

CURRENTLY - FROM NEWS TO NOTES

DAILY CURRENT AFFAIRS

The Hindu & The Indian express

Headline	Source
Centre says right to vote not same as freedom of voting	The Hindu, Page 1 – Polity / Constitution (Right to Vote & Freedom of Expression)
Two Census mobile applications, test portal for self-enumeration launched	The Hindu, Page 1 – Governance / Digital Census / Data Collection
India to question citizens who worked in Myanmar's cyberscam compounds	The Hindu, Page 1 – International Relations / Internal Security
Kolkata's Jadavpur University introduces month-long course on country's plurality	The Hindu, Page 4 – Education / Society

Headline	Source
Allahabad HC orders Dalit women to return ₹4.5-lakh compensation for retracting complaint	The Hindu, Page 6 – Judiciary / SC-ST Act / Social Justice
Redraw welfare architecture, place a UBI in the centre	The Hindu, Editorial Page – Economy / Welfare Policy / Inequality
Large bank shareholders' voting cap said to remain	The Hindu, Page 17 – Economy / Banking Regulation / RBI Policy
Trump's nuclear test threat risks upending global test ban regime	The Hindu, Page 18 – International Relations / Security / Treaties (PTBT, CTBT)
Lack of skilled support adding to rising maternal deaths in Afghanistan	The Hindu, Science Page – Health / Women & Child Welfare / Human Rights

Centre says right to vote not same as freedom of voting

Krishnadas Rajagopal
NEW DELHI

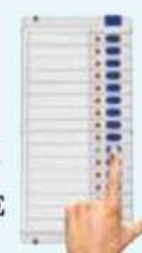
The Centre has argued in the Supreme Court that the 'right to vote' in an election is different from the 'freedom of voting', and while one is a mere statutory right, the second is a part of the fundamental right to freedom of speech and expression.

The case was listed before a Bench headed by Justice Surya Kant for hearing on Thursday. However, the Bench did not assemble.

The Centre was responding to a petition seeking to declare Section 53(2) of the Representation of the People Act, 1951, and Rule 11 read with Forms 21 and 21B of the Conduct of Elections Rules, 1961, which apply to 'uncontested elections', *ultra vires* the Constitution for violating freedom of speech and expression under Article 19(1)(a). Section 53(2) kicks in when the number of candidates equals the number of seats

 The 'right to vote' is only a statutory right conferred by Section 62 of the Representation of the People Act of 1951. Freedom of voting is a species of the right to expression under Article 19(1)(a) of the Constitution

THE CENTRE in its affidavit



to be filled in an Assembly or Lok Sabha election.

NOTA option

In such cases, the provision instructs a Returning Officer (RO) to declare all such candidates as duly elected by filling in Form 21 (in case of a general election) or Form 21B (in case of an election to fill a casual vacancy).

The petitioners, Vidhi Centre for Legal Policy, represented by advocate Harsh Parashar, and the Association for Democratic Reforms, through advocates Prashant Bhushan and Neha Rathi, submitted that the RO's declaration without conducting a poll prevented citizens from expressing their right to vote the 'None of the Above' or the NOTA option and voice their dissatisfaction about the contesting candidate.

Both the government and the Election Commission of India have responded to whether declaration of a sole candidate without taking any poll was a violation of the electors' right to express their unhappiness by voting NOTA.

The Centre's affidavit in court began with a fundamental lesson on the difference between 'right to vote' and the 'freedom of voting'.

CONTINUED ON
» PAGE 14

'Right to vote different from freedom of voting'

It said the 'right to vote' was only a statutory right conferred by Section 62 of the Representation of the People Act of 1951, and subject to the limitations given in the statute. Freedom of voting, on the other hand, was a "species of the right to expression under Article 19(1)(a) of the Constitution".

Illustrating the gulf, the Centre has quoted from a 2003 Supreme Court judgment in *Civil Liberties (PUCL) versus Union* that "the initial right (right to vote) cannot be placed on the pedestal of a fundamental right, but at the stage when the voter goes to the polling booth and casts his vote, his freedom to express arises. The casting of vote in favour of one or the other candidate is tantamount to expression of his opinion and preference and that final stage in the exercise of voting right marks the accomplishment of freedom of expression of the voter".

But, the Centre pointed out, the freedom of voting (the freedom to choose a candidate through positive vote or a negative vote through NOTA) was dependent on whether or not there was a poll taken.

"Freedom of voting is an incidence of a poll," the Union government submitted.

The election would be put to vote only if the number of candidates were more than the number of seats to be filled, as provided under Section 53(1) of the 1951

Petition

- Challenged Section 53(2), RPA 1951 and Rule 11 with Forms 21 & 21B, Conduct of Election Rules 1961.
- Claimed that when only one candidate is declared elected without polling, voters lose their right to express dissent through NOTA.
- Said this violates Article 19(1)(a) — freedom of speech and expression.

Government's Reply

1. Right to Vote $\neq$ Freedom of Voting

- Right to vote $\rightarrow$ Statutory right under Section 62, RPA 1951.
- Freedom of voting $\rightarrow$ Part of freedom of expression under Article 19(1)(a).

2. Freedom of voting arises only when a poll is held.

- If no poll (uncontested election), freedom of voting doesn't apply.

3. Quoted PUCL vs Union of India (2003):

- Right to vote $\rightarrow$ not fundamental.
- Casting a vote $\rightarrow$ exercise of freedom of expression.

Two Census mobile applications, test portal for self-enumeration launched

Vijaita Singh
NEW DELHI

The Registrar-General and Census Commissioner of India launched two mobile applications this week in preparation for the trial phase of the country's first digital Census in 2027.

The pre-test for the first phase, House Listing and Housing Operations (HLO), when a total of 30 questions on housing amenities will be asked, will be held in select areas across the country from November 10 to 30.

The enumerators, including block development officials, revenue officials, and government schoolteachers, have been trained to collect data on the two applications available



The pre-test for first phase, House Listing and Housing Operations, will be held in select areas from November 10 to 30. R. RAGU

ble on Google Play Store: Digital Layout Map (DLM) and Census 2027 - House-list. The apps are compatible with both Android and Apple phones, and can only be downloaded by authorised personnel.

Public participation

The self-enumeration portal is available for testing from November 1 to 7.

"To encourage public

participation, a Self-Enumeration facility will be made available through the Census Portal from 1st to 7th November 2025, allowing individuals residing in the areas selected for Pre-Test to submit their details online through the website <https://test.census.gov.in/se>, prior to field visits by enumerators," a government statement said.

The DLM app's descrip-

tion explains the evolution of India's Census, the world's largest data collection exercise, into a digital operation.

It adds that the DLM app replicates the traditional methodology followed by supervisors and enumerators for drawing notional sketches for houselisting blocks, the primary unit for data collection, while introducing digital efficiency. The app will record building coordinates (latitude and longitude for each structure), the names of localities, roads or streets, building numbers (if available; otherwise, temporary Census house numbers will be assigned by enumerators), and building type (pucca or kutch).

India to question citizens who worked in Myanmar's cyberscam compounds

Kallol Bhattacharjee
NEW DELHI

Indian citizens who worked in the cyberscam compounds of Myanmar will be "questioned" about their activities during their employment period, official sources said on Thursday as India brought back 270 nationals who had earlier taken refuge in Thailand after fleeing the scam centres of Myawaddy, where the Myanmar military carried out operations in the last week of October.

On Thursday evening, two special flights operated by the Indian Air Force flew back 270 Indian na-

India brought back 270 nationals who had earlier taken refuge in Thailand after fleeing the scam centres

tionals, including 26 women, from Chiang Mai in Thailand to the Hindon airbase in Uttar Pradesh. These individuals were among hundreds of international workers who were forced to leave the cyber scam centres that were operating out of Myawaddy.

Officials said that the people who are being flown back will not be allowed to go back home immediately

as the relevant investigating agencies are trying to find out more details about how they ended up there and what activities they were participating in.

"The idea behind the questioning is not just about finding out how these scam centres operate but also to find out how to prevent similar people from joining such transnational networks," said a source. The official further said that the investigation would look into the Indian links and possible accomplices of these networks and how they recruit young men and women to fly to such locations.



Mains Enrichment

Kolkata's Jadavpur University introduces month-long course on country's plurality

Bishwanath Ghosh
KOLKATA

Teaching about the many Indias to Indians and also to others, Jadavpur University, in collaboration with the University of East Anglia, has just started a month-long online course focusing on aspects of India studies that are often ignored, particularly the country's plurality and heterogeneity.

"This course was started on the understanding that academics have a larger responsibility towards society, and it is important that they meet that responsibility by designing courses that focus on the Indian reality, as indeed the National Education Policy 2020 encourages," Sayantan Dasgupta, Professor, Department of



The course that began on November 3 on online mode is a result of a collaboration with the University of East Anglia. DEBASISH BHADURI

Comparative Literature, Jadavpur University, which is holding the course, said.

The course began on November 3 and will continue till December 5.

"This is part of the larger move towards internationalisation of education in India, where experts from va-

rious parts of the world can collaborate and contribute their expertise," Professor Dasgupta said.

The course, he said, emerges from a project undertaken by him and Professor Jon Cook of the University of East Anglia, focusing on the importance

of minority traditions as part of their academic social responsibility.

The project has been working with communities using the Nepali, Lepcha, Bodo, and Kudmali languages in West Bengal.

Key highlight

A key highlight of the course would be the interdisciplinary approach being rapidly embraced by the study of the Humanities. It will also include lectures that focus on gender issues, both stereotyping and resistance.

It will also have several speakers addressing issues related to the syncretic nature of Indian civilisation and questions of democracy and decolonisation in various fields.

Allahabad HC orders Dalit women to return ₹4.5-lakh compensation for retracting complaint

Ishita Mishra
NEW DELHI

The Allahabad High Court on Thursday ordered three Dalit women to return the compensation of ₹4.5 lakh, collectively received by them from the Uttar Pradesh government, after they retracted their statements regarding a complaint of assault that was recorded in front of a magistrate.

₹5-lakh fine

A Bench of Justice Shekhar Kumar Yadav also slapped a fine of ₹5 lakh on the 19 men, accused of assaulting the women, for manipulating the victims.

The matter pertains to a complaint lodged by a woman and her two daughters-in-law against 19 upper caste men for trespassing, assault, criminal intimidation and the SC/ST Act in Prayagraj district in July last year.

A local court had summoned the accused, who approached the High Court seeking directions from the court to dismiss the cognisance and summoning orders from the trial court.

'No complaint with police'

During the hearing earlier this month, the woman told the court that she never lodged any complaint with the police and that her thumb impression was taken on a blank paper.

The lawyer representing the State submitted the medical report and the statements recorded

Their conduct shows abuse of the process of law, misuse of provisions of the SC/ST Act, HC said

before a magistrate of the three women, wherein they unequivocally supported the prosecution version. The court was also informed that each woman received ₹1.5-lakh compensation from the government.

"The court finds it disturbing that the complainant now denies having filed the FIR despite having made statements under Section 164 Cr.P.C, affirming the allegations and having availed of substantial monetary compensation under the statutory scheme meant for genuine victims of atrocities," the court said while ordering the women to return the compensation. It added that the conduct of the women prima facie reflects a "serious abuse of the process of law" and "a gross misuse of the benevolent provisions of the SC/ST Act".

'Fraud on the State'

The court termed the sequence of events as "deliberate attempt to manipulate the criminal justice process after wrongfully obtaining public funds, thereby committing a fraud upon the State".

To deter recurrence of such manipulative conduct, a cost of ₹5 lakh is imposed upon the appellants as well, it added.



Redraw welfare architecture, place a UBI in the centre

As India's wealth gap stretches to levels unseen since Independence and technology races ahead of policy, we find ourselves hurtling toward a collision of crises, job-shedding automation, gig economy precarity, climate-driven displacement and a mental health time bomb fed by chronic insecurity. At this moment, ideas such as universal basic income (UBI), once dismissed as utopian, deserve a fresh, pragmatic look. A UBI can cushion mass unemployment, restoring consumer demand when machines outnumber workers, rewarding unpaid care that props up the formal economy, and rebuilding a social contract frayed by pandemics and capitalism alike. In India, where welfare systems are often plagued by inefficiencies, exclusions and complex eligibility filters, a UBI offers a radical yet simple proposition: a periodic, unconditional cash transfer to every citizen, irrespective of income or employment status. Re-examining it is no longer an academic indulgence. It is an urgent policy imperative. By embedding dignity, autonomy and simplicity into its design, a UBI challenges us to rethink what a welfare state ought to provide in the 21st century.

Universality is the primary strength of a UBI. Where Bismarckian and Beveridgean models peg security to past employment or bureaucratic proof of hardship, a UBI anchors it in citizenship alone, transforming social protection into a streamlined, rights-based pipeline that is resilient to automation shocks, climate emergencies and the invisible labour of care. It bypasses the administrative complexities of targeted welfare and removes the stigma associated with poverty-based entitlements. It aims to create a basic floor of income security for all, ensuring that no one is left behind due to bureaucratic lapses or conditional access.

The argument for a UBI in India

India's current welfare landscape, though expansive, remains fragmented and uneven. Schemes suffer from leakage, duplication, and exclusion. A UBI offers a way to streamline welfare delivery, particularly as digital infrastructure, such as Aadhaar and Direct Benefit Transfer (DBT) platforms, matures. But the argument for a UBI is not just administrative; it is fundamentally moral and economic.

The macro numbers flatter us. Earlier this year, the Press Information Bureau (PIB) claimed that India ranks fourth globally in income equality, citing the consumption-based Gini index. However, this measure focuses on household expenditure, not income or wealth, and thus masks the true extent of economic inequality. According to the World Inequality Database, India's wealth inequality Gini stood at 75 in 2023. The top 1% of the population owns 40% of the national wealth, while the top 10% controls nearly 77%. These figures suggest a level of concentration unseen since colonial times.

At the same time, India's GDP growth – 8.4% in



Saptagiri Sankar Ulaka

is Member of Parliament (Lok Sabha), Indian National Congress, and Chairperson, Standing Committee on Rural Development and Panchayati Raj

2023-24 – has failed to translate into broad-based prosperity. Nobel laureate Joseph Stiglitz has long argued that GDP, while measuring economic output, does not account for the quality of life, environmental sustainability or equity. This disconnect is underscored by India's ranking of 126 out of 137 countries in the 2023 World Happiness Report – behind Nepal, Bangladesh, and Pakistan. GDP-centric narratives obscure rising precarity, job insecurity and social stress.

A modest, unconditional deposit, landing in every Jan Dhan account without forms or favours, means that a gig-worker can buy vegetables even when the app is quiet and a rickshaw driver's child can start the school term with new shoes. So, a UBI chips away at extreme concentration, reduces the lure of one-off freebies, and anchors growth in every kitchen rather than just in quarterly spreadsheets.

Pilot studies within India, including the Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA)-led initiative in Madhya Pradesh (2011-13), found that UBI recipients experienced better nutrition, increased school attendance, and higher earnings. International trials in Finland, Kenya and Iran showed similar results, with improved mental health and food security, without reducing willingness to work.

Automation and artificial intelligence add urgency to the case for a UBI. According to a McKinsey Global Institute report, up to 800 million jobs worldwide could be displaced by 2030 due to automation. India's semi-skilled and informal workforce is especially vulnerable. A UBI can provide a buffer during this transition, allowing time for upskilling and repositioning in the labour market.

It will rework the citizen-state relationship

The philosophical case for a UBI is equally compelling. For decades, the relationship between the citizen and the state has been largely transactional, defined by market participation and economic contribution. A UBI offers a structural antidote to the very populist, consumer-as-voter politics Shruti Kapila critiques. It removes the political incentive to dangle ad hoc freebies, free power here, a loan-waiver there, that parties deploy to manufacture short-term allegiance. When income security is decoupled from partisan largesse, voters are less hostage to transactional giveaways and more empowered to judge governments on systemic outcomes: quality of schools, rule of law, and ecological stewardship. In this sense, a UBI shifts the relationship from consumerism ("Vote me in, get subsidised units of electricity") back to citizenship ("You already possess a basic economic right; now demand good governance"). It replaces the politics of paternal patronage with a rights-based social contract, undercutting populist schemes that thrive on scarcity, targeted subsidies and moral grandstanding.

Worries that a basic income cheque would make everyday prices explode do not match how

people live where such cheques already exist. Big inflations, Weimar and Zimbabwe happened when factories shut and debts were owed in foreign money, not because ordinary people got a little extra spending money. Fund a UBI responsibly, keep the shelves stocked, and it becomes a cushion against hardship, not a spark for price hikes. Rather than dismiss a UBI as fiscally unviable or politically risky, we must engage with it seriously, as a tool to reduce poverty, mitigate inequality, and strengthen democratic citizenship.

It is important to recognise that a UBI is not a panacea. It will not by itself create jobs, fix public health systems or transform education outcomes. But it can serve as a base – providing a minimum level of economic security upon which individuals can build lives of agency and aspiration. It also recognises and supports unpaid labour, especially the care work undertaken predominantly by women, which remains invisible in traditional economic metrics. A UBI is not about promoting dependency; it is about expanding opportunity.

Some issues such as funding

Despite its promise, a UBI raises legitimate concerns. A minimal UBI of ₹7,620 a person a year – equivalent to the poverty line – would cost around 5% of India's GDP. Funding such an initiative would require either raising taxes, rationalising subsidies, or increasing borrowing, each of which has its economic implications. Moreover, a UBI's universality could dilute its redistributive intent by allocating resources to affluent sections alongside the poor.

A practical way forward would be to introduce a UBI in phases. Vulnerable groups – women, the elderly, persons with disabilities and low-income workers – could be prioritised. This targeted rollout would allow for evaluation and infrastructure building before full-scale implementation. A UBI could also complement, rather than replace, essential schemes such as the Public Distribution System and the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, particularly in the early stages.

Another key challenge is technological access. While Aadhaar and Jan Dhan have expanded financial inclusion, gaps remain in digital literacy, mobile access and bank connectivity particularly in tribal, remote, and underserved areas. These gaps must be closed to prevent exclusion from a scheme intended to be universal.

As the Indian state seeks to modernise its welfare architecture, a UBI deserves a central place in the conversation. History suggests that India will revisit the question sooner than we think. The calculus is no longer 'Can we afford UBI?' but 'Can we afford the democratic cost of mass insecurity?' Universality, not means-testing, is the architecture fit for a 21st-century welfare state.

The views expressed are personal

What is UBI

Universal Basic Income (UBI) — a periodic, unconditional cash transfer to every citizen — ensures basic income security and aims to replace inefficient welfare schemes.

Why Needed

India's welfare system is fragmented, slow, and exclusionary. UBI offers a direct, transparent income floor, cutting bureaucratic leakages and ensuring universal coverage.

Arguments for UBI in India

1. **Inequality:** India's top 1% hold 40% of wealth. UBI can reduce disparity and provide economic stability neglected by current welfare delivery.
2. **AI Impact:** With AI and automation threatening jobs, UBI can cushion income loss and support retraining and transition.
3. **Philosophical Basis:** UBI upholds dignity, autonomy, and equal citizenship, shifting welfare from political favour to rights-based empowerment.

Funding & Way Forward

- **Cost:** 5 % of GDP (₹7620 a person a year- BPL).
- **Source:** Rationalise subsidies, merge overlapping schemes.
- **Approach (phase wise) :** Start with vulnerable groups — women, elderly, disabled, informal workers.
- **UBI to complement, not replace, PDS and MGNREGA.**

Large bank shareholders' voting cap said to remain

Reuters

NEW DELHI

India plans to retain a cap on voting rights for large shareholders in domestic banks, two sources said, signalling New Delhi's attempts to liberalise the financial sector and draw more foreign investment, will stay limited in scope.

Reserve Bank of India (RBI), the country's banking regulator, initiated a number of steps to unwind complex regulations in recent months and has permitted foreign lenders to pick up large stakes in domestic banks.

The government is also planning to more than



Foreign-investment cap in State-run banks may be raised.

double the foreign-investment cap in State-owned lenders to 49%, *Reuters* reported last week. However, rules for voting rights will not be eased yet, they said.

As per current rules, a single shareholder cannot

hold more than 26% voting rights in a private bank, even if their ownership is higher than that. For government-owned banks, that cap is 10%.

Excessive control issue

India's Federal Finance Ministry and the RBI discussed increasing the cap on voting rights to give large shareholders more say in strategic decisions but decided against it to avoid excessive control, said the first source.

The government wants safeguards like a cap on voting rights of 26% for a single shareholder to stay to avoid sole decision-making, said the first source.

Summary:

- The Government of India will retain the cap on voting rights for large shareholders in domestic banks.
- Under current RBI rules, a single shareholder cannot exercise over 26% voting rights in a private bank, even if ownership is higher.
- For public sector banks, the voting cap remains 10%.
- Though the foreign investment limit in state-owned banks was raised to 49%, the voting rights cap will not be eased.
- The decision, taken after consultations between the Finance Ministry and RBI, aims to avoid excessive control by major investors and ensure balanced decision-making.

Trump's nuclear test threat risks upending global test ban regime

NEWS ANALYSIS

Stanly Johny

On October 29, just minutes before his meeting with Chinese President Xi Jinping in Busan, South Korea, U.S. President Donald Trump said the U.S. would "start testing our nuclear weapons on an equal basis with other nations". Back in the U.S., Mr. Trump repeated his claims in an interview. "Russia is testing; China is testing, but they don't talk about it... And certainly North Korea has been testing. Pakistan has been testing."

Mr. Trump is correct about North Korea, which has tested multiple nuclear weapons in the new century. But other nuclear powers, including the U.S., China and Russia, have maintained a moratorium on weapons testing since the 1990s. They, however, have tested weapons that can carry nuclear warheads. Mr. Trump's announcement came immediately after Russia announced that it successfully tested a nuclear-powered cruise missile (Burevestnik) and an undersea torpedo (Poseidon). Both are designed to overcome American missile defence systems and can carry nuclear warheads. But those were not nuclear detonation tests.

The last time Russia tested a nuclear weapon was in 1990, when the Soviet



Deadly detonation: A mushroom cloud rises from a test blast at the Nevada Test Site on June 24, 1957. AP

Union was still alive. The last American nuclear bomb test was held in 1992, and the last Chinese test was in 1996. In 1996, the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) banned all nuclear tests, but it never came into force as the required number of countries did not ratify it. The U.S. and China have signed the treaty but never ratified it. Russia had signed and ratified it, but in 2023, amid mounting tensions with the U.S., it decided to de-ratify it.

Debate in the U.S.

Russia remains the world's largest nuclear power with an inventory of 4,309 warheads, according to the Federation of American Scientists. The U.S. comes second with 3,700 weapons, while China is believed to have more than 1,000 warheads. Historically, the U.S. has carried out the most number of nuclear tests – 1,030 detonations, followed by the

reaction or explosion. But Mr. Trump, in another interview, clearly said, "We are going to test nuclear weapons like other countries do."

Devastating effects

The 1963 Partial Test Ban Treaty, signed by the Soviet Union, the U.S. and the U.K., banned all nuclear test detonations in the atmosphere, outer space and underwater. Since then most tests were conducted underground. Even subterranean tests, experts say, could cause devastating environmental damages, including total destruction of ecosystems at test sites and contamination of soil, air and water.

If the U.S. starts testing weapons, it could cause a domino effect on other nuclear powers. There were reports that China had made preparations at Lop Nur, where Mao detonated China's first bomb in 1964, in case it decides to resume testing. Russia was unambiguous in its reaction. "If they begin testing, naturally we will do the same," Russia's Security Council chief Sergey Shoigu said on October 31.

If the U.S. and Russia resume tests, China could do the same. And if China does it, India will come under internal pressure to start testing its weapons. Then Pakistan may not stand out. A new phase of nuclear arms race would begin, with long-term consequences for humanity.

Soviet Union (715) and the French (210). China has conducted more than 45 nuclear tests. In total, there have been 2,056 nuclear tests since 'Trinity', the first nuclear detonation by the U.S.

In the U.S., the debate on whether the country should resume nuclear tests has been raging for some time. Those who support tests argue that it is important to bolster the country's nuclear deterrent – tests can prove that nuclear arsenals actually work, and provide critical data allowing countries to build more powerful, compact and specialised warheads.

On November 2, U.S. Secretary of Energy Chris Wright said the U.S. would not resume nuclear weapons tests but would conduct "subcritical tests". A subcritical test uses conventional explosives to compress fissile material (Plutonium 239), without triggering nuclear chain

Summary:

- Donald Trump hinted the U.S. may resume nuclear tests, ending its 1992 moratorium.
- Move follows Russia's recent missile tests and could trigger a global arms race, with China, India, and Pakistan likely to follow.
- CTBT (1996) bans all nuclear tests but never came into force as the U.S. and China haven't ratified it.

PTBT (1963):

- Signed by U.S., U.K., USSR.
- Banned nuclear tests in the atmosphere, outer space, and underwater.
- Aimed to reduce radioactive fallout and environmental harm.
- Allowed underground tests, leading to continued testing till 1990s.

Lack of skilled support adding to rising maternal deaths in Afghanistan

Divya Gandhi

Afghan women are giving birth without skilled support, and maternal deaths, which could have been prevented, are on the rise, says a correspondence by three clinicians in the latest edition of *The Lancet*, which also explains the cause.

"Afghanistan today faces a maternal health crisis that is as much political as it is medical. When girls are banned from studying beyond grade 6, nursing and midwifery schools are shuttered, and female health workers are restricted in their ability to work, the results are tragically predictable."

Shutting down female education and employment in healthcare is a decision with "fatal consequences" in Afghanistan, "where cultural norms already restrict women from being treated by male doctors," say the authors, who include, Amina Nasari, CUNY School of Medicine, New York. The inaccessibility to emergency obstetric care could lead to fatal haemorrhages, eclampsia, sepsis, and obstructed labour.

Fragile health system

In 2024, the Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan estimated that 17.9 million people in Afghanistan re-



Reeling under impact: The bans on women's work and education, specifically in midwifery and nursing, must be lifted, says a new *Lancet* correspondence. AP

quired health assistance that year; the country has "a fragile and under-resourced healthcare system, fraught by unequal access to services, ongoing communicable disease breaks, critical unmet maternal and child health needs, high rates of malnutrition, and significant morbidity and mortality rates as result", says a United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) report.

It adds that UNICEF has reported Afghanistan "having one of the world's highest maternal mortality rates with 638 mothers dying for ev-

ery 100,000 births, exacerbated by acute shortages of qualified birth attendants in the country."

Minimal ante-natal care

There is much to be done for antenatal care too in Afghanistan. For instance, no more than 6.2% of women received good-quality antenatal care, according to a paper published in *BMC Pregnancy and Childbirth* in January 2025.

The Lancet correspondence references the 2022-23 Afghanistan Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey, which

Alleviating a crisis

These are the four strategies offered by latest *Lancet* correspondence to overcome the maternal health crisis.



- Lift the bans on women's work and education
- Female health

workforce must be protected and expanded

- Donors must make women-only services non-negotiable

- Data must drive decision making. Numbers will help target resources

Afghanistan has one of the world's highest maternal mortality rates with 638 mothers dying for every 100,000 births, according to the UNICEF

found that only 36.3% of mothers received a postnatal check within two days of delivery. "In December, 2024, Afghanistan's authorities banned women from higher education in health sciences, including

nursing and midwifery. This decision cut off one of the last viable pathways to train skilled female providers who are essential to maternal and newborn survival," say the authors: clinics have closed; female-only outreach teams suspended; and humanitarian agencies have stopped maternal and newborn services when barred from deploying female staff.

Earlier this year, another correspondence in *The Lancet*, the authors, including Prof. Nasari, said that according to UNICEF, the ban on secondary education for girls alone cost the Afghan economy at least \$500 million in 2022.

"Allowing the 3 million girls from that year's cohort to complete secondary education could have contributed \$5.4 billion to the economy. The decision also undermines an already fragile health-care system by blocking one of the few remaining paths for women to contribute to health care."

Four strategies

The latest correspondence offers four strategies to overcome these attacks on maternal health: First, lift the bans on women's work and education, specifically midwifery and nursing; second, "the existing fe-

male health workforce must be protected and expanded and midwifery schools should be reopened without delay"; third, "donors must make women-only services non-negotiable." And fourth, "data must drive decision making... Numbers, not anecdotes, will strengthen advocacy and help target resources."

The lack of health-care access "translates to a surge in home births without the presence of trained professionals, no access to emergency interventions when complications arise, and a tragic increase in preventable maternal and neonatal deaths," says the *Lancet* correspondence.

And now, Afghan women have lost "their last hope" as Taliban has shut down Internet, says a BBC report from September.

"As clinicians, we must be clear: restricting female health workers is not tradition. It is a policy with a measurable death toll... let Afghan women train, work, and lead in health care and beyond. The health of mothers, the survival of newborns, and the wellbeing of entire communities depend on it... This is not just a health-care issue; it is a human rights crisis," the authors conclude.

(divya.gandhi@thehindu.co.in)