demographic dividend become a demographic advantage.