

2024

DAILY CURRENT AFFAIRS





Daily Current Affairs from *The Hindu*, *The Indian Express* & *The Assam Tribune*

3rd Mar 2025

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1. Giving cities their due

Context: Indian cities are facing a severe crisis of pollution, poor infrastructure, and climate vulnerability, making them increasingly unliveable and in urgent need of bold urban reforms. India's cities are struggling with a multi-dimensional crisis, encompassing pollution, infrastructure failure, and inadequate public services. Delhi, among the world's most polluted cities, experiences severe air quality deterioration every winter. With an anticipated urban population of over 600 million by 2036, cities must undergo major reforms to remain habitable and efficient.

Key points

- **Pollution Crisis:** Delhi's air quality is hazardous in winter. 42 Indian cities rank among the world's top 50 most polluted. Water and waste mismanagement –
 - 50% of India's 603 rivers are polluted.
 - Less than 20% of waste is treated; overflowing landfills emit methane.
- **Climate Vulnerabilities:** *Extreme weather events* - Flooding in Mumbai/Bengaluru (2023), heatwaves in Delhi (50°C).
Health impacts - Heat-related illnesses, fatalities, and displacement.
- **Infrastructure Gaps:** Overcrowded roads, failing water/sanitation systems. By 2036, 600 million people will live in cities ill-equipped for growth.
- **Required climate Resilience:** *Green Infrastructure* - Parks, green roofs to combat heatwaves. Modern drainage systems to prevent floods.
Early Warning Systems - Strengthen disaster preparedness (e.g. flood alerts).
Sustainable Urban Planning - Integrate climate adaptation into city master plans.
- **Governance & Structural Issues:** *Statistics* - Census towns rose from 1,362 (2001) to 3,894 (2011). Contribute to 30% of urban growth but lack funding/planning.
Consequences - Inadequate infrastructure, haphazard development. Exclusion from urban development schemes (e.g. Smart Cities Mission).
- **Way ahead:** *Singapore's Urban Model* - Efficient land use, affordable housing (80% live in public housing), green spaces (47% green cover), strict anti-pollution laws.
India's Urban Challenge Fund (2025-26 Budget) - Rs 1 lakh crore fund for Cities as Growth Hubs, Water/Sanitation, Creative Redevelopment. Incentivize cities to electrify public transport, control emissions and construction dust and improve waste management.
Governance Reforms - Notify census towns as urban areas to unlock funding. Strengthen municipal capacity for climate-resilient planning.
- **Conclusion:** Indian cities are grappling with overcrowding, pollution, and poor health, but these are not insurmountable challenges. The time for change is now, and the next decade will determine the fate of Indian cities. They can become smart, green, and liveable or succumb to pollution, congestion, and insecurity.

2. The student and the three-language debate

Context: In the rhetoric of partisan politics surrounding the three-language formula, unsurprisingly, the most important stakeholder has been forgotten: the student. The recent Tamil Nadu-Centre tussle revolves around NEP's three-language formula, with Tamil Nadu opposing mandatory Hindi education in state schools. The most affected group in the three-language policy debate is public school students, who make up about 55% of total school enrolment in Tamil Nadu.

Key points

- **Challenges in the National Education Policy (NEP):** While the National Education Policy (NEP) is path-breaking on many accounts, there are a few provisions that ignore the ground realities of public education in India, especially at the primary and secondary levels.
- **NEP's Justification:** The NEP declares that the compulsory learning of three languages is intended to improve cognitive ability, enable mobility for employment, and promote national integration. This very hypothesis is a problematic one.
- **Impact of AI on Language Learning:** One could post their query in any language in say Google Gemini (even children in a public school will hopefully soon have access either through a smart classroom or a smartphone) and get an answer instantly.
- **Third Language and Communication:** A third language will certainly enable better communication with the community that speaks that language. But that is a choice that most adults make as a part of the profession they choose.
- **State of Primary Education:** The state of primary education is pathetic, both nationally and in Tamil Nadu, as highlighted in the Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) Survey 2024.
- **The Role of Education in Employment Opportunities:** *Education and Career Choices* - Education should lead to a choice of gainful employment opportunities.
Relevance of a Third Language for Public School Students - If opportunities for public school students are available within the State (from government, private enterprise, or self-employment), the need for a third language may not be critical.
- **Challenges of Implementing a Third Language in Public Schools:** *Focus on Improving Education Quality* - The response to the shocking state of quality in primary education (which continues into secondary and higher secondary education) should be to massively improve teaching quality and learning outcomes, rather than adding one more language.
Time Constraints in School Curriculum - There is a finite time available at school to cover all subjects.
Budgetary Constraints and Impact on Infrastructure - Despite Tamil Nadu having one of the highest per-child education budgets, 80%-90% of the budget is spent on teacher salaries, while infrastructure suffers.
- **Way ahead:** *No Academic Merit in Thrusting a Third Language* - Since there is no academic justification for forcing a third language, especially at the primary level, an alternative approach is needed.
Introduction of Hindi in Public Schools - Hindi could be offered as an option as a third language from middle public school.

3. In America first, an opening

Context: US President Donald Trump has proposed reciprocal tariffs to counter trade imbalances, which could significantly impact India's exports, particularly in the agricultural sector. US President Donald Trump's renewed call for reciprocal tariffs aims to address the US trade deficit, which rose to \$918.4 billion in 2024. While China accounted for the largest share at \$295.4 billion, India's deficit with the US stood at \$45.7 billion.

Key points

- **Reciprocal Tariffs:** Tariffs are taxes imposed by an importing country on foreign goods, making them more expensive for domestic consumers. For example, if a US citizen orders a Jamdani saree from India, US import tariffs will increase its price, affecting affordability.
- **India's High Tariff Structure:** India's tariff rates are significantly higher than those in the US. The simple average tariff rate in India is 17%, compared to 3.3% in the US. The disparity is even more evident in agriculture, where India imposes an average tariff of 39%, while the US maintains a much lower 5%. Trade-weighted tariffs further highlight this gap—India at 12% vs. the US at 2.2%.
- **Impact on India:** *Exports Will Become Costlier* - US may increase tariffs on Indian goods, making textiles, pharmaceuticals, and auto parts less competitive.
Trade Deficit Will Shrink - India may import more from the US (like defence equipment, oil, and gas) to balance trade, reducing its \$38 billion trade surplus with the US.
Rupee May Weaken - More imports mean higher demand for US dollars, leading to a weaker rupee, increasing India's import bill.
Atmanirbhar Bharat May Suffer - India's self-reliance push may slow down if the US pressures India to buy American goods.
Impact on Foreign Investments - US firms may push for local production in India to avoid high tariffs, boosting FDI (Foreign Direct Investment).
- **Key sectors under observation:** The US has long sought greater access to the Indian market, particularly for – Whiskey (150% duty), Walnuts, chicken legs (100% duty), Walnuts, chicken legs (100% duty), Walnuts, chicken legs (100% duty).
- **Concessions and Tariff Reductions:** India has shown some flexibility in lowering tariffs, such as reducing duties on Washington apples from 50% to 15%. Similar phased reductions could be considered for – Walnuts, chicken legs (100% duty), Walnuts, chicken legs (100% duty), Walnuts, chicken legs (100% duty), Walnuts, chicken legs (100% duty).
- **Way ahead:** *Increased R&D Investment* - India spends less than 0.5% of its agri-GDP on research, far below global benchmarks. Raising this to 1% is essential for boosting productivity.
Modernizing Agri-Value Chains - Expanding cold storage, upgrading logistics, and improving quality certification will enhance India's export potential.
Developing Export Hubs - Key production clusters should be transformed into agri-export hubs (e.g., banana, mango, pomegranate exports to Russia, Korea, Japan, and Australia).
- **Conclusion:** Trump's tariff threats should serve as a wake-up call for Indian policymakers. Rather than relying on high tariffs and subsidies, India must transition towards a productivity-driven export strategy.

4. Centering care in India's economic policy

Context: The Union Budget 2025 allocated a record amount to the Gender Budget, but this increase was driven by welfare schemes rather than investments in care infrastructure. Despite the Economic Survey highlighting the importance of care work, the Budget fails to adequately address unpaid care burdens, limiting women's workforce participation. The Union Budget 2025 allocated ₹4,49,028.68 crore to the Gender Budget (GB), marking a 37.3% increase from FY24. It accounts for 8.86% of the total Budget.

Key points

- **Unpaid Care and Domestic Work (UCDW):** Globally, women spend 17.8% of their time on unpaid care work, with higher burdens in the Global South. In India, women shoulder 40% more UCDW compared to South African and Chinese women.
- **Additional Burdens:** Unpaid work in the Global South includes water collection, fuel gathering, farm work, and household chores. Due to poor infrastructure, women spend up to 73% of their time on these activities. Climate change worsens this burden, with water-related unpaid labour in India projected to reach \$1.4 billion by 2050.
- **Proposed Solutions for Reducing the Care Burden:**
 - Recognising Unpaid Work* - The 2019 Time Use Survey showed women spend seven hours daily on unpaid work. Time-use modules can be added to existing household surveys to improve policymaking.
 - Reducing the Burden* - Investment in time-saving technologies and affordable care infrastructure is essential. The Jal Jeevan Mission (JJM), extended until 2028, aims for 100% potable water coverage. Expanding childcare centres, eldercare services, and assistive technologies would help women participate in the workforce.
 - Redistributing Care Work* - Shifting responsibilities from homes to the State and within households is crucial. The ₹1 lakh crore Urban Challenge Fund can finance urban redevelopment, water, and sanitation projects.
 - Representation in Decision-Making* - Women's participation in policymaking leads to better and more effective outcomes. Exclusion from decision-making results in policies that ignore their real-life struggles.
- **Conclusion:** Nari Shakti is a key driver of economic growth, but the Budget fails to prioritise care work. A well-funded, targeted strategy is necessary to make care work a core part of inclusive development.

Q. A well-funded, targeted strategy is necessary to make care work a core part of inclusive development. (যত্নৰ কামক অন্তৰ্ভুক্তিমূলক বিকাশৰ এক মূল অংশ হিচাপে গঢ়ি তুলিবলৈ এক সু-পুঁজি, লক্ষ্যযুক্ত কৌশলৰ প্ৰয়োজন।)

Q. Discuss the significance of public investment in care infrastructure for gender equity and economic growth in India. (ভাৰতত লিংগ সমতা আৰু অৰ্থনৈতিক বিকাশৰ বাবে যত্ন আন্তঃগাঁথনিৰ ক্ষেত্ৰত ৰাজহুৱা বিনিয়োগৰ গুৰুত্ব আলোচনা কৰক।)

5. Assam's small hydropower potential

Context: Assam's hilly regions and river systems present an estimated small hydropower potential of over 500 MW, with approximately 88 identified sites offering a combined capacity of about 117 MW. However, little to none of this potential has been utilized thus far. Rivers such as the Dhansiri, Ranganadi, and Kopili, along with streams in Karbi Anglong and North Cachar Hills, are particularly suitable for small and micro hydropower projects.

Key points

- **Subansiri Lower Hydro Electric Project (SLHEP):** It is an under-construction gravity dam on the Subansiri River in Northeastern India on the borders of Arunachal Pradesh and Assam. It is a run-of-river project. It will be the single largest hydroelectric plant in India when completed.
- **National Hydroelectric Power Corporation:** It is an Indian public-sector hydropower company that was incorporated in 1975 to plan, promote and organise an integrated and efficient development of hydroelectric power. Recently it has expanded to include other sources of energy like solar, geothermal, tidal, and wind.
- **Subansiri River:** It is a trans-Himalayan River and a tributary of the Brahmaputra River that flows through Tibet's Lhuntse County in the Shannan Prefecture in Southwestern China, and the Indian states of Arunachal Pradesh and Assam. It is the largest tributary of the Brahmaputra.
- **Learning from Norway's success:** Norway, with its rugged terrain and plentiful rivers, is a global leader in hydropower. Approximately 95% of Norway's electricity comes from hydropower, supported by an extensive network of approximately 1,769 hydropower plants with a combined installed capacity of around 33,691 MW.
- **Assam's growing electricity demand:** Assam's electricity demand has been rising rapidly. In 2016, the state's peak power demand was around 1,400 MW. By 2023, this had surged to 2,500 MW, and forecasts suggest it could reach 4,000 MW by 2026.
- **Opportunities for development:** Assam has several opportunities to capitalize on its hydropower resources. Developing small hydro projects on rivers like Dhansiri, Ranganadi, and Kopili can generate localized power. Micro hydropower systems can electrify remote villages, fostering socio-economic development.
- **Challenges to overcome:** While the opportunities are vast, Assam must address several challenges. Hydropower projects can disrupt river ecosystems, affecting fish migration and biodiversity. Poorly planned dams can exacerbate flooding during monsoons. Land acquisition and displacement of communities remain contentious issues.
- **Way ahead:** To unlock its hydropower potential, Assam must take a holistic approach. Conducting comprehensive studies to identify optimal sites for small projects while minimizing environmental impact is essential. Establishing dedicated agencies to oversee small hydropower development and streamline regulatory processes can strengthen the institutional framework. Assam's vast network of rivers offers a unique opportunity to harness small hydropower for sustainable development.