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School education has lost its way

Cluster, block and district-level institutions face acute staff shortage and systemic exhaustion



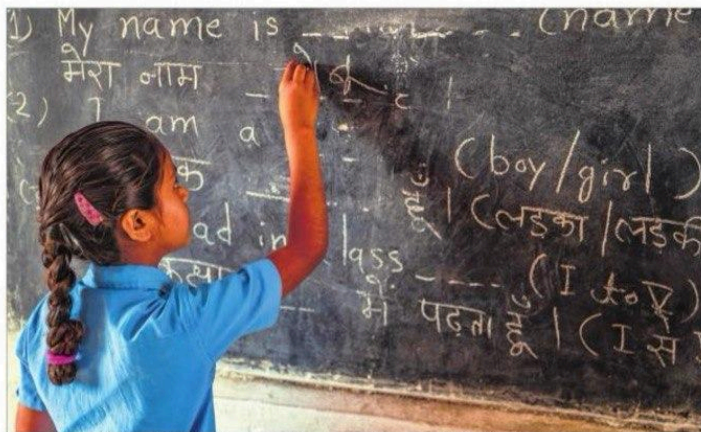
KRISHNA KUMAR
FORMER DIRECTOR, NCERT

SCHOOL infrastructure has once again claimed some space in the media. The last time it stayed in the news long enough to matter was in the mid-1980s, when a sensitive education secretary at the Centre put into effect Operation Blackboard. The idea was to enable primary schools to have the minimum requirements for practising active pedagogy.

It was the first time that plastic globes, *tablas* and children's literature found a place in the supply list for primary schools. Small scissors and hand-held magnifying lenses were still not regarded as necessary and binoculars were light years away. Much has changed over the last 40 years, but small children are not supposed to learn by doing much with their hands as they used to in the 'basic' schools of the post-Independence era. Computers and AI are priorities. The news that European nations have banned them in elementary classes has not filtered down to state-level policymakers.

Radical expansion of the system occurred under the auspices of two flagship programmes: DPEP (District Primary Education Programme) and SSA (Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan). DPEP was launched in 1994 in response to an increasing social demand and a global consensus that also brought funds. It was followed by a more carefully planned SSA, which later became a vehicle for the implementation of the Right to Education (RTE) Act.

Both these programmes resulted in a massive growth of enrolment, retention and infrastructure. Dream-like decentralised



MISSION : Operation Blackboard was aimed at providing essential facilities in primary schools. ISTOCK

governance featured cluster, block and district-level institutions — CRCs (cluster resource centres), BRCs (block resource centres), DIETs (district institutes of education and training) — to support pedagogic effort. Today, these structures face acute staff shortage and systemic exhaustion. Recent news reports about Punjab show that DIETs are running with less than half their staff strength. New officials don't remember what exactly the cluster and block-level resource centres were meant for.

This is nothing unusual. Civil servants come and go, programmes carry on. The newly appointed have little time to read old reports. Once I asked an MED student to find out how many officers serving the Directorate of Education in New Delhi were familiar with reports written over the previous decade. In her survey, just one elderly officer showed signs of vague familiarity with these reports. The rest said they had no time to read.

Little wonder that no one involved in elementary education remembers the Anil Bordia committee report. It was an attempt to consolidate the gains of SSA.

A seasoned and distinguished

Frequent holidays and official duties don't allow teachers to focus on teaching.

bureaucrat, the late Bordia was the architect of Operation Blackboard. He knew that the old directorates were in no mood to own and sustain the innovations of SSA. After all, it was a mission, with project-style funding and implementation, implying expedited procedures to meet deadlines. When its growth began to slow down, the structures created under its auspices had no state guardianship left. The committee headed by Bordia went into minute details in order to

present a blueprint for "harmonising" colonial-era directorates with SSA's mission-mode attainments. It is a brilliant report, but no one reads it now. Schools with locked libraries, outcome-driven testing and teacher shortages are back. Adding to the children's woes, many teachers are away on SIR (Special Intensive Revision) duty.

From teacher recruitment to construction work and school supplies, SSA created a parallel system. It was exciting to watch its progress, even as one knew that when SSA ended, an uneasy mix of old and new practices would stymie the system. That is precisely what happened. After the passage of the RTE Act, SSA began to slow down and eventually it was merged into the Samagra Shiksha Abhiyan, which was meant to cover secondary, not just primary, education, with stingier funding for the latter. The growth of private schools and the introduction of English-medium teaching without adequate pedagogic support led to new distortions.

Sporadic reports in recent weeks have drawn public attention to the condition of schools in many parts of the country.

Although these reports are patchy, they indicate that children's education is not in good health. Recruitment of teachers is sluggish, and multiple cadres persist because appointments made under DPEP and SSA have not been regularised. The problem of staff shortage in schools has become chronic, and is further exacerbated by deployment of teachers for "official" duties like SIR. No one in authority worries about the impact a teacher's absence from school has on children's learning.

The RTE law was supposed to inaugurate a new chapter in India's social history. The chapter did open up new, unprecedented vistas — like reservation for the poor in private schools — but older tendencies proved tenacious. Many factors weakened the RTE's implementation, especially the clauses covering quality. These clauses depended on the quality of training institutions. An overwhelming majority of them are privately owned and the government's regulatory authority could not control their ways.

The JS Verma Commission's sharp report on teacher training institutes now spends its peaceful afterlife on the Internet. In any case, the focus has shifted to maintenance of showpieces and shiny islands. The system has acquiesced to the wider culture of competition that merges into coaching for coveted courses. This ecology cares little for the vast majority. Historically, this is not new, but it is a disappointing reversal to the pre-RTE cultural ethos.

Globally, too, it shows that our trajectory has little to do with *viksit* countries. Even in an absolutely basic matter like the importance of maintaining a regular teaching routine, we prefer the event-management model. Frequent holidays and official duties don't allow teachers to focus on teaching. School closures are common. The BRICS dignitaries won't know that Delhi schools were closed during their visit.

18. राष्ट्रीय शिक्षा नीति 2020 धारणीय विकास लक्ष्य-4 (2030) के साथ अनुरूपता में है। उसका ध्येय भारत में शिक्षा प्रणाली की पुनःसंरचना और पुनःस्थापना है। इस कथन का समालोचनात्मक निरीक्षण कीजिए। (उत्तर 250 शब्दों में दीजिये)

National Education Policy 2020 is in conformity with the Sustainable Development Goal-4 (2030). It intends to restructure and reorient education system in India. Critically examine the statement. (Answer in 250 words) 15

- Q18. स्कूली शिक्षा के महत्त्व के बारे में जागरूकता उत्पन्न किए बिना, बच्चों की शिक्षा में प्रेरणा-आधारित पद्धति के संवर्धन में निःशुल्क और अनिवार्य बाल शिक्षा का अधिकार अधिनियम, 2009 अपर्याप्त है। विश्लेषण कीजिए। (250 शब्दों में उत्तर दीजिए)

The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009 remains inadequate in promoting incentive-based system for children's education without generating awareness about the importance of schooling. Analyse.

(Answer in 250 words) 15

1. School Education Has Lost Its Way

Source: *The Tribune*

GS: GS-2 — Education, Governance, Social Sector

Context

- India has successfully expanded **school access, enrolment and infrastructure**, but the institutional system required to sustain **quality teaching and learning** has weakened.
- The priority is therefore to strengthen the **academic support system, teacher availability, teacher education and classroom teaching time** that underpin meaningful learning.

1. Expansion of School Education and Institutional Support

- District Primary Education Programme (DPEP), 1994:** Strengthened elementary education through decentralised planning and district-level interventions.
- Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA):** Expanded access, enrolment, retention and school infrastructure while developing an academic-support network.
- Academic support institutions: Cluster Resource Centres (CRCs), Block Resource Centres (BRCs) and District Institutes of Education and Training (DIETs)** were intended to provide continuous teacher training, academic guidance and school-level support.
- Right to Education (RTE) Act, 2009:** Established free and compulsory education for children aged **6–14 years**, consolidating the rights-based approach to elementary education.

2. Erosion of the Institutional and Academic Support System

- **DIETs and academic centres:** Inadequate staffing has reduced their capacity to provide sustained professional support to teachers; the piece highlights instances in Punjab where some DIETs have operated with **less than half of sanctioned staff**.
- **Institutional continuity:** Successive reforms and restructuring have weakened the continuity of some of the institutional arrangements developed during the expansion of elementary education.
- **Teacher cadres:** Multiple cadres created under different programmes have contributed to administrative complexity.
- **Academic function:** Institutions intended primarily for **pedagogical support and teacher development** need to regain their academic role.

3. Teacher Availability and Loss of Teaching Time

- **System scale:** UDISE+ 2024–25 records **14.71 lakh schools, 24.69 crore students and 1.01 crore teachers**.
- **Single-teacher schools:** **1.04 lakh schools** have only one teacher, highlighting continuing issues of teacher availability and distribution.
- **Non-teaching responsibilities:** Deployment of teachers for administrative and other official duties reduces the time available for classroom teaching.
- **Quality implication:** The issue is therefore not only the aggregate number of teachers but their **availability at the school level, distribution and time devoted to teaching**.

4. From Access to Quality Learning

- Expansion of infrastructure and enrolment does not automatically translate into **learning outcomes**.
- **Teacher education:** Quality pre-service and in-service training is essential for improving classroom pedagogy.
- **Academic mentoring:** Functioning CRCs, BRCs and DIETs are necessary for continuous professional development and support.
- **Teaching over administrative activity:** School functioning needs to give primacy to **regular classroom instruction**, rather than allowing administrative duties, events and other activities to displace teaching.
- **Technology and infrastructure:** These should strengthen teaching and learning rather than substitute for **trained teachers and effective pedagogy**.

5. Strengthening the School-Education System

- **Revitalise DIETs, BRCs and CRCs** through adequate staffing and clearly defined academic responsibilities.
- **Address teacher shortages and uneven deployment**, particularly in single-teacher schools.

- **Protect instructional time** by minimising teachers' deployment for non-teaching duties.
- **Strengthen teacher education** through effective professional development and academic mentoring.
- **Maintain institutional continuity** while implementing new education reforms.
- Align infrastructure, technology and administrative reforms with the primary objective of **improving classroom learning**.

Lessons from India's smallholder farmers

The world of "development" often seems short of convincing answers. Conflict, climate stress, food insecurity, entrenched poverty, and fiscal pressure are exposing the limits of old models.

There is wisdom in starting with things as they are, which is where serious development must begin – with honest evidence, practical experience, and results that hold up. By that test, some of the most useful lessons for rural development may be coming, not from donor strategies, but from India's smallholder farmers.

Across rural India, farmers, women's groups, producer organisations, and rural enterprises are showing that smallholder agriculture can move beyond poverty and subsistence towards prosperity through organisation, commercial opportunity, and resilience at scale. While the story is not finished, it is one of the most important development stories of our time because India is showing, in ways few countries have matched at scale, that even in resource-constrained contexts, rural transformation can be practical, inclusive and commercially serious. India's approaches are not perfect, but they are among the most impressive – combining infrastructure, enterprise development, skills, finance, and market access in increasingly commercial ways that can deliver results at scale.

However, challenges remain. Smallholder farmers – at the first mile of our food systems – continue to face unequal access to



Marc de Sousa-Shields

IFAD Country Director,
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India is an important voice in the Global South's rural development conversation

finance, technology, markets, land, water and relevant infrastructure. Climate change is adding pressure through less predictable rainfall, rising temperatures, and weakening soils. But these realities make India's experience all the more valuable, because they show why rural transformation cannot depend on isolated projects alone.

The lesson is simple but important: no single intervention is enough. Roads, irrigation, power and digital connectivity matter, but they only change lives when farmers can organise into collectives that give them real bargaining power, access to finance and technology, and the ability to reach markets and build viable food enterprises.

Redefining development

This is visible in programmes financed by the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), a specialised UN agency and long-standing partner of India. Examples from nearly five decades of the IFAD-India partnership include self-help groups accessing commercial credit in Maharashtra, which support thousands of enterprising rural women; a hub-and-spoke economic development model in Meghalaya; youth- and women-led farmer producer organisation enterprises in Uttarakhand; climate-resilient Zau farming in Mizoram which protects the environment as well as traditional communities; and engaging with the young people in Jammu and Kashmir, harnessing their entrepreneurial spirit, in order to unlock the region's vast agricultural potential.

India's experience is compelling because it has built much of the ecosystem needed to make those connections work through government bodies, NGOs, private enterprises, the Agri Stack digital public infrastructure, institutions such as NABARD, self-help groups, farmer producer organisations, cooperatives and micro, small and medium enterprises.

Together, they help smallholders access services, finance and markets, while digital tools improve efficiency and accountability. The new IFAD-India eight-year strategy, launched in May this year, is aligned with India's Viksit Bharat@2047 vision and built around strengthening that architecture.

India is an important voice in the Global South's rural development conversation, and that voice is increasingly taking on a broader leadership role. In the spirit of *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*, India's rural experience becomes a shared resource for the wider family of nations. As the only international financial institution devoted to rural transformation, with a presence in 92 countries, and many more as part of the wider UN system, the IFAD is how India's lessons travel beyond its borders. This does not mean India's models can be copied exactly. What can travel are the principles – build strong local institutions, connect them to markets and finance, invest in rural enterprises, use digital systems intelligently, and treat smallholders, including women and youth, as economic actors rather than passive beneficiaries.

Q14. समेकित कृषि प्रणाली क्या है ? भारत में छोटे और सीमांत किसानों के लिए यह कैसे लाभदायक हो सकती है ? (250 शब्दों में उत्तर दीजिए)

What is Integrated Farming System ? How is it helpful to small and marginal farmers in India ? (Answer in 250 words)

15

2. Lessons from India's Smallholder Farmers

Source: *The Hindu*

GS: GS-3 — Agriculture, Rural Development, Inclusive Growth

Context

- India's predominantly smallholder agricultural structure faces constraints of **scale, resources and market access**, but collective organisation and institutional support have created pathways towards more productive, commercially viable and resilient rural livelihoods.
- The broader focus is on **India's experience of rural transformation and its relevance for other developing countries**.

1. Smallholder Agriculture: The Structural Challenge

- **86% of operational holdings** are small and marginal holdings, according to the Agriculture Census 2015–16.
- The average operational holding was about **1.08 hectares**, limiting individual farmers' access to economies of scale.
- Fragmentation creates difficulties in accessing **credit, technology, irrigation, machinery, storage and remunerative markets**.
- Climate variability further increases risks to smallholder incomes and agricultural productivity.

2. Collective Organisation to Overcome Small-Farm Constraints

- **Farmer Producer Organisations (FPOs)** enable aggregation of produce, collective procurement, better market access and stronger bargaining power.
- **Self-Help Groups (SHGs)** strengthen savings, credit access and livelihood-based enterprises, particularly among rural women.
- **Cooperatives** provide mechanisms for collective production, service delivery and marketing.
- Collective action enables small farmers to obtain **economies of scale without requiring individual land consolidation**.

- FPOs and other collectives can also facilitate **grading, processing, packaging and value addition**, enabling greater participation in agricultural value chains.

3. Building an Integrated Rural Economic Ecosystem

- **Infrastructure:** Roads, irrigation, electricity, storage and digital connectivity create the basic conditions for productive rural activity.
- **Finance:** Institutional credit enables investment in agricultural inputs, technology and rural enterprises.
- **Technology and skills:** Extension services, digital platforms and skill development improve productivity and market participation.
- **Market integration:** Linkages with processors, institutional buyers and organised markets create opportunities beyond primary agricultural production.
- **Institutional convergence:** Government agencies, NABARD, FPOs, SHGs, cooperatives, MSMEs, private enterprises and civil-society organisations contribute to different components of rural transformation.

4. From Smallholder Farming to Rural Enterprise and Resilience

- Smallholders can increasingly participate as **producers, entrepreneurs and value-chain participants**, rather than remaining dependent primarily on welfare support.
- **Women and youth** can drive rural entrepreneurship through SHGs, FPOs, skills and technology-based enterprises.
- **Value addition and diversification** can create additional income opportunities beyond primary cultivation.
- Climate-resilient agriculture and sustainable management of **soil, water and local ecosystems** are essential for long-term livelihood security.
- IFAD-supported initiatives in **Maharashtra, Meghalaya, Uttarakhand and Mizoram** demonstrate locally adapted approaches combining livelihoods, institutions, enterprise development and resilience.

5. Lessons for the Global South

- **Strong grassroots institutions** can improve the effectiveness of public investment and development finance.
- **Collective organisation** can address several disadvantages associated with fragmented and small-scale production.
- Rural transformation is strengthened when **infrastructure, finance, technology, skills and markets** operate as an integrated system.
- India's experience provides **adaptable principles rather than a single replicable model** for developing countries with large smallholder populations.

Marathi film *Gondhal* is India's pick for Oscars 2027

Press Trust of India
MUMBAI

Marathi film *Gondhal* has been chosen as India's official entry to the Oscars 2027, the Film Federation of India announced on Friday.

Written and directed by Santosh Davakhar, the film is set in rural Maharashtra and plays out over a night of a traditional ritual centred around a newlywed couple.

The film was chosen as India's submission for Best International Feature category for the 99th Academy Awards from a list of 33 films, said P. Sheshadri, chairperson of the selection committee.

"This year we've had four Marathi films, 14 Hindi films, and other films, all the films were good. It's a happy moment for Indian cinema, for Marathi cinema. This time the official



A still from *Gondhal*. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

entry is *Gondhal*," Mr. Sheshadri said at a press conference here.

"We've watched 33 films in last 10 days of different languages. There were many other good films for which we were debating about. *Angh* and *Ikkis* were in top three list apart from *Gondhal*," he added.

"*Gondhal* had its world premiere at the 56th International Film Festival of India (IFFI) in Goa in 2025 in the Indian Panorama segment. Davakhar won the

Silver Peacock for Best Director at the festival.

Set against the midnight carnival of the ritualistic Gondhal dance in rural Maharashtra, the movie follows Suman, a woman trapped in an oppressive marriage, who plots a murder and an escape with her forbidden lover, blurring the lines between devotion, deception and fate.

No Indian winner so far

No Indian film has managed to win in the Best International Feature film segment so far, which was earlier known as the Best Foreign Film category.

Only three Indian films have received nominations in the category – Mehmood Khan's *Mother India*, Mira Nair's *Salaam Bombay* and Ashutosh Gowariker's *Lagaan*.

The 99th Oscars will take place on Sunday, March 14, 2027.

Source: PTI

GS: GS-1 — Indian Culture, Cinema and Cultural Heritage

Context

- *Gondhal*, a Marathi film based on the traditional **Gondhal ritual of rural Maharashtra**, has been selected as **India's official submission for the 99th Academy Awards (2027)**.
- It was selected from **33 Indian films** for the **International Feature Film** category.

1. How India Selects Its Oscar Entry

- The **Film Federation of India (FFI)** selects one film every year as India's official submission.
- For 2027, a **14-member jury chaired by filmmaker P. Sheshadri** selected *Gondhal*.
- Other participating countries also select **one official film** through their respective Academy-approved selection bodies.

2. International Feature Film Category

- The **International Feature Film** category covers eligible feature films produced outside the United States with predominantly non-English dialogue.
- India's selected film competes with the official submissions of other countries in this category.
- Selection as India's official submission **does not mean automatic Oscar nomination**.

3. Selection After the Country Submission

- The **Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences** examines the submitted films for eligibility.
- Academy voting produces a **shortlist of 15 films**.
- From the shortlist, **5 films receive the final Oscar nominations**.
- The winner is subsequently selected through Academy voting.

4. Gondhal and India's Record

- Directed by **Santosh Davakhar**, the film had its world premiere at the **56th International Film Festival of India (2025)** and won the **Silver Peacock Award for Best Director**.
- It is the **fourth Marathi film** selected as India's official submission, after *Shwaas*, *Harishchandrachi Factory* and *Court*.
- India has received three nominations in this category: *Mother India*, *Salaam Bombay* and *Lagaan*; it has not yet won the International Feature Film Oscar.

• WILDLIFE

A Himalayan bird's calls are changing due to human noise: Why this matters

Vidheesha Kuntamalla

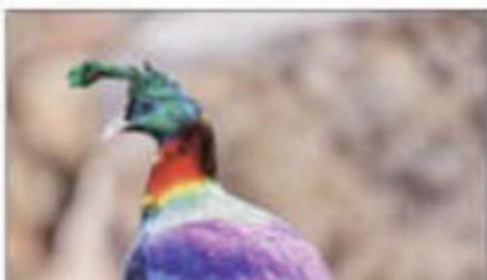
Dehradun, September 18

THE HIMALAYAN monal, the state bird of Uttarakhand, is a striking-looking landfowl found across the Himalayan mountains, including in Jammu and Kashmir, Himachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand and Sikkim.

While the ground-dwelling bird is not endangered, a study carried out by researchers at Hemvathi Bahuguna Garhwal University (HBGU) has found that the bird is changing its calls — because tourism and traffic are making its surroundings noisier. This could have implications for its success in mating, though the researchers, Rajeev Lochan, Dinesh Kumar Sharma and Anand Kumar, have not established this.

What did the study show?

To study the monal's calls, the researchers used passive acoustic monitoring devices, along with a microphone, across different seasons. They compared two areas within the Kedarnath Musk Deer Sanctuary — the Madmaheshwar Valley, which has relatively little human activity, and Chopta Valley, which



has roads, tourists, pilgrims and other visitors. They recorded hundreds of monal calls and compared them. The striking finding was that monals in the noisier area used higher-frequency calls.

Which of the following statements with regard to the arrival of Amur Falcons at Doyang Lake in Nagaland each year from Mongolia is/are correct ?

1. It showcases how sustained local conservation efforts can contribute to the arrival and protection of international migratory birds.
2. It reflects the global success of advanced tracking technologies that guide migratory birds back to their stopover sites.
3. It confirms that Amur Falcons have adapted to permanent residency in India due to favourable habitat changes.

Select the answer using the code given below :

- (a) 1 only
- (b) 1 and 2
- (c) 2 and 3
- (d) 3 only

4. Human Noise Alters the Calls of Himalayan Monal

Source: *The Indian Express*, September 18, 2026

GS: GS-3 — Environment, Biodiversity and Conservation

Context

- A study by **Hemvati Nandan Bahuguna Garhwal University** has found that human-generated noise is influencing the calling behaviour of the **Himalayan Monal** in Uttarakhand.
- It highlights an often-overlooked impact of human activity: **disturbance of wildlife communication**.

1. Himalayan Monal: Key Facts

- **Scientific name:** *Lophophorus impejanus*; a member of the **pheasant family (Phasianidae)**.
- **Habitat:** High-altitude Himalayan forests, alpine meadows and forest edges.
- **Indian distribution:** Jammu and Kashmir, Himachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand and Sikkim.
- **Identification:** Male has distinctive **iridescent plumage and a metallic-green crest**; female has comparatively subdued colours.
- **Conservation status:** IUCN: **Least Concern**; **Wild Life (Protection) Act, 1972: Schedule I**; **CITES: Appendix I**.
- **Significance:** **State bird of Uttarakhand**.

2. Findings of the Study

- **Study area:** Researchers monitored Monal calls in the **Kedarnath Musk Deer Sanctuary**.
- **Comparison:**
 - **Madmaheshwar Valley:** relatively low human activity.
 - **Chopta Valley:** greater influence of roads, tourists and pilgrims.
- **719 calls recorded:** Acoustic monitoring was used to compare calling patterns across the two environments.
- **Higher-frequency calls:** Monals in the noisier area shifted their calls towards **higher frequencies**, helping them communicate amid background noise.
- **Call duration:** Calls were also found to be **slightly longer** in the noisier environment.
- **Behavioural flexibility:** The findings indicate that Monals can **modify their vocal characteristics according to the surrounding acoustic environment**.
- **Limitation:** The study does not establish whether these changes ultimately affect **breeding success or survival**.

3. Why Does It Matter?

- **Communication:** Calls are important for social interaction and locating/responding to other individuals.
- **Reproduction:** Noise can mask mating-related calls, potentially affecting communication between males and females.
- **Conservation:** Human disturbance can therefore affect wildlife **even without direct habitat destruction**.

4. **Way Forward**

- **Noise management:** Control unnecessary vehicular, construction and tourism-related noise in sensitive habitats.
- **Responsible tourism:** Regulate visitor and pilgrimage activity around important wildlife areas.
- **Acoustic monitoring:** Include sound-based monitoring in wildlife-management programmes.
- **Wildlife-sensitive planning:** Consider animal communication and breeding behaviour while planning roads and tourism infrastructure in Himalayan landscapes.

No hard ceilings

A rise in minimum PF pension will protect the worse-off among the retired

The Union Cabinet's approval to raise the wage ceiling for mandatory coverage under the Employees' Provident Fund Organisation (EPFO) from ₹15,000 to ₹25,000, though belated, is commendable. The BJP-led government has finally responded to this long-standing demand of workers in the organised sector. Around 51 lakh additional employees may be brought under the PF fold, which has around 7.98 crore contributing members. Those in the wage slab of ₹15,000-₹25,000 will now be covered under the Employees' Pension Scheme (EPS), 2026. Although Union Labour Minister Mansukh Mandaviya cited a government survey as the basis for the increase, the 12-year delay in implementing it should have been avoided. The Minister, who said that the average salary in private establishments was ₹23,000, should also make the survey's findings public for a better understanding of the country's overall wage situation. With some concerns having been raised that not every employer may be willing to make the additional contributions required after the revision, the government must ensure that all employers comply with the law.

So far, the government has been silent on revising the EPS minimum pension of ₹1,000 fixed

5. Employees' Provident Fund Organisation: Expansion of Social Security Coverage

Source: *The Hindu*, September 2026

GS: GS-2 — Social Security, Labour and Employment

Context

- The Union Cabinet has raised the **wage ceiling for mandatory Employees' Provident Fund Organisation (EPFO) coverage** from ₹15,000 to ₹25,000 per month, effective **17 September 2026**.
- The revision is expected to bring **more than 51 lakh additional employees** under mandatory social-security coverage.

1. Employees' Provident Fund Organisation: Basics and Scale

- **EPFO** is a statutory social-security organisation under the **Ministry of Labour and Employment**.
- It administers three major schemes:
 - **Employees' Provident Fund (EPF)**: retirement savings.
 - **Employees' Pension Scheme (EPS)**: pension benefits.
 - **Employees' Deposit Linked Insurance Scheme (EDLI)**: employment-linked life insurance.
- **Current scale**: about **7.98 crore contributing members**, associated with around **7.68 lakh contributing establishments**.
- **Pension coverage**: around **82 lakh pensioners** receive benefits under EPS.

2. What Has Changed?

- **Mandatory wage ceiling**: increased from **₹15,000 to ₹25,000 per month** after the previous revision in September 2014.
- Employees earning **₹15,000–₹25,000 per month** in covered establishments will now come within the mandatory social-security framework, subject to applicable scheme provisions.
- Newly covered employees will gain access to **EPF savings, EPS pension and EDLI insurance protection**.
- **Additional coverage**: more than **51 lakh employees** are expected to be brought into the system.

3. Why Was the Ceiling Raised?

- The ₹15,000 ceiling had remained unchanged for **12 years**.

- Since 2014, **wages, incomes and formal employment have increased**, making the earlier threshold less aligned with prevailing wage levels.
- The revision seeks to expand statutory social security alongside the growth of formal employment.

4. Expected Impact

- **Workers:** wider access to retirement savings, pension and insurance protection.
- **Formalisation:** stronger linkage between formal employment and statutory social security.
- **Retirement security:** greater participation in contributory savings can improve long-term financial protection.
- **Employers:** additional statutory contribution obligations for newly covered employees.
- **Government:** annual expenditure is estimated at **₹11,339 crore**, compared with about **₹10,250 crore currently**; five-year expenditure is estimated at **₹56,696 crore**.

Nearly 2,000 marriage records in Odisha manipulated to claim welfare aid: report

Satyasundar Barik
BHUBANESWAR

Nearly 2,000 instances of alleged manipulation of marriage records to fraudulently claim marriage assistance under the Nirman Shramik scheme have come to light during an audit of the funds of the Odisha Building and Other Construction Workers' Welfare Board.

The draft audit report on the 'Implementation of PARESHRAM and Nirman Shramik Portal in the State' is expected to be part of the Comptroller and Auditor General's Audit report for 2024-2025.

A day earlier, based on the findings of the same audit report, *The Hindu* reported on how 2,487 construction workers were declared dead and their

On analysis of the legacy database, it was noticed that 676 marriage certificates had registration dates prior to the date of marriage, stated the audit report

nominees were paid death assistance, even though the workers continued to draw subsidised foodgrain under the National Food Security Act and the State Food Security Scheme after their recorded deaths.

"On analysis of the legacy database, it was noticed that 676 marriage certificates had registration dates prior to the date of marriage. Similarly, in five sampled districts, it was found that 126 marriage registration dates were prior

to the date of marriage," states the draft report.

It adds that after the Nirman Shramik Portal went live, 1,257 such cases were found across the State and 333 in sampled districts, leading to disbursement of ₹6.29 crore. "Audit found that system design flaws and lack of validation allowed ineligible individuals to exploit the scheme, violating marriage registration protocols," the draft report states.

Blank registers

The report also notes that marriage certificate issue registers were maintained with blank pages and without recipient signatures at the Block Development Office, Khariar. "It was observed that 586 marriage benefits were disbursed in

BDO, Khariar amounting to ₹2.90 crore covering 2020-25 but details of the issued certificates were not available," it states.

The board provides ₹50,000 aid for the marriage of an unmarried registered female beneficiary or for the marriage of two unmarried daughters above 18 years of a registered construction worker. The board had amassed over ₹4,000 crore by 2024.

As per the Orissa Hindu Marriages and Registration Rules, 1960, the "parties to the marriage duly solemnised in accordance with the provisions of the Act shall within a period of 30 days from the date of solemnisation of the marriage compulsorily submit application in Form B before the Registrar for registration of the marriage".

6. Odisha Marriage-Assistance Scheme: Welfare Leakage and Ethical Governance

Source: *The Hindu*, September 2026

GS: GS-2 — Governance, Welfare Delivery | GS-4 — Ethics, Integrity and Probity

Context

- The **Odisha Building and Other Construction Workers' Welfare Board** provides marriage assistance under the **Nirman Shramik scheme**.
- An audit found manipulation of marriage records and irregular disbursement of benefits, raising concerns over **welfare leakage, administrative controls and ethical governance**.

1. Scheme and Key Findings

- **Nirman Shramik scheme**: provides **₹50,000 marriage assistance** to eligible registered construction workers' families.
- **Nearly 2,000 suspected cases** of manipulation of marriage records were identified.
- **676 marriage certificates** had registration dates earlier than the actual marriage dates.
- After the **Nirman Shramik Portal** became operational, **1,257 such cases** were detected, involving **₹6.29 crore** in disbursements.
- The audit identified **system-design flaws and inadequate validation** as major reasons enabling such irregularities.

2. Nature of Governance Failure

- **Weak verification**: Beneficiary eligibility and marriage records were not adequately cross-checked.
- **Poor internal controls**: System safeguards failed to prevent or flag suspicious claims.
- **Record-management deficiencies**: Blank registers, missing signatures and unavailable certificates weakened traceability.
- **Financial leakage**: Public funds were disbursed against potentially ineligible or fraudulent claims.
- **Weak accountability**: Deficiencies in supervision made it difficult to ensure responsibility for wrongful approvals.
- **Technology-governance gap**: Digitisation of the welfare process did not ensure the integrity of the underlying data.

3. Ethical Dimensions

- **Integrity**: Public records must reflect facts accurately; deliberate manipulation violates administrative integrity.

- **Probity:** Public funds are held in trust and must be used strictly for legitimate beneficiaries.
- **Accountability:** Officials involved in verification and sanction have a responsibility to prevent wrongful disbursement.
- **Impartiality and fairness:** Fraudulent beneficiaries can deprive genuinely eligible workers of limited welfare resources.
- **Responsibility towards the vulnerable:** Welfare schemes exist to protect vulnerable workers; leakage undermines their intended social purpose.
- **Public trust:** Misuse of welfare funds erodes citizens' confidence in public institutions.
- **Ethical use of technology:** Digital systems should strengthen transparency and accountability rather than merely automate existing administrative weaknesses.

4. Way Forward

- **Database cross-verification:** Link marriage-assistance applications with the official marriage-registration database before sanction.
- **Automated red flags:** Cases involving inconsistent dates or duplicate claims should be automatically flagged for verification.
- **Audit trails:** Maintain complete digital records of application, verification, approval and payment.
- **Social audit and grievance redressal:** Enable beneficiaries and local communities to identify wrongful inclusion or exclusion.
- **Fix responsibility:** Establish clear accountability at each verification and sanctioning stage.
- **Periodic independent audits:** Regular audits can detect systemic loopholes before they result in large-scale leakage.