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GS 2: POLITY, GOVERNANCE, SOCIAL JUSTICE, INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS/INSTITUTIONS

1. The deeper meaning of declining school enrolment

Context: As the world's most populous country, India hopes to reap its demographic dividend due to its burgeoning youth population. Demographers and policy planners always knew that this window of opportunity would remain open, but only for a limited time. Declining school enrolment over the past decade marks the beginning of the end of this period. This means that India may become older even before becoming rich. The United District Information System for Education Plus (U-DISE+) data for 2022-23 and 2023-24, which was released by the Ministry of Education on December 30, 2024, caused much consternation as it showed a 15.5 million drop (6%) in school enrolment since 2018-19.

Key points

- **Overview:** This could mark the beginning of the end of the India's demographic dividend and a population aging before it becomes rich.

- Current status:** *Official explanation* - Official sources have attributed the decline in enrolment to improvements in data collection. They explain that seeding Aadhaar numbers with enrolment eliminates multiple enrolments.

Significant drop in enrolment - School enrolment has plummeted by 24.51 million or 9.45% over the past decade.

Elementary-level decline - Elementary-level enrolment registered a pronounced fall of 18.7 million (13.45%). This level of education has been free and compulsory under the Right to Education (RTE) Act since 2009.

Secondary and senior secondary trends - Secondary-level enrolment declined by 1.43 million (3.75%). Senior secondary-level enrolment increased by 3.63 million (15.46%).
- Government and government-aided schools:** Enrolment in government and government-aided schools, which account for more than 65% of total school enrolment, recorded a significantly higher decline-

 - *Government schools* - Declined by 19.89 million (13.8%).
 - *Government-aided schools* - Declined by 4.95 million (16.41%).
- Private unaided schools:** Total enrolment increased by 1.61 million (2.03%). Senior secondary-level enrolment surged by 1.41 million (15.55%).
- Demographic factors and declining school enrolment:** *Decline in school-going population* - The 6-17 years age group declined by 17.30 million (5.78%) over the past decade.

Correlation between population and enrolment - Data show a statistically significant strong positive correlation between school enrolment and the population of the relevant age group. The decline in population explains 60.36% of the decline in enrolment.

Decline in the number of schools - The number of schools in India declined by 79,109, from 1.55 million (2017-18) to 1.47 million (2023-24), a 5.1% drop.
- Social impacts:** *Youth population and enrolment growth* - A burgeoning youth population is necessary for enrolment growth, which India has been experiencing until recently.

Population shift - It has now entered the phase when the population bulge is shifting to the right.

Immediate effect on elementary enrolment - Since the process began only recently, it is reflected rather sharply in elementary-level enrolment.

Gradual impact on higher education - The effect will gradually but firmly be felt in secondary and senior secondary-level enrolment and will finally impinge on higher education.

Shrinking working-age population - As is already the case in most developed countries, we will soon face the transition to a shrinking working-age population.

Need to maximize demographic dividend - This is disconcerting because it is happening sooner than expected.

India's challenge - Ideally, a country must reap as much demographic dividend as possible to generate much-needed income and wealth to support and sustain the burden of an ageing population.
- Conclusion:** Declining school enrolment has less to do with the change in data collection method than a shift in the demographic bulge to the right. Unless the 2021 Census, which is yet to begin, presents a different demographic trend, it could mark the beginning of the end of the demographic dividend for India.

2. Hit Refresh

Context: New Chief Election Commissioner Gyanesh Kumar has joined his office in a challenging moment for the Election Commission. There has been an ongoing controversy over the appointment, as leader of the opposition Rahul Gandhi has made a protest over the “midnight decision” public, alleging it was “disrespectful” and “discourteous” of the government to go ahead while the appointment process was being challenged. The EC has showed signs of an institutional fraying that is both the cause and result of a larger denting of public trust. In recent elections, the opposition has stepped up the decibel levels of questions about the fairness of the poll process.

Key points

- **Background of the controversial appointment:** *Allegations of Disrespect* - Leader of Opposition, Rahul Gandhi criticized the midnight decision as disrespectful and discourteous. Appointment process challenged legally, with claims of procedural impropriety.
Legal Context - Government followed a law enacted post-Supreme Court intervention. Controversy pending judicial resolution.
- **Polarized Political Landscape:** *Government vs. Opposition Dynamics* - BJP enters third term with reduced majority but continued electoral momentum. Opposition gains foothold but struggles to consolidate strategy.
EC's Role - Must navigate heightened tensions and ensure perceived neutrality.
- **Institutional Erosion of Trust:** *Historical Context* - TN Seshan (1990s) revitalized EC's constitutional mandate, but effectiveness has fluctuated since.
Recent Criticisms - Opposition questions EVM reliability, delays in publishing turnout data, and electoral roll discrepancies. Allegations often lack evidence but reflect broader distrust.
Outgoing CEC Rajiv Kumar's Concerns - EC is unfairly blamed for electoral losses and spread of rumours undermines credibility.
- **Recent Controversies:** *Model Code of Conduct (MCC) Violations (2019)* - Accusations of double standards in handling MCC breaches.
Dubious Precedent - EC issued notices to party presidents for leaders' remarks during Rajiv Kumar's tenure, raising questions about procedural fairness.
- **Way forward:** The EC needs to address apprehensions about its conduct in an open and transparent manner.
 - It must engage with all players and stakeholders.
 - It cannot appear either evasive or combative vis-a-vis the Opposition's concerns.The new CEC could begin by opening the doors of his institution to all those who might have a question and draft his responses in a tone that echoes the impartial voice of a constitutional authority, not that of an angry outburst by a party spokesperson.
- **Conclusion:** CEC Gyanesh Kumar inherits a complex mandate: managing a politically charged environment while restoring public trust in the EC. The success of his tenure will depend on his ability to navigate the dual challenges of political polarisation and institutional criticism.

3. Policing, Not Protection

Context: The question of a Uniform Civil Code (UCC) is extremely fraught in India. Non-marital relationships have never been debated within its purview. However, the Uttarakhand UCC's emphasis on live-in relationships and its regulations has brought forth many debates ranging from legal to social. While there are many complex legal questions that the domain of non-marital relations, including those among same sex partners, gives rise to, it is mistaken to assume that such relations have a single variant.

Key points

- **Debate over the Uniform Civil Code (UCC):** *Contentious Issue in India* - The UCC is a highly debated topic, with varied interpretations and implications across different states. Traditionally, UCC discussions have centred on marital relationships rather than non-marital or live-in relationships.
Emergence of Live-In Relationships - Non-marital cohabitation has historically been underexplored in legal debates. Recent debates have intensified due to specific cases (e.g. 2022 Shraddha Walker case) and media portrayal.
- **Legal and Social Evolution:** *Empirical Evidence and Media Influence* - Limited empirical studies exist; much of the understanding is anecdotal and derived from high-profile cases. Media and popular culture play significant roles in shaping public opinion on live-in relationships.
Judicial and Policy Engagement - Since the early 21st century, the judiciary, policymakers, feminists, and legal scholars have debated the status and rights of those in live-in relationships. The Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act (2005) broadened the conversation by including relations in marriage.
- **Multiple Relationship Models:** *Trial Marriages* - Cohabitation as a test before entering a formal marriage.
Alternative Unions - Live-in relationships as a distinct alternative to conventional marriage.
Secondary or Later-Life Relationships - Cohabitation involving divorced or widowed individuals.
- **Cultural and Traditional Practices:** In many parts of India, certain forms of non-marital relationships have historical and customary acceptance. Some arrangements include scenarios where one or both partners are already married, adding to the complexity.
- **Legal Implications of Varied Relationship Forms:** *Protection vs. Regulation* - The initial legal impetus was to protect women in secondary unions, particularly those in relationships with married men. Legal protections have been extended in limited forms (e.g. through the Malimath Committee's recommendations).
Judicial Interpretations - Landmark cases (Velusamy vs D Patchaiammal, Indra Sarma vs VK Sharma) reflect a trend toward a restricted legal definition of relationships in marriage. Such interpretations have narrowed the scope of protection offered to live-in partners.
- **Conclusion:** The inclusion of live-in relationships in the Uttarakhand UCC has opened a complex legal and social debate. While protection for vulnerable partners is essential, over-regulation risks infringing on personal freedoms. Instead of imposing rigid frameworks, a more nuanced approach—one that balances legal safeguards with individual autonomy—may be better suited to address the evolving nature of relationships in India.

4. Quakes may well sharpen India's seismic readiness

Context: Two years ago, on February 6, 2023, the people of Türkiye and Syria were jolted out of their sleep. At least 17,000 were killed, with their numbers mounting within minutes, as a great earthquake shook those countries in the early hours after 4 a.m., at 7.8 on a scale of 0 to 10. A second jolt came like a collaborator of the first, nine hours later, destroying whatever buildings stood on or around the scene of the first trauma.

Key points

- **Overview:** India must shake itself out of its perilous innocence and be prepared for the reality beneath the earth's crust.
- **Fault Lines:** *Expression Usage* - 'Fault lines' is an expression that we come across and use as we might 'glaciers' or 'deserts. That is, without realising that it refers to an intensely volatile and totally unpredictable phenomenon, like the temper of the proverbial sleeping dragon or demon.
Location and Structure - Fault lines lie between the 15 log-jammed major tectonic plates on which the earth's thin crust sits.
Dormancy - These lines can slumber for decades, even centuries, quietly, one may say so 'sweetly', that their very existence can be forgotten by all except seismologists.
Awakening and Impact - Until the fault lines stir, rise, shake and then go on to mutilate, destroy and kill whatever lies on and along those lines. Depending on the degree of the awakened one's temper, the fury lasts or abates till such time as it lasts or abates.
- **Impacts of nature:** *Formation of the Himalayas* - India's Indian Plate pressing onto the Eurasian Plate sculpted the Himalaya.
Fault Line Location - The fault line involved runs right along the Great Himalayan Arc that stretches from Kashmir to the Northeast. It also implicates adjacent tracts in Pakistan, the Tibetan Autonomous Region of China, Nepal, and Bhutan.
- **Challenges:** *Challenges in prediction* - The Editorial noted, 'Predicting the day and time is outside the ambit of current science.' The best hope is insulation against projected damage.
Infrastructure concerns - Infrastructure development in the Himalayan region must consider landslides, glacial lake outbursts, and the fragility of the region. Every project, whether a power plant or dam, must factor in the imminence of a major earthquake.
- **Way forward:** *Seismic building insurance* - Setting up a seismic building insurance scheme wherein premiums for insuring against collapse can be offered and encouraged.
Cost assessment for disaster response - Doing an assessment of the costs of rescue, temporary sheltering, and rehabilitation zone-wise, of dislocated populations.
International collaboration - Fast-forwarding collaboration with countries that are experts in the field on earthquake anticipation through sensors and architecture nostrums. This would involve expenses on hiring consultants.
- **Conclusion:** All this sounds grim. But we should tell ourselves that there is the 'good news' that we are, as of this moment, ahead of the big seismic shock that has been anticipated by seismologists. We are capable of planning with some composure, even as we recover from the shock of February 17, not in a post-shock trauma accompanied by fiscal crippling. And, we have an institutional advantage in the shape of a Ministry of Earth Sciences and a Disaster Management Authority waiting to be harnessed in any scheme towards seismic resistance.