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Topics Covered

- **The India-U.K. FTA spells a poor deal for public health**
- **Decoding ECI's counter affidavit on SIR**
- **Clean House**
- **As climate change events spike, key focus should be drowning prevention: experts**
- **A slow revival**

The India-U.K. FTA spells a poor deal for public health

GS 2 – Health & Governance;

GS 3 – Economic Development & Trade Policies; Essay;

Ethics – Public Policy vs Commercial Interests

The India-U.K. FTA spells a poor deal for public health

India and the United Kingdom have signed their Free Trade Agreement (FTA), with the Union Commerce and Industry Minister, Piyush Goyal, and the British Business and Trade Secretary, Jonathan Reynolds, signing the deal on July 24, 2025, during the visit of Prime Minister Narendra Modi to the U.K. On July 22, 2025, the Union Cabinet, Government of India had approved the FTA. Officially called the Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement, this FTA was first announced on the conclusion of negotiations on May 6, 2025.

The India-U.K. FTA is good news from the economic perspectives of both countries. However, the FTA could pose a public health challenge for India. It will allow tariff-free entry – and thus lower prices – for U.K.-made food products such as biscuits, chocolates and soft drinks in India, many of which would fit into the categorisation of High Fat, Sugar and Salt (HFSS), posing grave long-term health risks. Cheaper prices supplemented by the expected aggressive marketing and advertising campaigns could prove harmful from the point of view of the health of citizens.

The case of Mexico

Concerns about the FTA and its adverse public health impact are not hypothetical. In 1992, when the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) was signed between Mexico, the United States and Canada, Mexico made the mistake of not implementing robust public health safeguards. In the years that followed, Mexico experienced the following: a dramatic rise in imports of cheap, sugary drinks, snacks and processed foods; a surge in the consumption of HFSS food products, and a steep rise in diet-related diseases, obesity and diabetes. Mexico could halt the rise in the sale of HFSS products and manage lifestyle diseases only when it introduced stringent public health regulatory mechanisms such as a 'Soda Tax' and warning labels upfront in 2014.

From a public health viewpoint, the India-U.K. FTA is a concern for India. While the sale of unhealthy food products in the U.K. is relatively better regulated, the regulatory framework is sub-optimal in India. For example, the U.K. has implemented a ban on the advertising of HFSS products on television and online. The ban on such TV advertisements before 9 p.m., and a complete ban on paid online advertisements for HFSS products will come into effect on October 1, 2025. Similarly, the U.K.'s traffic light Front-of-Pack Nutrition Labelling (FOPNL) system uses a colour-coded system to help consumers quickly understand the nutritional content of packaged foods and drinks. For example, green indicates low levels of fat, saturated fat, sugar, and salt, amber indicates medium, while red indicates high. This system helps consumers make healthier choices.

India lacks binding restrictions on junk food



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The entry of cheaper junk food as a result of a free trade agreement can prove to be expensive in terms of public health

advertisements targeting children; the existing regulations are not effectively enforced and routinely flouted. India relies on self-regulation through the Advertising Standards Council of India, which is an industry body. There is ample evidence that in the food sector 'industry self-regulation' is rarely and partially effective. There are a few regulations that prohibit misleading advertisements, i.e., the Advertising Code of the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting; however, regulatory bodies are often unable to identify misleading advertisements or, if done so, no penalty is assigned. The cartoon mascots on food products targeted at children on the one hand and celebrity endorsements on the other normalise unhealthy choices. The use of celebrities and sportspersons are key to these tactics. Many of these celebrities have privately acknowledged that they do not use the products which they publicly promote and advertise. Yet, such deceitful behaviour has never resulted in social or public outrage.

The problem with India's 'star rating'

In India, the issue of a mandatory FOPNL is pending for want of a decision on the right type of labels and amendments under the Food Safety and Standards (Labelling and Display) Regulations, 2020. While evidence from various studies is that all types of warning labels help in reducing the consumption of HFSS, the most effective are the use of warning labels. Yet, Indian authorities are more interested in the use of "star rating", which could be misleading and less effective. Therefore, the process of introducing a warning system on packaged food is slow. For example, in September 2022, there were proposed amendments to introduce mandatory warning labels. Yet, three years later, the amendments remain on paper. After a Public Interest Litigation in April 2025, the Supreme Court of India has directed the authorities to make a decision on warning labels in a time-bound manner. Many independent subject experts believe that a part of the reason for the delay in the adoption of the Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI)'s 2022 draft regulations for FOPNL is because of industry lobbying – this has diluted the proposals, opting for "star ratings" that are confusing instead of clear warnings such as Chile's black octagonal labels (when 'food products exceed certain thresholds of sugar, sodium, saturated fat, and/or calories').

India and many parts of the world are already facing a challenge of rising lifestyle diseases. In March 2025, *The Lancet* published two studies which indicated that obesity is on the rise across large parts of the world. Ultra Processed Food (UPF) and HFSS food items have witnessed a CAGR of 13.3%, in India, from 2011-21. Not surprisingly, the burden of lifestyle diseases such as obesity, diabetes and hypertension is rising at

an alarming rate, in all age groups – more so in children and adolescents. A position statement on FOPNL in India, released in June 2025 and signed by 29 organisations, provided comprehensive evidence on the harmful effects of HFSS and UPF; it also advocated having warning labels being a mandatory part of HFSS and UPF packages.

Commercial activities, i.e., trade and treaties have been integral part of human life and the economic ambitions of nations. The FTAs have economic benefits and multiple rationales. However, getting cheaper junk food as a result of an FTA can be costly in public health terms. These apprehensions are founded in sound global evidence. In fact, in the last decade, global health agencies have begun talking about the Commercial Determinants of Health – the conditions, actions and omissions by commercial actors that affect health.

There is news that India may sign another deal, the India-European Free Trade Agreement (TEPA), involving Iceland, Liechtenstein, Norway, and Switzerland, in October 2025. Trade deals and FTAs are likely to be signed with some more countries. They could be good for the economy, but from the point of view of public health they could prove to be the Trojan horses of non-communicable diseases, unless sufficient safe-guards are implemented. There is a need to balance the economic benefits of FTAs with the need to protect public health and ensure restrictions on the marketing and labelling of food products.

It is still not late

Now that the India-U.K. FTA has been signed, the legal text will be drafted in the weeks ahead, and this is the opportunity for India to make the right move, it needs to act immediately to mitigate the FTA's public health impact. It is time for strong measures to regulate the advertising of HFSS, as also suggested in the Economic Survey 2024-25 and in line with the recent 'Dietary Guidelines for Indians', published by the National Institute of Nutrition in May 2024. The mandatory FOPNL in the form of warning labels should be implemented at the earliest. The proposed 'sugar boards' and 'Oil Boards' in schools are a good entry point to having 'health promoting schools'. However, 'a more holistic approach of 'HFSS boards' needs to be considered. School meals and school college canteens should stop the sale of packaged and unhealthy food items. Protective measures must be implemented with urgency to counter the potential effects of current and future FTAs. Public health practitioners and health policymakers need to be more engaged on issues that are related to trade deals, and when it comes to ultra-processed food and high fat, salt and sugar food. It is an issue of public health, which affects nearly every Indian in every age group, and a subject that must be treated with urgency.





On **July 24, 2025**, India and the United Kingdom signed a **Free Trade Agreement (FTA)**, officially known as the Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement. While this agreement aims to bolster economic ties, it has raised **public health concerns** due to the potential influx of **High Fat, Sugar, and Salt (HFSS)** food products into India at cheaper prices.

Nature of the India-UK FTA

- Signed by Union Commerce Minister Piyush Goyal and UK Trade Secretary Jonathan Reynolds.
- Expected to boost bilateral trade by allowing **tariff-free entry of British products**, including **HFSS foods** like chocolates, biscuits, and soft drinks.

Public Health Concerns

- Cheaper HFSS products + aggressive marketing may increase consumption, especially among youth and children.
- Likely **long-term health consequences**: rise in obesity, diabetes, hypertension, and other noncommunicable diseases (NCDs).

Case Study – Mexico’s NAFTA Experience

- **Post-1992 NAFTA**, Mexico saw a **spike in HFSS imports and diet-related diseases**.
- Corrective measures came only in 2014 through:
 - ♦ **Soda Tax**
 - ♦ **Front-of-Pack Warning Labels**

Regulatory Comparison: India vs U.K.

- ♦ lacks binding restrictions and

Feature	United Kingdom	India
HFSS Ad Regulation	Ban on TV ads before 9 PM (Oct 2025), full ban on online ads	Weak enforcement; self-regulation via industry
Front-of-Pack Labels	Traffic Light System (Colour-coded)	Star Rating (Less effective, industry-backed)
Enforcement	Strong	Largely ineffective

Delay in FOPNL Implementation in India

- Draft warning label amendments (2022) still pending.
- **Supreme Court** (April 2025) ordered time-bound action post-PIL.
- **Industry lobbying** has slowed reforms; preference for “**star ratings**” over effective **warning labels** like Chile’s black octagons.

Rising Burden of Lifestyle Diseases in India

- Studies (The Lancet, March 2025): Obesity & NCDs rising across all age groups.
- From 2011–21: Ultra-Processed Foods (UPF) grew at **13.3% CAGR**.
- Children and adolescents most affected.





Way Forward: Balancing Trade with Public Health

1. Implement Robust Regulations

- Enforce mandatory FOPNL using warning labels, not star ratings.
- Draw from Chile's labelling model and Mexico's soda tax experience.

2. Curb Misleading Advertising

- Ban celebrity endorsements for HFSS targeted at children.
- Penalise misleading or aggressive marketing by food giants.

3. Transform Food Environments

- Introduce 'HFSS Boards' in schools, ban junk food in canteens.
- Support Health-Promoting Schools (align with NIN's 2024 Dietary Guidelines).

4. Public Policy Interventions

- Integrate health safeguards in all future FTAs, e.g., upcoming India-EFTA TEPA.
- Regular health impact assessments before trade liberalisation.

5. Multisectoral Coordination

- Public health experts must be involved in FTA negotiations.
- Shift from commercial determinants to health-sensitive economic policies.

Decoding ECI's counter affidavit on SIR

GS Paper 2 – Electoral Reforms, Federalism, Role of Constitutional Bodies;

Decoding ECI's counter affidavit on SIR

What has the Election Commission of India argued in its counter affidavit filed in the Supreme Court? Why is seeking a citizenship test through the Special Intensive Revision exercise in Bihar problematic? What are the legal and logistical challenges involved?

EXPLAINER

Prerogative Role

The story so far
The Election Commission of India (ECI) filed a counter affidavit in the Supreme Court on July 26, in response to the writ petition challenging the constitutionality of the special intensive revision (SIR) exercise currently underway in Bihar. The text in the 70-page ECI affidavit is only 50 pages long; bulky annexures run into almost 700 pages. Almost 625 pages of these annexures comprise representations received by the ECI from various political parties, along with their annexures.

What's the rationale for a citizenship test?

A preliminary review of the complaints annexed with the ECI affidavit reveals that they mostly pertain to typical defects like duplication of names in the voter list, non-deletion of deceased voters, exclusion of eligible voters and false or fraudulent voter registration.

None of the complaints involve the electoral rolls of Bihar, nor does any of the complainants allege instances of illegal migrants from foreign countries being included in the electoral rolls in any state. The complainants, which account for almost 80% of the volume of ECI's counter affidavit, do not provide any evidence or justification for the ongoing SIR exercise in Bihar or a nationwide citizenship test of electors across the country, for which the affidavit vehemently argues.

Is it legally tenable?

The counter affidavit invokes Article 326 which specifies that "every person who is a citizen of India... shall be entitled to be registered as a voter", and also Section 15 of the Representation of the People Act, 1950 which mandates the preparation of electoral rolls "under the superintendence, direction and control of the ECI, to assist in its having statutory authority to undertake a de novo preparation of electoral rolls, requiring electors already registered in the electoral rolls to submit fresh documentary proof of their citizenship. The affidavit also rebuts the apex court's advisory to include Aadhaar card, the Election Photo Identity card (EPIC) and ration card in the list of permissible documents for the SIR exercise.

There are several fallacies in the ECI's assertions. First, the SIR process dilutes the cause of citizenship proof on all existing electors whose names were registered by the ECI through the process. Another fallacy is also available for the deletion of non-citizens from electoral rolls on the basis of specific complaints backed by evidence. Here those due processes have been rendered dysfunctional by the overwhelming nature of inclusion errors via vote illegal migrants.

If so, the ECI's affidavit should have been able to present precise data on the number of complaints received on the inclusion of foreign nationals or illegal migrants in the electoral rolls of Bihar, and all other States for that matter. In the absence of such evidence, ECI's logic that all inclusion errors will be rectified through summary revisions are only provisional and may these affidavits be rectified through intensive revisions like SIR have more authority, does not hold.

Second, the Representation of the People Act, 1950, does not make any distinction between electors added through summary revisions and those added through "special intensive revisions". While section 2(3) of the law permits the ECI to direct a "special

Chasing the rolls

Table 1: Data on the special intensive revision in Bihar, as released by the Election Commission of India, on July 22.

Category	Total	Percentage (%)
Total Electors (as per 2001 Census)	1,71,04,102	100.00
Enumeration Forms Received	7,13,03,402	41.68
Enumeration Forms Digitised	7,13,03,402	41.68
Electors not found at their addresses so far	52,25,124	3.05
Probably Deceased Electors reported so far	18,66,889	1.09
Probably Permanently Absent Electors reported so far	26,51,631	1.55
Electors Identified as Residing at Multiple places	7,50,742	0.44
Electors not traceable	11,444	0.01
Total electors covered	7,64,34,228	44.63
Remaining Enumeration Forms yet to be received	21,51,611	1.25

revision' for individual constituencies or their parts, the word "intensive" does not find any mention in the law. The Representation of the People Act, 1950 was amended in 1987 to introduce two separate categories of electoral roll revisions, summary and intensive. However, even the 1960 rules do not provide any specific definition or guidelines for "intensive" revisions. The statutory foundation of SIR, therefore, remains fuzzy.

Third, the arguments provided by ECI's affidavit in rejecting the Supreme Court's advice to include EPIC, as one of the documents to prove eligibility, contradicts the exemption granted to electors included in the 2003 electoral roll from furnishing any document under SIR 2005 other than "the relevant extracts of the said past showing their name in the 2003 electoral roll". ECI's affidavit states that the children of electors included in the 2003 rolls have also been allowed to use this privilege to prove their eligibility. Such privileging of the inclusion in the 2003 electoral rolls, over and above all electoral rolls published by the ECI in two subsequent decades, is highly questionable.

The ECI's affidavit mentions that the 2003 Bihar SIR guidelines prescribed four documents to prove eligibility: proof of citizenship, namely "NBC Register where evidence of citizenship certificate, valid passport; or Birth Certificate." However, a copy of the 2003 SIR guidelines have not been provided with the affidavit. Was there any house-to-house enumeration and citizenship verification for the entire state during the 2003 Bihar SIR on the basis of such documentary requirements? If not, how did illegal migrants were detected and deleted from rolls in 2003? These facts need to be ascertained and debated before accepting inclusion in the 2003 electoral rolls as probative evidence of citizenship under SIR.

Fourth, the ECI's affidavit asserts the applicability of the continued citizenship criteria introduced by the Citizenship Amendment Act, 2003 (CAA 2003).

whereby (a) Each voter has to submit documentary proof of his date and place of birth, (b) for those born between July 1, 1987 and December 2, 2004, additional documentary proof of date and place of birth of either father or mother is required, and (c) for those voters born after December 2, 2004, both parents' date and place of birth are required to be submitted.

The constitutionality of this controversial citizenship amendment legislation, which had proposed to introduce a National Register of Indian Citizens (NRC), remains under challenge before the apex court. The rules under this Act were notified even before the CAA, 2003, was passed and notified, casting doubts over its legal status. Now, importantly, the Registrar General of India never issued any order to initiate the NRC, as stipulated in the citizenship rules. Hence, the NRC does not exist anywhere in India, except for the State of Assam. Prime Minister Narendra Modi had clarified in December 2019 that his Cabinet had never discussed the initiation of the NRC since 2014.

When the authorities statutorily mandated to initiate the NRC and its underlying citizenship scheme agencies CAA, 2003 have decided not to proceed with it till date, can the ECI claim to have the legal mandate to implement the same citizenship test in Bihar, in lieu of an electoral roll revision?

What will be the impact?
The ECI's counter affidavit has tried to highlight that the SIR exercise by the ECI is not a one-time exercise. Forms have already been collected and digitised from over 90% of the 138 crore electors in Bihar. The next point here is that the ECI's affidavit does not disclose the number or proportion of digitised enumeration forms which are accompanied with the required documents. Rather, the affidavit mentions that "each elector who has submitted the

THE GIST

The Election Commission of India (ECI) counter affidavit in response to the ongoing special intensive revision exercise in Bihar defends its attempt to prove citizenship through both documentary and biometric means.

The status of the SIR exercise reported in the ECI's affidavit contains data till July 18, 2025. The updated status provided by the ECI's press note on July 22 is reproduced in Table 1. Till then, around 21.5 lakh (2.1%) electors were yet to receive and submit their enumeration forms. Major political parties of Bihar were officially requested by the ECI to connect with the remaining electors, through their functionaries and booth level agents.

Till July 24, around 7 lakh forms were not received. Viability of the ECI in ensuring correct percent coverage through its own machinery of booth level officers (BLOs) and volunteers either exposes the impracticability of the SIR exercise.

Moreover, over 51 lakh (5.1%) electors were not found at their residential addresses by the ECI. While around 1 lakh among them are reported as "not reachable" and another 1 lakh as multiple enumerations, the numbers of deceased electors over 26 lakh (2.6%) and those permanently migrated at 31.5 lakh (1.8%), are quite significant. Whether errors are avoided in such exclusion can be known only after the publication of the final rolls.

The constituency-wise distribution of these exclusions also remains unreported. The impact of deletion of migrated electors can be substantial if they are clustered within a few constituencies and demographics.

Why is ECI not accepting Aadhaar, ration card?
ECI's non-acceptance of the apex court's advisory on including Aadhaar and ration cards in the list of indicative documents rests on tenuous grounds. The ECI's own enumeration form for SIR 2005 seeks the Aadhaar number from all electors, albeit on a voluntary basis. The ECI's affidavit states that statutorily, "Aadhaar is a proof of citizenship", which is specious logic, because statutorily the ECI has no mandate to conduct a citizenship test.

In the case of ration cards, the ECI has cited "widespread instances of false ration cards" as the ground for non-acceptance. A data table in ECI's affidavit shows coverage of issue of the above eligibility documents for SIR 2005. It shows that 13.8 crore "residence certificates" and 6.72 crore card certificates issued from 2001 to 2025, far exceeding the total number of electors in the SIR exercise, if residence certificates can be accepted as eligibility proof of SIR 2025, electors their total number exceeding Bihar's current aggregate population, leaving no ration cards to be rejected as document on the grounds of being bogus proof.

Any widely accessible official card or document in a voter's constituency would be prone to counterfeits – currency notes being the most common example. Solutions need to be found in plugging systemic loopholes, enhanced vigilance and effectively designed counter measures.

Unless the ECI revises its rigid insistence on citizenship determination, the Bihar SIR exercise is likely to result in a faster than the four-year long NRC process in Assam between 2001 and 2003, which was eventually reported by all those who demanded it after reportedly spending ₹1,000 crore of public money.

(Prepared for an internal and activist)

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The Election Commission of India (ECI) has filed a **counter affidavit in the Supreme Court** defending the **Special Intensive Revision (SIR)** of the electoral rolls in **Bihar**, which includes a **citizenship verification exercise**. The move has raised serious **legal, constitutional, and logistical concerns**, especially as it resembles a de facto **citizenship test** under the guise of electoral roll cleaning

Main Issues & Arguments

- **Nature of the ECI's Counter Affidavit**

- ♦ The affidavit spans **789 pages** (88 pages of arguments + 700 pages of annexures).
- ♦ 80% of complaints attached **don't pertain to Bihar** or allegations of illegal migrants.
- ♦ Yet, ECI uses these to justify the need for a **nationwide citizenship verification**

Legal and Constitutional Issues Raised

a) Burden of Proof Shifted to Citizens ECI is **asking all existing electors** to prove citizenship afresh. Violates **due process** — as electoral rolls already underwent verification.

Deletion of non-citizens is already provided for under existing law **via complaint-based mechanism**.

b) No Legal Basis for 'Intensive Revisions' Representation of the People Act, 1950 does not mention "intensive" revision.

Only mentions "summary" and "special" revision under Section 21(3).

1960 Rules allow "intensive" revisions but lack clear **definitions** or **modalities**.

c) Selective Privileging of 2003 Electoral Roll Voters listed in 2003 rolls (and their children) are **exempted** from strict documentation.

However, post-2003 voters are required to submit multiple documents.

Creates inequality and arbitrariness — legally questionable.

d) Use of Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) 2003 Criteria

ECI is applying NRC-style **birth documentation tests** based on:

- Date/place of birth of voter (or parents) depending on DOB.

NRC hasn't been initiated officially in any state except Assam.

PM Modi in 2019 clarified that NRC was never discussed in Cabinet.

Hence, ECI has **no legal mandate** to implement NRCl like provisions.

Way Forward

1. Recalibrate SIR Objectives Shift from **citizenship testing** to **data cleaning** of voter lists.

Use **existing legal frameworks** for deletion of ineligible voters.

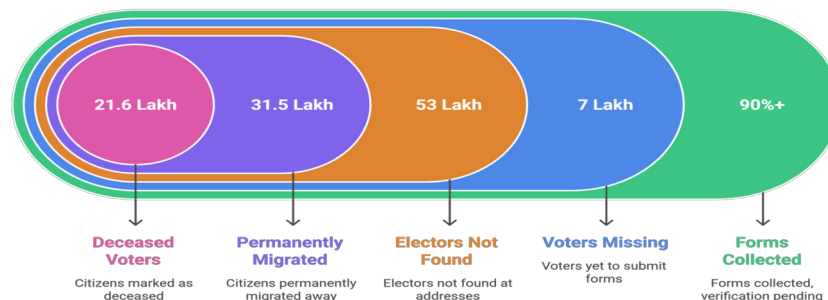
2. Accept Standard IDs Aadhaar, EPIC, ration cards should be accepted like **residence certificates**.

3. Ensure Judicial Oversight Implement safeguards under SC guidance to ensure **transparency** and **non-discrimination**.

4. Publish Disaggregated Data Provide **constituency-wise exclusion stats** to assess impact.

5. Involve Political & Civil Society Stakeholders Boost **confidence and inclusivity** in electoral roll processes.

Voter Data Completeness and Verification





Clean House

Clean house

Septic tank desludging must be mechanised completely

Behind the hazardous cleaning deaths of 160 people in 2022 and 2023, a social audit of 54 of which the Ministry of Social Justice has tabled in Parliament, lies a deleterious business model. Local contractors had hired 38; only five were on a government payroll. The rest were public sector workers 'loaned' to private employers, obscuring liability. Progress on this front has lagged despite the Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and their Rehabilitation Act 2013, court orders, Swachh Bharat advisories, and the 2023 National Action for Mechanised Sanitation Ecosystem (NAMASTE) scheme. A 2024 Parliament reply said 57,758 workers were engaged in hazardous cleaning nationwide but only 16,791 PPE kits were supplied. Fewer than 14,000 had received health cards and only 837 safety workshops had been conducted in 4,800 urban local bodies. There are at least two bright spots, however. In Odisha, identified workers have PPE kits and access to mechanised desludging vehicles and Tamil Nadu has piloted sewer robots in Chennai to clean over 5,000 manholes. Technology and political will can thus deliver the desired results but little has reached most districts. Experts also flagged a near-complete lack of data on rural sanitation workers. India's real problem is enforcement. Industry members have said most underground infrastructure can be cleaned robotically if capital subsidies and operator training expand, yet government tenders often solicit manual bids. Most emergency response sanitation units are paper tigers. Only ₹14 crore has been released so far under the NAMASTE scheme, insufficient to mechanise sewer cleaning in even one major city. In the event of a worker death, police routinely book the lowest ranking supervisor or classify the death as an accident. The Supreme Court has asked for offending contracts to be cancelled and monetary liabilities imposed on principal employers, but local bodies are still to notify such rules. Two-thirds of validated workers are also Dalits, yet rehabilitation packages rarely include housing or scholarships that might help families exit contemptible occupations. Women who still sweep dry latrines receive even less policy attention. Among other measures, urban local bodies must mechanise sewer-cleaning post haste, and make it a licensed trade, and operating without a valid certificate a cognisable offence. Loans for workers to operate the machines that replace manual entry should be upscaled and linked to guaranteed service contracts from municipalities. Finally, the national government should include septic tank desludging under the Swachh Bharat rural budget and extend NAMASTE profiling to gram panchayats.



As climate change events spike, key focus should be drowning prevention: experts

GS Paper 3- Environment , Climate Change

As climate change events spike, key focus should be drowning prevention: experts

WORLD DROWNING PREVENTION DAY

Zubeda Hamid

At the end of April this year, in Tamil Nadu a completely avoidable drowning incident took place – a four-year-old girl, while attending a summer camp at a kindergarten, fell into a water tank in the premises, and died. Media reports indicate that the 11-foot deep tank was uncovered. Beyond the immediate police and government action that was taken however, the larger question remains as to how safe urban spaces – schools, roads, public places and homes – are, when it comes to preventing drowning deaths.

When we think of drowning, we think of large waterbodies – rivers, lakes and the ocean – but not many people realise that a person can drown even in one inch of water, says Jagnoor Jagnoor, a public health researcher and programme lead for injury, The George Institute for

Global Health. "Bucket deaths, for instance, are very common," she says.

Significantly, research indicates that younger people are more likely to die of drowning in canals, dams, swimming pools, water pits, tanks, wells etc., with one-third of all drowning deaths being in the 0-14 age group, says Rakhi Dandona, Panna Chandra Nath and Aditya K. Josh, the authors state that every year, lakhs of people are affected by urban floods in India, and almost all major cities face the problem, in addition to smaller cities. "From 2011 to 2020, floods in India claimed approximately 1,500 human lives annually," the paper states.

Impact of climate change
What can make badly-designed or non-maintained urban spaces dangerous, is that with a rise

in climate change events, heavy rain and flooding are beginning to affect an increasing number of cities, turning even small pits, sewers and channels on roadsides into potential hazards.

In the January 2025 paper 'Drowning in Our Progress? Tackling the Growing Menace of Urban Floods in India,' by Panna Chandra Nath and Aditya K. Josh, the authors state that every year, lakhs of people are affected by urban floods in India, and almost all major cities face the problem, in addition to smaller cities. "From 2011 to 2020, floods in India claimed approximately 1,500 human lives annually," the paper states.

The World Health Organization in its December 2023 Global Status Report on Drowning Prevention estimated that 75% of fatalities in flood-related disasters are drowning deaths. Along with increased frequency and severity of flood disasters and unplanned urbanisation, the number of people exposed to



Taking precautions: Government, communities and the private sector have a key role to play in preventing drowning deaths. FILE PHOTO

hazards is rising, it adds.

Why are channels uncovered, pools unfenced, drains unsilted and water tanks not lidded so often in our cities? The issue, says a senior urban planning expert, lies with both design and maintenance. Urban engineering is not always prioritised as it should be, leading to badly-designed utilities that do not account for pedestrian space and safety. Even when the design is good and is implemented, it is often patchy.

The other major issue, is to do with maintenance. "How to finance servicing and upkeep is a problem for almost all cities. What happens then is that the utility is built, but due to a lack of maintenance or repairs, it does not function as it should, or is incomplete for long periods, posing a hazard that is compounded by even small amounts of rain."

Prioritising flood resilience
One critical gap is that 'Smart cities (under the Smart Cities Mission) are not being built

with flood resilience in mind, points out Dr. Jagnoor. Even flagship schemes like the Jawaharlal Nehru Urban Renewal Mission do not prioritise floods and urban flooding in their strategies, states the research paper.

Planning for flooding, designing for it, and increasing awareness among first-responders should all be part of making cities more resilient towards urban floods, she says.

While the National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA) now takes cognisance of urban flooding, with the Management of Urban Flooding guidelines released in 2010, the WHO notes that policies for disaster risk management in India do not specify drowning. Nor is drowning in urban floods considered in the National Strategy for Prevention of Unintentional Injury, which focuses on drowning prevention as one of its goals, both critical gaps that need addressing, says Dr. Jagnoor. Where, ultimately, does the

responsibility lie? While the government has a major responsibility, communities and the private sector have a role to play as well, in ensuring flood resilience, safety and preventing drowning deaths.

"The private sector is responsible for a large chunk of constructions and some responsibility has to be taken," says the urban planning expert.

At smaller levels too, at home and outside, upkeep of facilities, regular monitoring, ensuring that safety equipment works and that safety laws are implemented in practice are crucial. This includes identification of potential hazards and measures to mitigate them. "We, as the community, have a major role in this. If we do not use unsafe facilities and equipment, we reduce the chance of drowning and we also then force the facilities up to keep," says Dr. Dandona.

As the WHO says anyone can drown; no one should. (zubeda.h@thehindu.co.in)





GS Paper 2: International Relations

A slow revival

India's ties with China are on the mend, but mutual trust needs rebuilding

India's decision to restart issuing tourist visas for Chinese nationals is a strong signal that diplomacy over restoring ties rent apart by the LAC military standoff and Galwan clash of 2020 is moving smoothly. Since Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Chinese President Xi Jinping met in Kazan last October, there have been a number of high-level meetings; the Working Mechanism for Consultation and Coordination on India-China Border Affairs (WMCC) has been convened three times. The visa decision comes a month after China reopened the Kailash Manasarovar Yatra pilgrimage. The two sides have also agreed in principle to revive direct flights, and it is hoped visas for journalists will follow. A joint statement last month said that they would hold "certain functional dialogues" to discuss economic issues and trade, presumably to address India's restrictions on Chinese investment, and China's export restrictions on fertilizer and critical minerals. The export restrictions are causing considerable disruption in Indian technology sector companies, and even Japanese and South Korean automotive companies based in India have raised concerns over supply chain issues. The measures are expected to continue to roll out as preparations begin for the expected visit of Mr. Modi for the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation Summit in August. The WMCC held on Wednesday in Delhi discussed preparations for the next meeting of Special Representatives on the China-India boundary question, to discuss dispute resolution; China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs says that it is speaking to India about New Delhi's concerns over the mega-dam project on the Brahmaputra (Yarlung Tsangpo) in Tibet.

However, both sides have been muted about the reason for the rupture in ties in the first place. There has been little discussion over what prompted the Chinese PLA to transgress the LAC in 2020, which led to the Galwan clash, and what guarantees Beijing has given that this would not be repeated. While in December 2024, the government told Parliament that normalcy in ties could only follow the restoration of "peace and tranquillity in the border areas", it appears it is now prepared to continue to normalise other parts of the relationship without achieving troop de-escalation, dismantling of infrastructure in disputed areas and buffer zones that would lead to restoring patrolling to pre-2020 levels. Ties have also been impacted over Operation Sindoor, with revelations that the PLA was in lock-step with Pakistan's army. The government must realise that restoring mechanisms of bilateral ties are not by themselves sufficient for rebuilding trust. Sweeping key issues under the carpet, without some transparency on the path ahead, could put the whole process of reviving relations at risk.

