



MONTHLY EDITORIALS

02-09-2024 to 30-09-2024

INDIA'S NEIGHBOURHOOD POLICY

India's neighbourhood policy has undergone significant challenges and changes from 2008 to 2024.

Between 2008 and 2010, India's neighbourhood saw epoch-making events, with India playing a catalytic role in promoting democracy in Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and the Maldives. India's diplomatic efforts were instrumental in shaping positive outcomes, such as the defeat of the LTTE in Sri Lanka and stabilizing democracy in Bangladesh and the Maldives.

By 2024, however, the neighbourhood landscape has drastically changed. In Bangladesh, Sheikh Hasina's government collapsed amidst an economic downturn, while in Sri Lanka, President Gotabaya Rajapaksa's regime faced severe anti-government protests. Myanmar's military coup in 2021 further destabilized the region, and India's influence in these crises has been limited.

India's support to its neighbours has been generous but often overshadowed by China's assertive "chequebook diplomacy." The article points out the need for India to recalibrate its approach, taking into account the evolving geopolitical challenges and the rise of anti-India sentiments in these countries.

New Delhi's response to these developments has been criticized for being too reactive and lacking strategic foresight. As India faces increasing challenges in its neighbourhood, the need for a robust and proactive diplomatic strategy is emphasized, especially in the face of China's growing influence and the complex political dynamics in the region.



Enhancing GST Oversight

The GST Council needs to enhance oversight and expedite reforms for a smoother tax regime.

The GST Council, responsible for overseeing the seven-year-old indirect tax regime, will meet on September 9, marking its second meeting in under three months after a long hiatus. This meeting is crucial for addressing taxpayer challenges and setting policy direction. The Council, led by the Union Finance Minister and State representatives, is expected to review GST's complex multiple-rate structure, with progress on this front likely to be slow due to varying state interests. Additionally, the Council should consider reviewing the 18% GST levy on essential services like health insurance, which has drawn recent attention. Another critical issue is the inclusion of items such as electricity, petroleum, and alcohol in the GST net, a longstanding demand by economists. While state-Centre relations remain tense, greater attention to GST's day-to-day operations is necessary. Despite healthy revenue trends, the pace of taxpayer refunds has been uneven, indicating the need for closer monitoring. The Council should not overlook these issues, as they are vital for avoiding potential industry complications, whether related to registration or tax demands.

AI Governance LEADERSHIP

India must take a leadership role in shaping global AI governance through inclusive and equitable frameworks.

The article discusses the importance of India's active participation in shaping global AI governance. As the Summit of the Future in September 2024 approaches, it presents a crucial opportunity for India to influence the international norms around AI. India, with its historical legacy and diplomatic strengths, should leverage platforms like the United Nations to advocate for a governance framework that aligns with the principles of equity and justice. India's diplomatic efforts, particularly in representing the Global South, have positioned it as a key player in international negotiations. The country should continue to push for AI governance that bridges the digital divide, ensures equitable benefits, and respects human rights. By advocating a balanced approach that considers the needs of both developing and developed nations, India can help create a more inclusive and fair digital future. The editorial stresses the need for India to address the challenges posed by the U.S.-China rivalry in AI, emphasizing India's role in building coalitions that promote an inclusive, secure, and transparent global AI governance framework.



HEALTH ALLOCATION DISPARITIES

Discrepancies between health budget allocations and outcomes persist across Indian states, highlighting inefficiencies and regional disparities.

There is a significant mismatch between the health budget allocations and health outcomes in Indian states. Despite an increase in overall health spending, there is no uniform improvement in health indicators across states. States like Kerala and Tamil Nadu, with relatively better health outcomes, receive lower allocations, while states with poorer health indicators often see higher budgetary allocations but fail to translate this into better health outcomes. The reasons for this disparity include inefficiencies in health system management, variations in governance, and differing health priorities among states. Moreover, the centralization of health schemes and the lack of autonomy for states hinder the effective use of allocated funds. To improve health outcomes, it is crucial to address these inefficiencies, ensure better governance, and allow states more flexibility in utilizing health budgets according to their specific needs.



FOOD SECURITY ACT AND PDS REFORMS

The Food Security Act (NFSA) has significantly reduced leakages in the Public Distribution System (PDS), particularly in states that implemented early reforms.

The introduction of the National Food Security Act (NFSA) in 2013 addressed concerns about the effectiveness of the Public Distribution System (PDS), which previously saw high leakages. According to National Sample Survey (NSS) data, leakages stood at 41.7% in 2011-12, but states that had implemented PDS reforms, such as Bihar, Chhattisgarh, and Odisha, saw dramatic reductions. The latest data from the Household Consumption Expenditure Survey (HCES) for 2022-23 shows that PDS leakages have dropped to 22%. The PDS reforms that expanded benefits to non-NFSA beneficiaries contributed to the reduced leakages. However, some states' success in reducing leakages may be underestimated due to the type of data collected. States like Chhattisgarh showed significant progress in their PDS systems through local procurement policies and door-to-door delivery. Additionally, the introduction of schemes like PMGKAY during the COVID-19 pandemic supported the system but later discontinued. Despite improvements, some states like Tamil Nadu have seen increased leakages, while others like Jharkhand still struggle with Aadhaar-related issues. Overall, the NFSA has transformed the PDS into a more reliable food security mechanism with ongoing challenges to address.



FISCAL

PRUDENCE STRATEGY

Maintaining a controlled fiscal deficit is essential for sustainable economic growth and financial stability.



Government expenditures exceeding revenue can lead to high deficits and economic challenges. The 2024-25 Union Budget emphasizes reducing the fiscal deficit to 4.5% of GDP by 2025-26, promoting a sustainable economic trajectory. While central government debt-GDP ratios are projected to decline with consistent GDP growth of 10.5%, fiscal discipline is key. Strict fiscal management targets aim to prevent rising interest rates and inflation, encouraging the private sector's role in economic investment. The Twelfth Finance Commission stresses household savings and their potential to reduce the government's borrowing needs. India's fiscal responsibility measures have historically kept debt-GDP ratios manageable, but significant external challenges, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, have delayed some adjustments. It is crucial to increase investment in the private sector, which can be funded by the government's long-term debt management strategies.

While other countries have reduced interest payments relative to revenue faster than India, the central government must now ensure that fiscal deficits remain sustainable. Relaxation of current fiscal rules must be done cautiously, focusing on reducing debt while supporting growth.

PUBLIC

HEALTH CRISIS

The article discusses the declining state of India's public health sector and the factors contributing to it.

India's public health system has significantly weakened, leaving citizens without essential healthcare services. The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the sector's inadequacies, exposing a policy paralysis in addressing fundamental issues. There is a shortage of staff, inadequate infrastructure, and lack of accountability, which affects the delivery of healthcare services. Public spending on health remains low, resulting in a decline in basic services like immunization and maternal healthcare. The government's reliance on the private sector and insurance-based models has not improved healthcare access for the poor. Primary Health Centers (PHCs) and district hospitals, crucial to public health, are understaffed and under-equipped. Programs like Ayushman Bharat focus on hospitalization but neglect primary care and preventive health services. The article stresses that increasing health expenditure, addressing staffing issues,

and strengthening PHCs are crucial to reversing this trend. Public health should be prioritized, ensuring access to affordable, quality care for all, especially the underprivileged. The editorial concludes with the call for a comprehensive strategy that moves beyond hospital-centric care and insurance models, focusing on robust primary and preventive healthcare systems to meet the needs of the population.



FUTURE

OF CENSUS IN INDIA



India should shift from decennial enumeration-based censuses to dynamic, register-based ones for timely and accurate data.

India's upcoming Census, delayed due to the COVID-19 pandemic, might take place in 2026 or 2027, a 16-year gap from the last Census in 2011. While concerns arise about outdated data, register-based censuses are proposed as a more dynamic alternative. This approach, already adopted by countries like Austria, Finland, and Sweden, uses government administrative registers to gather data, making it more efficient and cost-effective. India has the potential to implement such a system, integrating existing databases like Aadhaar, PAN, and voter ID. Though the integration of multiple databases is a mammoth task, the benefits, including real-time data updates, outweigh the challenges. Transitioning to this method could save resources, streamline census operations, and improve accuracy. Additionally, small-scale surveys may be used for detailed statistics where needed. This shift would represent a significant leap toward more frequent, continuous censuses, enhancing policy decisions and socioeconomic research.

GST RELIEF

FOR INSURANCE



The GST Council considers tax relief on life and health insurance premiums amid rising concerns about high levies.

The GST Council, in its second meeting after the 2024 general election, is addressing concerns about the 18% tax on insurance premium payments. A new Group of Ministers is being formed to review and recommend changes in the GST on life and health insurance policies, with a decision expected in November. This is a shift from Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman's earlier defense of the levy in Parliament, where it was noted that states benefit significantly from GST revenues. The reconsideration has been requested multiple times since 2017, but previous discussions maintained the status quo.

What's different this time is that some government members have expressed opposition to the high GST on life insurance, calling it unfair. Other political allies have also pushed for reductions in taxes on health and life insurance. The sharp rise in GST collections from health insurance, growing by over 54% between 2021-22 and 2023-24, has fueled the debate. The Council is considering tax relief that would reduce premiums, especially for group policies, senior citizens, or capped insurance covers. The focus is on ensuring these cuts benefit consumers, given the rising cost of healthcare post-pandemic and the challenges families face with inadequate public health systems. There are also suggestions to review helicopter services taxed at 5%, while ensuring that insurance policies receive similar attention.

BANGLADESH'S POLITICAL UNCERTAINTY

“ Bangladesh is facing severe political instability, posing risks both domestically and regionally.



Bangladesh is experiencing severe political turbulence, compounded by a shift in governance after massive protests over the 'quota system' and ongoing student demonstrations. Sheikh Hasina, the Prime Minister, was forced to resign and flee, while an interim government, backed by the army, took over. The interim administration, led by economist Muhammad Yunus, has dismissed key officials. Although some may view Hasina's removal as a democratic victory, it could resemble the 'Prague Spring', with democratic aspirations crushed quickly. The growing influence of Islamist forces has also exacerbated the situation, presenting additional internal threats. Regionally, India's security concerns have intensified due to rising Islamist radicalism in Bangladesh and Myanmar. Bangladesh's pro-India stance, heavily associated with Sheikh Hasina, is in doubt, especially if the country leans towards China or Pakistan. Further instability could also disrupt the Indian northeast, increase radical elements, and endanger economic cooperation. Thus, the country's uncertain future, with impending elections, poses serious risks for India and the broader region.

13-09-2024

BULLDOZER JUSTICE CONCERNS

The Supreme Court is addressing concerns over extra-legal demolitions that target marginalized groups, urging the need for due process.



The Supreme Court of India is engaging with stakeholders to create guidelines to address extra-legal demolitions, which have become more frequent, often targeting vulnerable groups without legal recourse. Over the past few years, local authorities have conducted such demolitions arbitrarily, frequently without following due process or providing rehabilitation options, leading to further marginalization and inequality. These actions violate fundamental rights and go against constitutional principles. The Court aims to ensure that future demolitions adhere to legal frameworks that balance enforcement with the protection of human rights. It suggests implementing strict guidelines, including a moratorium on punitive demolitions, providing proper notice, and ensuring affected parties are informed of their legal rights and options. Demolitions should only occur in exceptional cases and after thorough assessment of their necessity. Additionally, the guidelines must prioritize rehabilitation and provide an opportunity for those affected to challenge the decision. The Court stresses the need for municipal accountability, as current practices often infringe on citizens' rights. By reimagining demolition policies, the legal framework should ensure fairness, due process, and prevent unjust actions that disproportionately impact marginalized communities.

INFLATION WOES

Inflation in food prices, especially vegetables, is threatening to undermine India's economic stability and momentum, making disinflation challenging for policymakers.



India's retail inflation, as reported by the National Statistical Office, showed an increase in August with headline inflation rising to 3.65% from 3.60% in July. The primary driver was a surge in vegetable prices, which saw a sharp rise of over 380 basis points, pushing food price inflation to 5.66%. Prices of commonly consumed vegetables like potatoes and onions remained in high double digits for over six months, adding pressure to inflation levels. Pulses and cereals also saw persistent double-digit inflation. Rural areas, in particular, saw food inflation rise above 6%, while private consumption is struggling to recover.

Core inflation, which excludes food and fuel, also rose slightly to 3.38%, signaling broader price instability. Manufacturers reported a sharp increase in goods prices, marking the second-fastest inflation in output prices in nearly 11 years, further complicating price stability. RBI Governor Shaktikanta Das acknowledged that achieving the final phase of disinflation remains challenging. With high food inflation threatening to impact growth, authorities are focused on preventing inflation from undermining broader economic momentum, even as policymakers continue to face spatial and temporal challenges posed by the monsoon.



DIGITAL CAMPAIGNING

The article discusses the growing influence of digital platforms in shaping electoral outcomes and political narratives.

Digital platforms have transformed election campaigns, as seen in the Brexit referendum and India's elections. These platforms enable highly targeted political messaging, often exploiting data to shape voter perceptions. In India, political parties, especially during the 2023 Karnataka elections, spent heavily on digital campaigns. The ruling party allocated a significant portion of its budget to digital propaganda, highlighting the shift from traditional campaigning methods.

The use of third-party campaigners and "offshore islands" in political advertising is a growing concern, as they remain largely unregulated and operate in the background. These entities spend large amounts of money to influence elections while staying out of the public eye, complicating the transparency of campaign financing. The unchecked role of these offshore entities undermines electoral integrity and requires regulation.

The article also calls for stronger reforms to handle the rise of digital political advertising. Clear regulations, transparency in third-party spending, and holding tech platforms accountable are necessary to ensure fairness. A more balanced approach to spending caps and addressing the power of tech companies in political discourse is critical for a more democratic and transparent electoral process.



THE DEATH PENALTY DEBATE

“ The editorial critiques the continued use of the death penalty in India, especially its social and judicial implications for marginalized communities and victims of violence. ”

The editorial discusses the renewed debate on the death penalty in India, triggered by the West Bengal government's recent bill, which includes the death penalty for specific violent crimes. It highlights that while the death penalty remains in law across many countries, its effectiveness as a deterrent is questioned. In India, crime statistics show a rise in recorded murders, yet states like the Maldives and Sri Lanka have abolished it entirely for all crimes. India's legal reforms focus on women and child-related offenses, increasing the scope of capital punishment for crimes such as rape and murder. However, the death penalty disproportionately impacts marginalized groups, as these communities form the majority of the prison population.

The editorial emphasizes that the expansion of capital punishment has not significantly improved women's safety or reduced gender-based violence. Instead, it calls for broader societal reforms to address the root causes of violence, such as education, healthcare, and support for survivors. Legal reform alone, it argues, cannot solve deep-seated issues of inequality and justice. The piece concludes by advocating for an abolitionist approach, emphasizing the importance of focusing on reformative justice instead of retributive measures like the death penalty.

The Relevance of English



English plays a critical role in socio-economic mobility, yet educational policies have overlooked its significance.

Despite its importance for socio-economic advancement, national education policies in India have consistently neglected English language instruction. Since independence, policies like the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 have sought to reduce the prominence of English, focusing instead on promoting regional languages. This has disproportionately affected economically deprived children, especially in government schools, where access to English is limited. Affluent families, however, continue to have greater access to English education, widening the socio-economic divide.

With 90% of the population not proficient in English, the linguistic divide in India is stark, and the policy does little to address this. The NEP's push towards regional languages further marginalizes English, despite its critical role in global communication and economic participation.

Post-1991 economic reforms highlighted the necessity of English for India's growth, aligning with the global reality that English is essential. Other multilingual countries, such as China, have successfully integrated English into their education systems while balancing local languages. India should adopt a pragmatic approach that balances the importance of regional languages with the global necessity of English.

A bilingual framework can ensure that English, along with regional languages, is promoted without marginalizing either. This approach would better equip citizens for both global participation and national cultural preservation.

SIMULTANEOUS ELECTIONS



“ The idea of holding simultaneous elections is fundamentally anti-federal and problematic for India's multi-tiered democracy.

The Union government's decision to implement simultaneous elections, as proposed by a high-level committee, poses serious challenges to India's federal structure. The plan includes synchronizing Lok Sabha and State Assembly elections, followed by municipal and panchayat polls. Two reasons for this proposal are cited: cost reduction and alleviating the burden of continuous campaigning. However, there is little data to support these benefits. Simultaneous elections could extend the already lengthy election process and create complications if Assemblies are dissolved before completing a full five-year term. This contradicts the cost-saving argument and undermines state autonomy.

India's multi-tier governance system necessitates separate elections for different levels of government, reflecting varied voter preferences. Holding all elections together diminishes the significance of local elections and local governance, and it centralizes power. Moreover, forcing states to follow the central election cycle curtails the tenure of state governments, which further erodes the principles of federalism. To protect the spirit of Indian democracy, political parties and civil society must reject the proposal.

Indus Waters

TREATY **CONFLICT**



India and Pakistan's rigid positions threaten the Indus Waters Treaty.

India has escalated its demand for renegotiating the 1960 Indus Waters Treaty (IWT) with Pakistan, suspending all Permanent Indus Commission (PIC) meetings until Pakistan agrees to talks. The IWT, once a model for water-sharing agreements, has remained largely intact despite disputes, such as India's Baglihar Dam project in 2007 and Pakistan's Neelum project in 2013. However, tensions flared in 2016 when Pakistan escalated the Kishenganga and Ratle projects dispute, demanding arbitration. With the World Bank involved, both countries now run parallel processes—India boycotting arbitration and Pakistan withdrawing from neutral expert proceedings.

Political tensions further intensified after Prime Minister Modi's 2016 Uri attack comments that "blood and water" can't flow together, signaling a shift in the IWT's non-partisan handling. The deteriorating bilateral relationship, including the fragile 2021 LoC ceasefire, complicates potential treaty talks. Pakistan's recent invitation to India for the SCO summit in October could offer a diplomatic opportunity. Climate change and energy demands necessitate revisiting the treaty, but its future hinges on resolving disputes and finding common ground amidst the strained relations. The IWT, once a bright spot in India-Pakistan relations, now hangs in uncertainty, with leaders on both sides employing more fiery rhetoric.

23-09-2024



National

SECURITY STRATEGY

The editorial argues that India urgently needs a comprehensive National Security Strategy (NSS) to address its internal and external challenges.

India's national security is under scrutiny as global tensions rise, with conflicts like Ukraine and Gaza and economic uncertainties affecting growth. For the U.S., NSS focuses on projecting power, both domestically and internationally, aligning values with strategy. The U.K. emphasizes defending global interests through integrated military capabilities. France, facing challenges from Russia, integrates European unity into its defense outlook.

India lacks a formal strategy, and its budget speeches do not address direct external threats or provide a cohesive approach to combining defense, economy, and technological development. With multilateral alignments, such as the Quad and BRICS, India must navigate a complex geopolitical landscape, where economic ties conflict with security goals, especially in balancing relations with powers like the U.S., Russia, and China.

An effective NSS should clearly define national priorities, include transparency in budget allocations, and address weaknesses in defense and internal governance. India's defense budget needs transparency, and its strategy must cover all dimensions, from diplomacy to technological innovation. While India cannot act as an independent global force, its NSS should focus on long-term strategic resilience and improving coordination across sectors like defense, finance, and foreign policy.

India's

Defence Exports and Humanitarian Law



India needs to amend its laws to align with international humanitarian law for arms exports.

India's Supreme Court dismissed a plea to stop exporting defence equipment to Israel, despite concerns about possible war crimes in Gaza. Several countries, like the Netherlands and the UK, have halted such exports, citing compliance with international humanitarian law (IHL). India, however, lacks a legal framework to assess IHL compliance when exporting arms.

India's domestic laws, such as the Foreign Trade Act (FTA) and the Weapons of Mass Destruction Act (WMDA), regulate defence exports but do not explicitly address IHL compliance. Unlike the UK or the European Union, India is not obligated to review whether the importing nation complies with IHL, leaving a legal gap.

International law, particularly the Arms Trade Treaty (ATT), bars the export of conventional arms if there is knowledge they could be used for war crimes. Although India is not a signatory to the ATT, some of its principles reflect customary international law. Additionally, the Geneva Conventions obligate India to prevent weapons from being used to violate IHL.

To uphold its credibility as a major defence exporter, India should amend the WMDA and FTA to explicitly assess the humanitarian law compliance of importing countries. This legal amendment would help India strengthen its international standing and ensure responsible defence exports.

NATIONAL CREDIT FRAMEWORK FOR HOLISTIC EDUCATION

The National Credit Framework (NCrF) promotes flexibility, vocational training, and multidisciplinary learning in higher education institutions to better align with societal, technological, and economic needs.



The National Credit Framework (NCrF), derived from India's National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, provides a flexible structure for higher education institutions (HEIs) to offer credits across various disciplines, including vocational and skill-based education. The NCrF aims to shift the outdated, colonial mindset of rigid academic structures and introduce a broader-based, more adaptable system. This framework gives students the flexibility to earn credits through classroom activities, research, internships, apprenticeships, and vocational training, enabling them to gain a more holistic education. HEIs adopting the NCrF would help bridge the skill gap in India's job market, aligning curricula with technological and industrial changes. By incorporating both vocational skills and academic knowledge, institutions can prepare students for both employment and entrepreneurship, moving away from the traditional role of universities as mere centers of knowledge. The framework also emphasizes continuous curriculum adaptation to stay relevant to evolving societal and technological needs.

Critics who resist the framework are seen as clinging to outdated educational models, which may stagnate growth. The NCrF fosters an inclusive, democratized education system that balances academic knowledge with practical skills, helping students increase their social mobility and employability, making HEIs centers of both learning and skill development.

The Drawbacks of 'One Nation One Election'

“The article critiques the impracticality and challenges of implementing **simultaneous elections across India.**”




The idea of simultaneous elections for the Lok Sabha, State Assemblies, and local bodies was revived by the Prime Minister recently. A high-level committee recommended this approach, which was endorsed in the ruling party's manifesto. However, the author points out significant hurdles. The first step of the plan is to hold the Lok Sabha and State Assembly elections together within 100 days, which requires a Constitutional amendment.

One major challenge is achieving the special majority of 362 members to pass the bill in the Parliament, given that the ruling National Democratic Alliance lacks such numbers. Moreover, synchronizing election terms could undermine India's federal structure. The frequent dissolution of assemblies would disturb governance, and fixed election cycles would weaken the flexibility that individual states currently possess.

The estimated savings of ₹466 crore by holding fewer elections are minimal, compared to larger public expenditures. Additionally, the article highlights logistical difficulties, such as requiring more election personnel and resources.

Lastly, the article argues that while political parties cite distractions from governance due to frequent elections, the real issue lies in accountability. Elections are crucial for ensuring government responsibility, and the idea of 'one nation, one election' overlooks this critical function of democracy.

Rethinking India's Pension System



Pension
Scheme

India's pension system requires reform to balance market reliance and welfare provisions, ensuring security for retirees.

India's pension system has evolved over time through the Old Pension Scheme (OPS), New Pension Scheme (NPS), and the proposed Unified Pension Scheme (UPS). While OPS offered a defined benefit system, guaranteeing income based on the last drawn salary, NPS introduced a market-based approach where retirees' pensions fluctuate based on investments. The NPS shifts risks to individuals, leaving retirees vulnerable to market volatility. With rising concerns about market-driven pensions and the erosion of welfare provisions globally, a return to a welfare-based approach is being reconsidered. The UPS aims to address these issues by balancing market reliance and providing more state-backed security. It calls for a universal pension structure that ensures a minimum guaranteed income, akin to OPS, while including informal workers, who lack sufficient pension coverage. A major concern remains government contribution, as the UPS needs to reduce reliance on market fluctuations and expand its inclusivity to all citizens. The broader welfare model seen in other nations and the global shift towards guaranteed social protection is influencing the ongoing debate on India's pension reforms.

28-09-2024

THE SELF-RESPECT MOVEMENT'S LEGACY

The editorial discusses the centenary of the Self-Respect Movement, its evolution, impact on social justice, and relevance against contemporary challenges in Indian society.

The Self-Respect Movement, celebrating its hundredth year, aimed to empower individuals to challenge hierarchical structures in society, promote rational thinking, subaltern politics, and women's rights. While often associated with the Dravidian Movement, the two are distinct, yet collectively contribute to Tamil Nadu's political discourse and resist majoritarian ideologies. Originating in 1925, under the leadership of E.V. Ramasamy (Periyar), the movement emphasized gender equality, eradication of caste-based oppression, and self-respect, leading to significant reforms like marriage rights and anti-religious stances.

Over the decades, the movement catalyzed radical social reforms such as the abolition of child marriage, the advocacy for property rights, and inter-caste marriages, challenging traditional norms. Although the movement was not opposed to religion, it resisted the caste structure perpetuated by religious practices, advocating for freedom from oppressive customs. The movement's ability to address contemporary issues like gender justice and cultural homogenization remains vital.

In the modern context, the rise of right-wing ideologies threatens the movement's core values by promoting a singular cultural identity. This makes the Self-Respect Movement's principles crucial for combating discrimination and fostering social justice. As it enters its second century, engaging youth and responding to new social challenges will be critical for its sustained relevance and impact.



URBAN

CONSUMPTION SLOWDOWN



“ India's economic growth may falter due to waning urban consumption and subdued rural demand.”

India's impressive 8.2% GDP growth in 2023-24 is accompanied by concerns over weakened farm sector performance and slowing private consumption. Private Final Consumption Expenditure (PFCE) growth was just 4%, the weakest since 2002-03 (excluding the pandemic period). The farm sector was hit by an unhelpful monsoon, reducing rural demand, while urban consumption patterns showed a shift towards high-end goods. Despite early signs of rural demand recovery, urban demand has started to weaken, as evidenced by the Reserve Bank of India's consumer confidence survey indicating a decline in current and future confidence levels of urban buyers. S&P Global Ratings expects India's growth to be at 6.8% this year, with high interest rates tempering urban demand further. The Finance Ministry also noted a dip in vehicle sales between April and August as a sign of faltering urban demand. Persistently high food inflation has limited consumers' discretionary spending capacity, threatening the broader economic growth and investment cycle. The article suggests that the government should consider lowering fuel costs and consumer prices to sustain demand during the upcoming festive season and beyond.