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India's rarest heron faces a silent end as new dam ignores its home

Once the dam in the Lohit river basin is built, it could alter the water's turbidity and flow, and lead to the local extinction of white-bellied herons; the bird was first described in 1878 based on specimens from the Teesta region, the species does not occur there today; in fact, it has been 'critically endangered' since 2007

Aditya Ansh

The white-bellied heron (*Ardea insignis*) is amongst the world's most elusive birds, nesting along fast-flowing rivers lined with old growth forests.

"India has a population of six to nine individuals distributed in three rivers: Noa-Dehing River, Lahm River and Lohit River," Yumlam Benjamin Bida, project manager, Ashoka Trust for Research in Ecology and the Environment, Bengaluru, said. "Out of these three rivers, Lahm is a tributary of the Lohit River and the river basin harbours 70% of India's white-bellied herons."

Yet on the Lohit, the Forest Advisory Committee under the Union Environment Ministry has granted in-principle clearance to a 1,200-MW hydroelectric power project that will fell more than 33,000 trees. The environmental impact assessment for the project also omitted white-bellied herons.

Borrowed time

"White-bellied herons have a very unique foraging strategy due to their huge body size" – up to around four-feet-tall, Mr. Bida said. "They hunt in shallow water and their dietary composition is only fish. They wait for the fish to come near and then strike it."

He added that the dam, once it is built, will alter the water's turbidity and flow, which could lead to the bird's "local extinction".

In 1878, the British ornithologist and naturalist Allan Octavian Hume first scientifically described the white-bellied heron based on specimens from the Teesta region in eastern India. The species is not known to occur there today.

According to Mr. Bida, it is not unknown for substantial changes in river conditions to lead to highly specialised species vanishing from that landscape.

Also, "The riparian mature forest plays a critical role for white-bellied herons, both for rooting and nesting. The hydroelectric power project will clear the mature riparian forest and let it get submerged, impacting the breeding of the species."

'No human disturbance'

White-bellied herons are in Schedule I of the Wildlife Protection Act of 1972, thus enjoying the highest level of legal protection. Even so, their range and population have declined significantly in the last century.

A 2019 review by the Tropical Resources Institute recorded the birds in parts of Sikkim, Nepal, Bhutan, and Myanmar at the beginning of the 20th century. Today, they are restricted to pockets of Arunachal Pradesh, Bhutan, and Myanmar.

"The white-bellied heron is known to inhabit Himalayan river systems up to elevations of about 1,500m above sea level," Murali Krishna, a wildlife ecologist who has worked extensively in the Eastern Himalaya, said.

"Based on my several years of observation in Arunachal Pradesh, the species appears to avoid even minimal anthropogenic disturbance and usually uses tall trees for nesting, in those areas where there is no human disturbance."

A white-bellied heron in Arunachal Pradesh. 'White-bellied herons have a very unique foraging strategy due to their huge body size' — up to around four-feet-tall. 'They hunt in shallow water and their dietary composition is only fish.' RAJKIMAR99 (CC BY-SA)

Overlooked in assessment

The project is being developed by Tehri Hydro Development Corporation India, Ltd. in partnership with the Arunachal Pradesh government. Its environmental impact assessment was prepared by WAPCOS, Ltd, a consultancy firm under the Ministry of Jal Shakti.

Although the Lohit River basin harbours most of these birds in India, the species did not feature in the project's impact assessment. According to the minutes of the Forest Advisory Committee meeting on December 19, 2025, State officials told the committee the birds had not been included because they had not been recorded within the project's diversion area.

The project also faced sustained opposition from local communities. Roshman Tawsik, resident of the Nukung Village and president of the District Congress Party Committee, said residents opposed the project since it was first proposed in 2008. "We do not want to sacrifice so much of our land and watch it getting submerged," he said.

During a public hearing in August 2025, community members questioned the reliability of the baseline data WAPCOS used in its assessment and said the draft assessment did not accurately reflect local realities. One participant noted that important flora and fauna, including a medical plant, had been excluded. Mr. Tawsik also criticised the report for not documenting the tribe's cultural practice of using natural indicators.

The draft also left out the affected villages of Nukung and Mla as well as the amended social impact assessment.

> For a species like white-bellied herons, ... there should be a basin-level approach, which entails assessing Lohit basin as one connected habitat, rather than looking at the site in isolation while assessing impacts.
>
> **YUMLAM BENJAMIN BIDA**
> Project manager at Ashoka Trust for Research in Ecology and the Environment

Ecological complexity

The Committee's consent will allow for compensatory afforestation in 51 patches of land in Madhya Pradesh, over a thousand kilometres away from the Lohit River basin. "Natural forests are highly complex ecological systems that develop over long periods through interactions of climatic, edaphic, and biotic factors, and hence cannot be fully recreated through human interventions," Mr. Krishna said.

"The Eastern Himalayas are highly complex due to their topography, climatic variability and diverse forest types, and they form part of a global biodiversity hotspot," he added. So developmental interventions require "careful planning and a strong ecological understanding", and authorities must "move from region specific impact and look into impact at a broader level".

"For a species like white-bellied herons, ... there should be a basin-level approach, which entails assessing Lohit basin as one connected habitat, rather than looking at the site in isolation while assessing impacts on nesting, roosting, and feeding areas for white-bellied herons," Mr. Bida said.

Imon Abedin, a field biologist with Aaranyak, an environmental protection organisation, also said the species faces multiple pressures, including changes in river courses, removal of large river boulders, unregulated tourism, fish poisoning, sand extraction, and pollution.

As a result, "there is often no clear roadmap to adequately compensate for its ecological impacts, especially for species like the white-bellied herons that already exist in extremely precarious conditions."

Mr. Krishna said he believes conservation planning needs to move beyond its narrow focus on charismatic wildlife, like tigers and elephants, and adopt a more informed approach that would treat conservation efforts "like on a war-footing" and giving rare species like white-bellied herons the same level of urgency afforded to better-known conservation priorities.

(Aditya Ansh is an independent media writer in New Delhi. adityaansh30@gmail.com)

THE GIST

- India has a population of six to nine white-bellied herons distributed in three rivers: Noa-Dehing River, Lahm River and Lohit River
- On the Lohit, the Forest Advisory Committee under the Union Environment Ministry has granted in-principle clearance to a 1,200-MW hydroelectric power project that will fell more than 33,000 trees
- However, the white-bellied herons did not feature in the project's impact assessment drawing criticism from conservationists

1. Context (Species in News)

I. The Union Environment Ministry has granted in-principle environmental clearance to a 1,200 MW hydropower project in the Lohit River basin, Arunachal Pradesh.

II. Conservationists warn that alteration of river flow, turbidity and riparian forests could threaten the Critically Endangered White-bellied Heron, whose largest Indian population is found in the Lohit basin.

2. White-bellied Heron (Ardea insignis)

I. Scientific name: Ardea insignis.

II. IUCN Red List: Critically Endangered (CR).

III. Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972: Schedule I.

IV. Distribution: India, Bhutan and Myanmar.

V. Indian distribution: Arunachal Pradesh (Lohit, Noa-Dihing and Lam river basins); about 70% of India's population occurs in the Lohit basin.

VI. Habitat: Fast-flowing Himalayan rivers with undisturbed riparian forests and rocky riverbeds.

VII. Diet: Primarily fish; hunts in shallow water using an ambush strategy.

VIII. Altitude: Up to about 1,500 m above sea level.

IX. Major threats: Hydropower projects, habitat loss, altered river flow, removal of river boulders, pollution and human disturbance.

X. Significance: One of the world's rarest herons and an important indicator of healthy Himalayan river ecosystems.

What India's young people are saying about families

Andrea M. Wojnar

UNFPA Representative in India and part of Team UN in India

Ask a grandmother in India what has changed since her time, and she will not talk to you about fertility rates. She will talk about her granddaughter, who finished college, has a city job, and is in no hurry to start a family. She will say it with pride and concern in the same breath, a blend the data reflects too.

The UNFPA survey

On World Population Day this year (July 11), UNFPA released the Demographic Futures Survey, the largest study of its kind, with over 1,08,000 young adults surveyed across 73 countries. It asked a simple question: not whether young people still wanted partnership and family, but what stood between them and it. (This year, India's Ministry of Health and Family Welfare set the theme, "Healthy Timing and Spacing of Pregnancies" or HTSP, a reminder that at the heart of every demographic number is a question of choice: whether young people can decide, freely and on their own timeline, when and how to build their families.)

India's fertility rate has settled at two children per woman, below the replacement level of 2.1. Some will hear that and reach for words like "baby bust" or "population crisis". At UNFPA, we see something else entirely. This is not a warning sign but the outcome of sustained government investment across decades, in girls' education, the National Health Mission, and expanding contraceptive choice and maternal health services. The share of young women married before 18 years has fallen from 23.3% to 20.1% in just the last few years. That is a policy achievement India's institutions can rightly take credit for.

But numbers tell more than one story at once, and if we stop at the good news, we miss what young India is trying to say.

Ask young people directly, and most want what generations before them wanted. Across the country, four in 10 women and a third of men say that two children is their ideal family size. The Demographic Futures Survey found the same pattern across countries: young people are not turning away from family life; they are asking whether the conditions exist to build it. So why the hesitation here? When we ask young couples what stands between them and the life they picture, the answers are almost always practical. Money comes first, cited by nearly four in 10. Then housing. Then job security. Then a very simple, human worry: how well can we care for our children?

That last question falls on one set of shoulders far more than another. Young women in India spend over five hours a day on unpaid housework and caregiving; young men spend about half an hour. Only 15 in every 100 young women are in paid work, compared to 55 in every 100 young men. These are not merely statistics. They help explain why so many capable young women feel that they must choose between a career and a family, when no one should have to choose at all.

The climate change issue

There is a newer worry layered on top of the old ones. The survey found that nearly all young people say climate change is disrupting their lives, and about half say it affects their peace of mind. Nearly half of young Indians also report being very worried about conflict, economic insecurity and environmental risk all at once, among the higher rates recorded anywhere. Add high youth unemployment and a mental health conversation that is only beginning in many Indian households, and a fuller picture emerges. This is not a generation rejecting parenthood. It is a generation asking, quite reasonably, whether the ground beneath it is steady enough to build on.

India is also marked by inter-State disparity. Bihar's fertility rate stands at 2.7, while Sikkim's is just 1.0. Kerala, Delhi and Tamil Nadu have long settled below the replacement level, while Bihar, Uttar Pradesh and Jharkhand are still catching up. These differences show that India's demographic transition is unfolding at different speeds across States, and that no single national policy can fully address every State's realities.

Responding to youth aspiration

The UNFPA's partnership with the Indian government and communities is aimed at translating what young people are telling us into practical support: high-quality, affordable and accessible childcare; families that share caregiving more equally; continued investment in stable, dignified work for young people entering the labour force; and greater attention to youth mental health, including climate anxiety, in conversations about family and the future. The private sector also has a vital role to play through parental leave, flexible work arrangements and family-friendly workplaces that enable young people to balance work and caregiving. The UNFPA has a unique role in the United Nations development system as a leader in data collection, population dynamics and evidence-based policymaking. The Demographic Futures Survey shows how population data can and must be deployed to help countries understand, plan for and adapt to demographic shifts.

India is home to 255 million young people aged 15 to 24 years, the largest generation this country, or perhaps any country, has ever raised. This is India's demographic dividend, a window of opportunity that will not remain open indefinitely. The choices we make today will determine whether this generation can fully realise its potential before that window begins to close. Young Indians are not walking away from the idea of family. They are waiting for the conditions that would let them say yes to it fully.

Young Indians still want families, but the conditions they seek reveal their aspirations, anxieties, and changing realities

1. **Context (GS I – Population & Associated Issues | GS II – Health, Women & Children | GS III – Human Resource Development)**

The United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) Demographic Futures Survey 2025 highlights that while Indian youth continue to aspire for marriage and parenthood, socio-economic, gender and environmental factors are reshaping the timing and size of families.

2. **Key Findings**

I. **Family aspirations remain strong**

* Most young Indians still prefer marriage and children, with two children emerging as the ideal family size.
* India's Total Fertility Rate (TFR) has declined to 2.0, below the replacement level (2.1), reflecting demographic transition rather than rejection of family life.

II. **Economic security shapes fertility decisions**

* Financial stability, affordable housing, secure employment and the cost of raising children are the primary determinants of family formation.
* Demographic choices are increasingly influenced by economic opportunities and social security.

III. **Gender equality is critical for demographic outcomes**

* Women continue to shoulder a disproportionate burden of unpaid care work and have significantly lower labour force participation.
* Greater sharing of caregiving responsibilities, quality childcare and family-friendly workplaces are essential to enable informed reproductive choices.

IV. **Demographic transition is becoming more complex**

* Climate change, mental health concerns, economic uncertainty and regional demographic variations are influencing fertility behaviour.
* Wide inter-State differences in fertility indicate that State-specific demographic policies are more effective than a one-size-fits-all national approach.

3. UPSC Value Addition

I. Important Data

* **UNFPA Demographic Futures Survey**: Over 1.08 lakh respondents across 73 countries.
* **India's youth population (15–24 years)**: 255 million.
* **TFR**: 2.0 (Replacement level: 2.1).
* **State variation**: Bihar (2.7) | Sikkim (1.0).

II. Policy Priorities

* Improve women's labour force participation.
* Expand affordable childcare and parental support.
* Generate quality employment for youth.
* Strengthen reproductive healthcare and mental health services.

Building an Atmanirbhar philanthropy ecosystem

Ashish Dhawan

Founder and Chairperson, The Convergence Foundation

Amit Chandra

Co-Founder, A.T.E. Chandra Foundation

India's philanthropic landscape has changed more in the past decade than many realise. Domestic private giving – through family philanthropy, Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), and individual donors – has grown rapidly and now far outstrips annual foreign philanthropic inflows. A new generation of entrepreneurs is rethinking differently about giving, while millions of Indians are entering the markets through mutual funds, systematic investment plans (SIP), and Unified Payments Interface (UPI). Against this backdrop, the debate around the Foreign Contribution (Regulation) Act (FCRA) takes on a different meaning: less a dispute about foreign funding than a chapter in India's move toward a more self-reliant philanthropic future.

The first principle should not be controversial. Every sovereign nation has both the right and the responsibility to regulate foreign capital flowing into organisations that shape public life. This is neither unique to India nor illiberal: the United States requires disclosure under its Foreign Agents Registration Act, and Australia and several European democracies run comparable regimes. The question worth debating is not whether foreign funding should be regulated, but whether that regulation is proportionate, predictable and efficiently run.

There is also a gap between perception and reality. The impression is that tighter FCRA rules have hollowed out Indian development work; the numbers say otherwise. NITI Aayog's portal NGO Darpan portal lists roughly six lakh voluntary organisations, of which only about 14,500 hold active FCRA registration. Foreign contributions have themselves doubled over the decade, from about ₹10,000 crore to around ₹22,000 crore. The sector has not been starved of money from abroad.

The rise of domestic giving

The bigger change lies at home. Domestic private philanthropy now exceeds ₹1.18 lakh crore a year – more than five times foreign inflows – according to the Bain-Dasra India Philanthropy Report 2026.

Family philanthropy is growing at double-digit rates as a new generation of wealth creators comes to see giving as part of wealth stewardship. The centre of gravity of Indian philanthropy has quietly shifted home.

None of this erases the hardship of the transition. A small number of organisations faced delayed renewals, long processing times, or cancelled registrations, disrupting work in education, health, livelihoods, and rural development. This was not true of the sector as a whole, but for those affected, the disruption was real and deserves acknowledgement rather than dismissal.

The transition also exposed how unevenly the sector had prepared. Many organisations operate with exemplary governance; others had gone dormant or were well-meaning groups whose documentation had not kept pace with rising expectations.

India's companies went through a similar reckoning over the past three decades: stronger governance initially felt like a burden, but it ultimately became the very thing that won investor confidence and drew in capital. The social sector can follow the same path. If money is the fuel of philanthropy, trust is its currency.

Better, not tighter regulation

The goal should be better regulation, not just tighter regulation. An administrative slip should not carry the same penalty as fraud. A structured path comprising deficiency notices, defined windows to correct errors, opportunities to provide clarification, and an independent appellate body would protect the integrity of the law while sparing genuine organisations avoidable disruption. The newly launched FCRA 2.0 platform offers a real opportunity to simplify compliance and move towards risk-based supervision.

Fixing FCRA's administration, though, is only half the task; the larger prize is to build what we would call an Atmanirbhar ('self-reliant') philanthropy ecosystem. India's giving has moved through three phases: first, a reliance on foreign philanthropy, and second, the transformation wrought by CSR, which now channels over ₹40,000 crore a year into development. The third phase must be powered by Indian families, entrepreneurs and citizens.

The most immediate opportunity sits with India's fast-growing community of high-net-worth individuals, whose giving has lagged well behind the growth in their wealth. This is where the largest pool of new domestic capital can be unlocked over the coming decade, and where policy can help most.

India's tax framework does not yet signal that philanthropy is a national priority. Deductions under Section 80G are usually limited to half the donation and capped at 10% of adjusted gross total income. Few large donors hit those limits, but tax policy is also about signalling intent – and other countries have been emphatic, from Singapore's 250% deduction to Britain's Gift Aid top-up and America's carry-forward provisions. India need not copy them wholesale. But raising the 80G deduction from 50% to 100%, as is already allowed for some categories, and lifting the ceiling to 25%, would cost the exchequer little while meaningfully improving the flow of long-term social capital.

Domestic giving, not foreign funding, is what will define India's philanthropic future

Expanding the donor base

One mechanism deserves particular mention. Most first-generation entrepreneurs hold their wealth in equity, not cash. A framework allowing donations of appreciated listed shares to eligible charities – with appropriate safeguards and a reasonable disposal window of, say, one to three years so that recipients can sell in orderly fashion – could become one of the most powerful ways to unlock domestic philanthropic capital.

The next frontier, over a longer horizon, is to widen the base. India now has over 220 million demat accounts, widespread SIP investing and UPI in every pocket; the infrastructure for mass participation already exists. If even a fraction of households gave ₹100, ₹500 or ₹1,000 a month through trusted digital platforms, millions of citizens would become active partners in solving the country's social problems. The Social Stock Exchange could do for social capital what India's markets did for financial capital – a trusted national platform linking credible organisations to ordinary citizens through clear disclosure and measurable impact.

The argument runs deeper than the sums involved. Domestic philanthropy creates more than money; it creates ownership. When Indian citizens and businesses fund India's own social challenges, they bring governance, ideas, volunteering and accountability along with their capital, strengthening not just the non-profit sector but also the wider social contract. That is the real case for an Atmanirbhar philanthropy ecosystem.

Foreign philanthropy will still matter, particularly in research, innovation and the exchange of ideas. But as India approaches developed-nation status, it should complement India's social development, not shape it. The aspiration, in the end, is not merely to regulate foreign philanthropy well. It is to build a country where the overwhelming share of social transformation is financed, led and owned by Indians themselves.

That is the promise of an Atmanirbhar philanthropy ecosystem – and, we believe, the next chapter of India's development story.

1. Context (GS II – Governance & Civil Society | GS III – Inclusive Growth)

I. India is witnessing a transition towards a self-reliant philanthropic ecosystem, with domestic giving becoming the dominant source of social sector funding. The objective is to strengthen philanthropy while ensuring transparency, accountability and national security.

2. UPSC Value Addition

I. Sources of Philanthropy in India
* Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR)
* Family and Individual Philanthropy
* Community & Religious Giving
* Foreign Philanthropic Contributions
* Digital Giving Platforms

II. Relevant Laws
* Foreign Contribution (Regulation) Act (FCRA), 2010: Regulates the acceptance and utilisation of foreign contributions by individuals, NGOs and associations to ensure transparency and safeguard national interests.
* Companies Act, 2013 (Section 135): Mandates Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) spending by eligible companies on specified social development activities.
* Income Tax Act, 1961 (Section 80G): Provides tax deductions for donations made to eligible charitable institutions, encouraging domestic philanthropy.

III. Important Data
* Domestic private philanthropy: ₹1.18 lakh crore annually.
* Foreign philanthropic inflows: ~₹22,000 crore annually.
* CSR spending: Over ₹40,000 crore annually.
* Around 6 lakh NGOs are registered on NGO Darpan, while only ~14,500 have active FCRA registration.

3. Key Points

I. Domestic philanthropy has become the primary pillar of India's social sector funding, reducing dependence on foreign contributions.

II. A balanced regulatory framework should ensure national security while enabling credible civil society organisations to function effectively through predictable and proportionate compliance.

III. Broadening the donor base through improved tax incentives, digital giving, donations of appreciated assets and greater citizen participation can strengthen domestic philanthropy.

IV. A robust, transparent and accountable philanthropic ecosystem can complement government efforts in education, healthcare, livelihoods and rural development, thereby promoting inclusive and sustainable development.

For the first time, undergraduate enrolments decline in India

AISHE reports released after a prolonged delay show a drop in students enrolled in undergrad courses, particularly in States such as Maharashtra and U.P.

DATA POINT

Sambavi Parthasarathy
Pon Vasanth B.A.

Even as issues around education have momentarily taken centre-stage amid the protests led by the Cockroach Janta Party and activist Sonam Wangchuk, the reports of the All India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE) for two years released together after a prolonged delay by the Union Ministry of Education (MoE) has largely gone unnoticed.

Importantly, the strange trend that has gone unreported is the inexplicable decline in the total number of students enrolled in undergraduate courses across the country. Such a decline has happened for the first time ever since the Union government started publishing AISHE reports from 2011.

In the government's own words, AISHE "serves as the primary source of official statistics on higher education in India and provides critical insights for policy formulation, planning, and monitoring of the sector". Yet, the MoE inordinately delayed the release of these reports. The AISHE report for 2021-22 had a delayed release in January 2024. More than two years later, the Ministry released the reports for 2022-23 and 2023-24 together earlier this month without much fanfare.

The total enrolment in higher education, which include undergraduate, postgraduate, diploma, Ph.D and other types of courses, increased by 3.7 lakh (0.8%) in 2023-24 compared to 2022-23, which is the lowest-ever increase. However, the number of students enrolled in undergraduate courses, who account for over 75% of all enrolments, declined by 93,000 (0.27%) in the same period **(Chart 1)**. This is despite the fact that the youth population in the eligible age group saw an increase, along with an increase in the number of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) that participated in AISHE, which went up from 56,180 in 2022-23 to 59,533 in 2023-24.

Neither the 2023-24 report, which played up the marginal increase in Gross Enrolment Ratio from 29.5 to 30, nor the Minister for Education Dharmendra Pradhan, who cited the report to highlight the increased enrolment of female students in STEM courses, have offered an explanation for this decline. Interestingly, the decline is seen only among male students since the number of female students enrolled in undergraduate courses saw an increase although they were fewer in numbers than the males. The enrolment of male students dropped by 2.2% between 2022-23 and 2023-24 while that of female students increased by 1.8% **(Chart 2)**.

In absolute numbers, two States – Maharashtra (-6%) and Uttar Pradesh (-3%) – accounted for the highest drop in undergraduate enrolments **(Chart 3)**. While the chart shows only 10 States with the highest number of enrolments, several other States such as Jammu and Kashmir and West Bengal saw steep falls in undergraduate enrolments by 13% and 8% respectively. Delhi, a major hub for education, registered a decline of 6%.

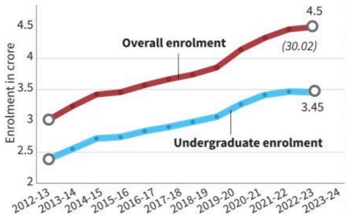
The States that saw declines accounted for a drop of over six lakh enrolments. The overall decline in the country would have been far higher, if not for the increase reported in few other States such as Tamil Nadu, Bihar, Karnataka and Odisha. Tamil Nadu in particular recorded the highest increase of 1.6 lakh, which is more than the 1.53 lakh decline reported in Uttar Pradesh. The latter in particular saw a sharp decline in undergraduate enrolments, accompanied by an almost similar increase in enrolments in Diploma courses – a trend not noticed in other major States **(Chart 5)**.

Programme type-wise analysis showed that the decline was in Arts, Sciences, and Commerce **(Chart 4)**.

Unexplained drop

Data for the charts were sourced from All India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE) reports released by the Ministy of Education. With inputs from Gauri Singavarapu, Gandla Sneha and Sachin Swaraj, who are interning with The Hindu's Data team

CHART 1: This chart shows the overall enrolment and enrolment in undergraduate (UG) courses. UG enrolments declined for the first time in 2023-24. *Value within brackets is GER*



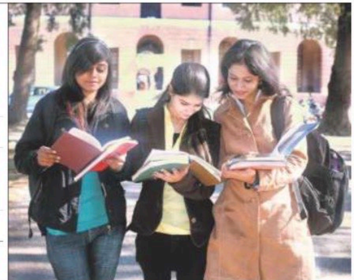


CHART 2: The gender-wise number of students enrolled in UG courses show that the decline in 2023-24 was noticed only among male students

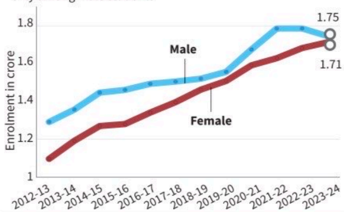


CHART 4: Among the top five types of programmes with highest number of enrollments, Arts, Science and Commerce saw declines

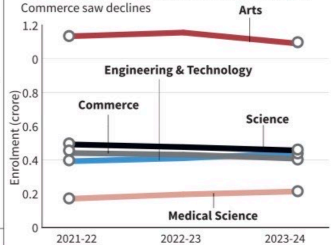
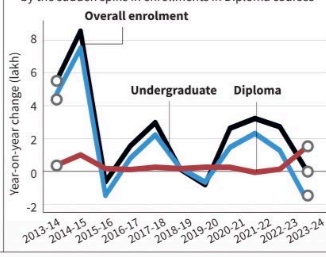


CHART 3: This chart shows the changes in student enrolments in UG courses in the 10 States with highest number of enrolments. Tamil Nadu's sharp increase offset the overall decline in UG enrolments

% Fall -8 -3 0 +3 +8 % Rise

State	2019-2020	2020-2021	2021-2022	2022-2023	2023-2024
U.P.	-0.66	+1.47	+2.31	+1.27	-1.53
Maharashtra	+0.41	+1.01	+0.05	+1.90	-1.85
T.N.	+0.96	-1.28	+0.29	+1.01	+1.60
Bihar	+1.22	+5.20	+2.80	-0.12	+0.89
Karnataka	+1.57	+1.54	+0.37	+1.34	+0.59
Rajasthan	+0.32	+1.78	+1.64	-1.08	+0.38
M.P.	+1.90	+3.03	+0.82	-1.38	+0.07
W.B.	+0.64	+0.03	+3.94	-0.52	-1.84
Andhra	+1.26	+1.13	-0.37	-0.94	-0.42
Telangana	-0.23	+1.73	+0.20	+0.75	+0.84

CHART 5: Uttar Pradesh was a standout case, where the sharp decline in UG courses was offset almost completely by the sudden spike in enrollments in Diploma courses



1. Context (GS II – Education | GS II – Social Sector Development)

The latest All India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE) 2023–24 reports a decline in undergraduate enrolment for the first time since 2011, despite an overall rise in higher education enrolment and Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER).

2. UPSC Value Addition

I. All India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE)

* Annual survey conducted by the Ministry of Education.
* India's primary database for higher education covering enrolment, institutions, faculty, infrastructure and educational outcomes.

II. Important Data

* Overall higher education enrolment: 4.50 crore (+3.7 lakh; +0.8% over 2022–23).
* Undergraduate enrolment: 3.45 crore, down by 93,000 (0.27%)—the first decline since 2011.
* Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER): Increased from 29.5 to 30.02.
* Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) covered: Increased from 56,180 to 59,533.
* Male UG enrolment: Declined by 2.2%.
* Female UG enrolment: Increased by 1.8%.
* Largest decline in UG enrolment: Maharashtra (-6%) and Uttar Pradesh (-3%).
* Largest increase in UG enrolment: Tamil Nadu (+1.6 lakh).
* Programme-wise decline: Arts, Science and Commerce; Medical Sciences registered a marginal increase.

Global wars delaying FTA negotiations

The deals facing various degrees of delays include separate free trade agreements with the Gulf Cooperation Council countries, Israel, and the Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union, cumulatively accounting for about $243 billion worth of trade for India, or about 20% of its total trade

T.C.A. Sharad Raghavan
NEW DELHI

The ongoing wars in the world have led to varying degrees of delays in the negotiations of at least three separate trade deals that India is working on, sources in the government have confirmed.

These deals involve countries that cumulatively account for about 20% of India's total trade.

These negotiations are on separate FTAs with the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, Israel, and the Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union.

"The GCC team had come to Delhi for the signing of the Terms of Reference (ToR) of the deal and so it is our turn to go there for the round of negotiation," a senior official in the Ministry of Commerce and Industry told *The Hindu*. "But with all this happening [the ongoing war in West Asia], that visit is pending."

Commerce Minister Piyush Goyal and the Secretary General of the GCC, Jasem Mohamed Albudaiwi, on February 24, 2026, formally launched negotiations for a free trade agreement (FTA) between India and the GCC countries – Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates.

However, later that month, the U.S. launched its attack on Iran.

As a result, the first round of negotiations is yet to take place.

"This FTA is of particular importance for India not just as a strategic one, but also because of access," the official said. "It will mean that any one of the ports of the GCC countries will give Indian exporters access to all the other countries."

War risk

India's trade deals facing delays because of global wars

In $ billion, unless specified

	Exports	Imports	Total Trade	Share in India's Total Trade
GCC	55.7	122.9	178.7	14.70%
EAEU	5.1	55.6	60.7	5%
Israel	2.2	1.7	3.9	0.30%
Total	63	180.3	243.3	20%

Source: Ministry of Commerce and Industry • Note: GCC - Gulf Cooperation Council; EAEU - Eurasian Economic Union

The negotiations regarding the India-Israel FTA, too, are facing similar delays. The ToR for the deal was signed in Tel Aviv in November 2025 by Mr. Goyal and Israel's Economy Minister Nir Barkat. The first round of negotiations took place in February 2026 in New Delhi and the second round was to be in May in Tel Aviv.

However, the war in the region delayed these talks as well and changed the location. Talks have only now resumed, with the Israeli negotiating team currently in New Delhi until July 23 to discuss the deal.

"Our team was to go there, but safety was obviously an issue," the official explained.

He added that similar concerns are leading to delays in India's in-person negotiations with the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) as well. The EAEU comprises Russia, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Belarus and Armenia.

"The first round of the EAEU FTA was held in November 2025 and the second round in Moscow was held all the way in June 2026," he explained. "The back-end talks are progressing well, but actual visits are becoming difficult to coordinate especially now that Ukraine has intensified its counteroffensive."

India conducts $60.7 billion worth of annual trade with the EAEU nations, predominantly with Russia. It has a total annual trade of about $178.7 billion with the GCC countries and $3.9 billion with Israel.

In total, therefore, the wars are delaying negotiations on trade deals involving about $243 billion worth of trade for India, or about 20% of India's total trade.

1. Context (GS II – International Relations | GS III – Indian Economy – International Trade)
Ongoing geopolitical conflicts in West Asia and Eastern Europe have delayed India's Free Trade Agreement (FTA) negotiations with the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), Israel and the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), affecting trade partnerships accounting for nearly 20% of India's total merchandise trade.

2. UPSC Value Addition
I. Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC)
* Established: 1981
* Headquarters: Riyadh, Saudi Arabia
* Members: Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE).
* Objective: Promote economic, political and security cooperation among Gulf countries.

II. Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU)
* Established: 2015
* Headquarters: Moscow, Russia (Eurasian Economic Commission)
* Members: Russia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Armenia and Kyrgyzstan.
* Objective: Ensure free movement of goods, services, capital and labour among member states.

III. Important Data
* Trade with GCC: US$178.7 billion (≈14.7% of India's total trade).
* Trade with EAEU: US$60.7 billion (≈5%).
* Trade with Israel: US$3.9 billion.
* Total trade affected: US$243.3 billion, accounting for ~20% of India's total trade.

3. Key Points
I. Geopolitical conflicts have disrupted physical negotiations, delaying the conclusion of FTAs despite continued technical-level discussions.
II. The India–GCC FTA is strategically important as it would provide Indian exporters wider market access across all six Gulf countries through a single agreement.
III. Delays in the India–Israel and India–EAEU FTAs may affect India's efforts to diversify export markets, strengthen supply chains and improve economic resilience.
IV. Timely conclusion of these FTAs would enhance India's trade competitiveness, attract investment and support its objective of deeper integration into global value chains.

FIFA WORLD CUP 2026

23RD FIFA WORLD CUP™

★ THE BIGGEST FIFA WORLD CUP EVER ★

FIFA
WORLD CUP
2026

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UNITED STATES | CANADA | MEXICO

TOURNAMENT AT A GLANCE

TEAMS	FORMAT	TOTAL MATCHES	TOURNAMENT DATES	VENUES
48	12 groups of 4 teams	**104**	11 JUNE – 19 JULY 2026	**16**
Largest number of teams in FIFA World Cup history	Round of 32 introduced	Largest number of matches in FIFA World Cup history		Across the three host nations

THE FINAL

SPAIN **1 - 0** ARGENTINA

Winning Goal:
Mikel Oyarzabal (63')

SPAIN BEAT ARGENTINA 1-0

CHAMPIONS

SPAIN
WINNERS

Spain have won their second FIFA World Cup title
(First: 2010 | Second: 2026)

INDIVIDUAL AWARDS

GOLDEN BALL
Best Player

RODRI
(SPAIN)

GOLDEN BOOT
Top Scorer

KYLIAN MBAPPÉ
(FRANCE)
10 GOALS

GOLDEN GLOVE
Best Goalkeeper

UNAI SIMÓN
(SPAIN)

BEST YOUNG PLAYER
Outstanding Young Player

PAU CUBARSÍ
(SPAIN)

KEY FACTS

- This was the 23rd edition of the FIFA World Cup.
- First FIFA World Cup to feature 48 teams.
- First edition to introduce a Round of 32 in the knockout stage.
- Largest FIFA World Cup ever in terms of teams (48) and matches (104).
- Hosted by three nations: United States, Canada and Mexico.