● POLITY   ● ECONOMICS   ● TECHNOLOGY   ● ECOLOGY

POLITY AND GOVERNANCE

STATUS OF THE RIGHT TO INFORMATION ACT

CONTEXT: The RTI Act, 2005, has undergone multiple amendments, but issues related to payment methods, understaffed information commissions, and the complexity of the online application process have hindered its effectiveness, leaving questions about public satisfaction with its functioning.

THE GIST

- The RTI Act's implementation is dependent on subordinate rules made by the Union Government and State Governments. For instance, the simple matter of what payment method a public authority can accept is left to the States to decide.

- Allowing RTI applications to be filed online largely removes some barriers — instead of obtaining uncommon financial instruments, citizens can simply file a request online and pay with UPI. However, many States do not have an online RTI portal.

- While activists have long warned of the weakening of the RTI Act, most of the damage they have seen is not merely from changes in the text of the law, but from the ways that various institutions across different Government apparatuses discharge their duties.

STORY SO FAR

The Right to Information Act, 2005, initially empowered citizens to access non-public government information, but concerns have arisen over its declining effectiveness in recent years, potentially hampering accountability efforts.

HAS THE RTI ACT BEEN AMENDED?

The RTI Act has undergone amendments, with significant concerns arising from these changes. The Digital Personal Data Protection Act of 2023 made a qualified prohibition on disclosing citizens' personal data a total prohibition, potentially hindering 'social audits' and accountability. The Right to Information (Amendment) Act, 2019 granted the Union Government unilateral power to decide the terms of information commissioners, affecting their independence. These amendments have raised worries about transparency and citizens' ability to hold public officials accountable.

HAS THE RTI ACT BEEN UNDERMINED?

The RTI Act's effectiveness is compromised not only by legislative changes but also by varying implementation rules at the state level, leading to differences in payment methods. Some states like Tamil Nadu do not accept Indian Postal Orders (IPOs), a common payment method. Additionally, delayed appointments to information commissions, including the Central Information Commission (CIC) and State Information Commissions (SICs), have eroded confidence in the system, with appeals often taking months or even years to be heard. For instance, Jharkhand SIC has lacked commissioners since May 2020, effectively suspending the appeals process and undermining the RTI Act's functionality in the state.

ABOUT ONLINE RTI PORTALS

While online RTI applications offer convenience, many Indian states lack online portals, and even the Union Government's RTI portal faces issues. User accounts that previously saved personal information are no longer available, requiring users to input details repeatedly. Past application data has also experienced intermittent disappearances, impacting the portal's functionality.

FUTURE

Growing dissatisfaction is evident as more first appeals are filed, reflecting people's discontent with the information provided by public officials under the RTI Act. Activists believe the Act's weakening isn't solely due to legislative changes but is exacerbated by institutional issues, including limited avenues to file requests, obtain information, and understaffed appellate bodies.

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DAILY NEWS ANALYSIS

Page 01

ADITYA MISSION

Isro's next mission — The Sun

Aditya-L1, the first space-based Indian solar observatory, will take off on Sept 2, Isro said. A look at what the mission, in which a probe will be placed millions of kilometres between Earth and Sun, entails.
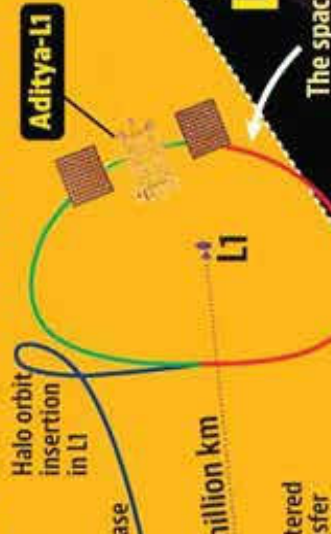
THE MISSION

The mission will be launched by Isro's PSLV XL rocket from Satish Dhawan Space Centre, Sriharikota. Initially, the spacecraft will be placed in a low-Earth orbit. Subsequently, the orbit will be made more elliptical and later the spacecraft will be launched towards its final destination by using onboard propulsion.

Once it leaves Earth's gravitational Sphere of Influence (SOI), the cruise phase will start and subsequently the spacecraft will be injected into a large halo orbit around L1 (see figure on the right). The total travel time from launch to L1 would take about four months.

It will carry 7 payloads and will observe the photosphere, chromosphere, and the outermost layers of the Sun (the corona). Four of these payloads will directly view the Sun and the remaining three will carry out in-situ studies of particles and fields.

- SWIS
- STEPS-1
- SUIT
- VELC
- HELIOS
- PAPA
- MAGNOMETER

Aditya L1

Earth

Four month long journey to L1

- Aditya-L1
- Halo orbit insertion in L1
- Cruise Phase
- 1.5 million km
- Earth SOI Exit
- Earth centered orbit transfer

Major objectives

- Coronal heating and solar wind acceleration
- Coupling and dynamics of the solar atmosphere
- Solar wind distribution and temperature anisotropy
- Initiation of Coronal Mass Ejection (CME), flares, and near-earth space weather
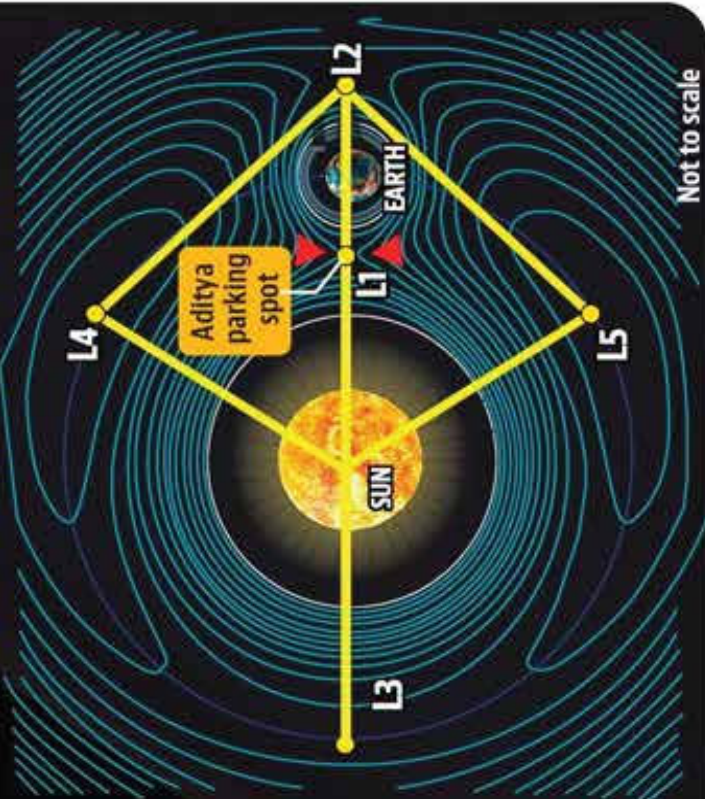
ADITYA'S PARKING SPOT LAGRANGE POINT 1

The spacecraft will be placed in a halo orbit around the Lagrangian point 1 (L1) of the Sun-Earth system.

L2

EARTH

Aditya parking spot

L1

SUN

L4

L5

L3

Not to scale

Since Aditya-L1 is observing the Sun, it makes sense for it to be placed in L1

1.5 million km from the Earth – distance of L1 from Earth

Lagrangian Points are positions in space where the gravitational forces of a two-body system (like the Sun and the Earth) create pockets of gravitational equilibrium. These can be used by spacecraft to stay docked in a single position without requiring to burn fuel.

Each planet, with respect to the Sun, has five such points – L1 to L5. Of these, L1 and L2 are closest (comparatively speaking) to the planet, and thus serve as good spots for observational missions.

The most famous occupant of L2 is the Nasa and Esa joint effort, the James Webb Telescope – a successor to Hubble. From L2, it gets a perfect vantage point to observe deep space.

CENTRE'S DIKSHA E-EDUCATION PLATFORM TO OFFER AI HELP

CONTEXT: The National e-Governance Division (NeGD) of the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology (MeitY) is set to integrate Personalised Adaptive Learning (PAL) into its existing Digital Infrastructure for Knowledge Sharing (DIKSHA) platform. The Personalised Adaptive Learning (PAL) suite allow each student to have an individualised learning experience over the course of the curriculum based on their unique needs and abilities. For example, if a student of Class 9 is learning the Pythagoras theorem and makes a calculation mistake, the AI learning system flags it and loops the student back to a basic video of how to make the calculation.

DIKSHA, which comes under the Education Ministry, provides e-content for schools by an online portal and a mobile application. It has embedded assistive technologies for learners with visual or hearing challenges. However, DIKSHA is a static content repository.

DIKSHA features digitised National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT) textbooks used by national and State Boards. Apart from this, DIKSHA hosts 2.43 lakh contributions by 11,624 academics by way of teaching videos, explainers, and practice questions. The NCERT has sought the MeitY's expertise in facilitating the PAL's integration into DIKSHA. In some States, private players are already administering the PAL, which works on AI or Artificial Intelligence, but budget constraints have been an obstacle.

With nearly 35 lakh students dropping out in Class 10 and ineligible to qualify for Class 11 every year, the Education Ministry wants to adopt digital learning with a focus on improving learning outcomes and school retention.

COURT'S ORDER AND THE ASI SURVEY ARE FLAWED

CONTEXT: In a comprehensive judgment dated November 9, 2019, a Constitution Bench of the Supreme Court of India interpreted the Places of Worship (Special Provisions) Act, 1991, in the context of the Ram Janmabhoomi temple case. However, recent developments, including an Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) inquiry into Gyanvapi mosque, Varanasi, have raised concerns about the Act's(the places of worship, special propvisions, Act 1991) application and its implications for religious sites across India, sparking debates on religious tolerance and cultural preservation.

BACKGROUND: The Places of Worship (Special Provisions) Act, 1991, was recently interpreted by the Indian Supreme Court in the Ram Janmabhoomi temple case. This Act prohibits the conversion of any place of worship and mandates the preservation of their religious character as of August 15, 1947. The Act, as defined by the Court, serves a dual purpose:

1. preventing conversions of the places of worship and
2. ensuring the historical religious character of places of worship remains unaltered.

The Supreme Court' in its order on August 4, 2023 refusined to stay the order of the Allahabad High Court dated August 2, 2023 in the Anjuman Intezamia Masjid Committee challenging the order of the Allahabad High Court which affirmed the order of the District and Sessions Court, Varanasi dated July 21, 2023 allowing for Asi survey in the premises of GYAN VYAPI mosque Varanasi.

Constitutional basis to an assurance

The Act broadly covers places of public religious worship of all denominations, including temples, mosques, gurudwaras, churches, and more. The Court emphasized the importance of this Act in protecting the fundamental values of the Indian Constitution, as it seeks to heal historical injustices by providing confidence to every religious community that their places of worship will be preserved.

However, a recent Supreme Court decision to allow an Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) survey at the Gyanvapi mosque has sparked controversy. Critics argue that if the mosque's religious nature has remained unchanged since August 15, 1947, such a survey is unnecessary and risks unsettling communal harmony. They also question the Court's failure to follow its own precedent in the Ram Janmabhoomi case.

This decision has raised concerns about upholding the Act's provisions and its impact on the rights and sentiments of minority communities, especially during a sensitive time approaching elections. It remains a contentious issue, prompting debates on the Act's intent and implications in contemporary India.

The opening of a Pandora's box

The recent decision by the Supreme Court of India to allow a survey at the Gyanvapi mosque has raised concerns about the potential precedent it sets. Critics worry that such actions may lead to similar demands for surveys at other mosques and even historic monuments like the Red Fort and Taj Mahal. While acknowledging past injustices, it's emphasized that modern India should not perpetuate them and should instead uphold principles of religious tolerance and democracy. The hope is that history will not remember 21st-century Hindus as indulging in religious bigotry and that India can continue to thrive as a diverse and harmonious nation.

ONE NATION ONE ELECTIONS

CONTEXT: After the enforcement of the Constitution on January 26, 1950, the first-ever general elections to Lok Sabha and all State Assemblies were conducted simultaneously in 1951-1952. The practice continued into the three subsequent Lok Sabha elections until 1967, after which it was disrupted. The cycle was first broken in 1959 after the Centre invoked Article 356 (failure of constitutional machinery) of the Constitution to dismiss the then-Kerala government. Subsequently, due to defections and counter-defections between parties, several Legislative Assemblies dissolved post-1960, which eventually led to separate polls for Lok Sabha and State Assemblies. Currently, the assembly polls in the States of Arunachal Pradesh, Sikkim, Andhra Pradesh and Odisha are held together with the Lok Sabha elections.

The One Nation One Elections (ONOE) will lead to the saving of public money, reducing the strain on the administrative setup and security forces, timely implementation of government policies, and administrative focus on development activities rather than electioneering. The Election Commission's expenditure of ₹ 8,000 crore over five years, amounting to ₹ 1,500 crore annually, or ₹ 27 per voter per year, can be considered a 'massive' expense for maintaining the pride of being the world's largest electoral democracy.

In August 2018, the Law Commission of India (LCI), chaired by Justice B. S. Chauhan, released a draft report on simultaneous elections.

SIGNIFICANCE: Frequent invocation of ECI-MCC with staggered elections-General and Assembly elections.

ISSUES AND CHALLENGES:

Policy paralysis at political level;

Bureaucratic paralysis with mobilization of bureaucrats as observers;

Monochromatise political diversity essential for addressing the social diversity of India.

Frequent elections can increase the vices of communalism, casteism and crony capitalism;

Data shows 77 % probability of voters voting for the same party during simultaneous elections.

SUGGESTIONS:

The LCI in its 170th Report {Reform of Electoral Laws

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DAILY NEWS ANALYSIS

Page 03

(1999)} suggested holding simultaneous elections at all levels for good governance.

Evidence from Brazil, Argentina, Canada, Germany, the US and Europe supports simultaneous elections to produce greater alignment between national and regional election outcomes.

SIGNIFICANCE: Section 2 of RoPA, 1951 does not have provisions regarding simultaneous elections.

SUGGESTIONS:

Amend Section 2 of RoPA, 1951 to include provisions for simultaneous elections.

SIGNIFICANCE: Article 83 (2) and 172 (1) provides a fixed tenure of not more than 5 years for Lok Sabha and State Legislative Assembly, unless sooner dissolved.

Amendments

Article 83 (2) and 172 (1): Article 83(2) and 172 of the Constitution stipulates that the tenure of Lok Sabha and State Assemblies respectively will last for five years unless dissolved earlier.

Section 14 and Section 15 of RoPA, 1951.

Any Assembly constituted after mid-elections would have tenure for remainder of the term of current Lok Sabha.

SUGGESTIONS

Amend the provisions under Article 75 (3) and Article 164 (2) that deals with the collective responsibility of the Council of Ministers to respective lower Houses of the Legislature.

Amend Rule 198 of Rules of Conduct and Business of House that specifies the procedure for moving a no-confidence motion.

Amend Article 356.

GEOGRAPHY

THE NORTHERN PLAINS OF INDIA IS THE MOST POLLUTED REGION

Chart 1 | The chart shows the annual PM2.5 concentrations in the top 25 most polluted countries and other select ones
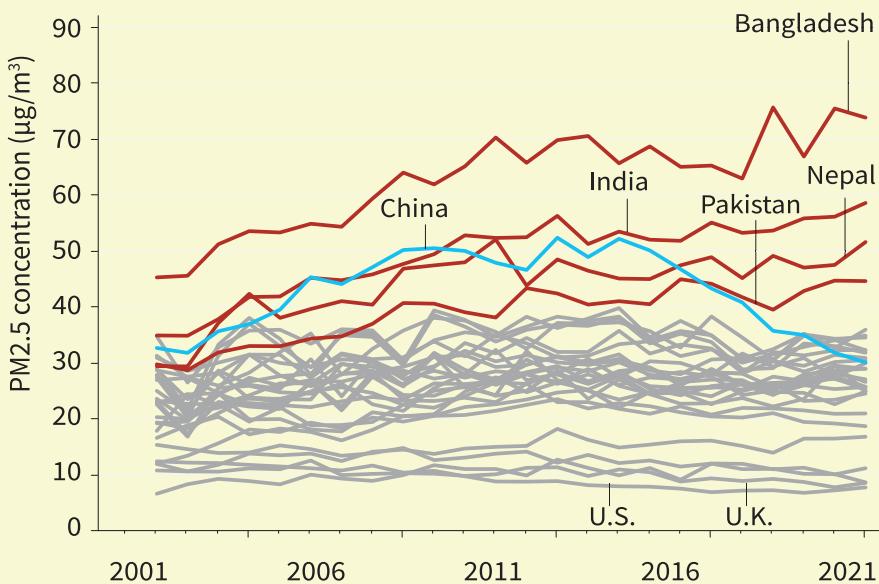

Chart 2 | The chart shows the top 5 threats to life expectancy in India
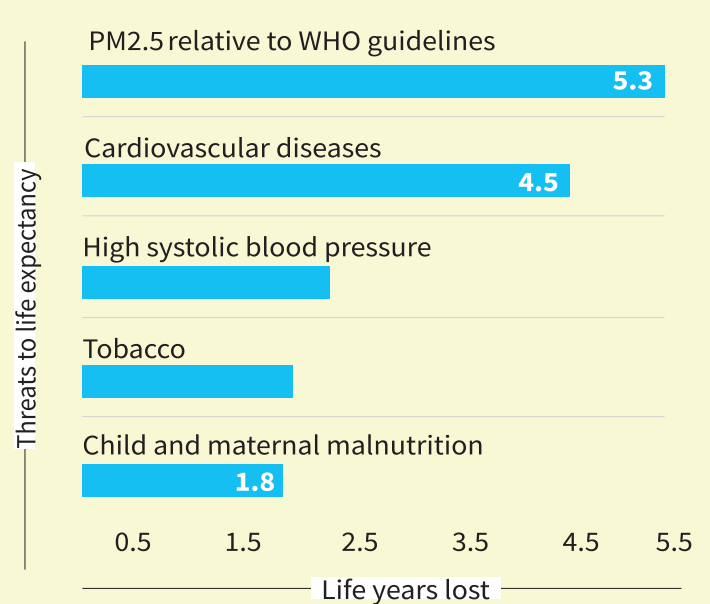

PM2.5 relative to WHO guidelines — 5.3
Cardiovascular diseases — 4.5
High systolic blood pressure
Tobacco
Child and maternal malnutrition — 1.8

Life years lost

Chart 3 | The chart shows the most polluted States in India and the potential life expectancy loss if pollution levels persist
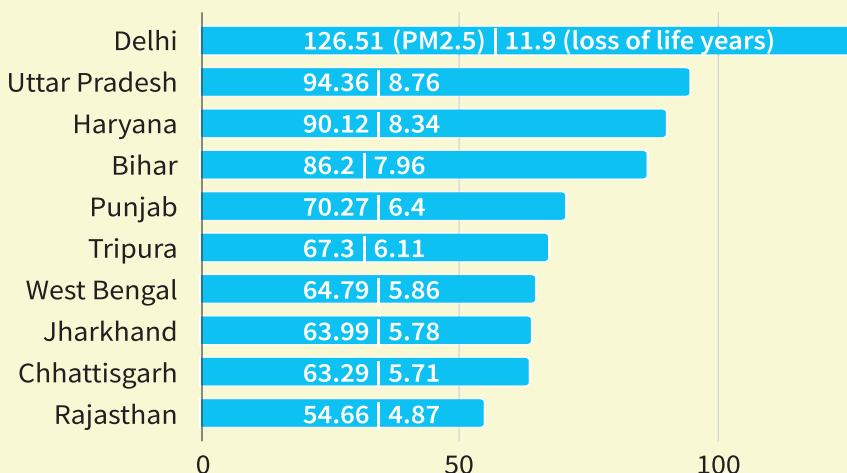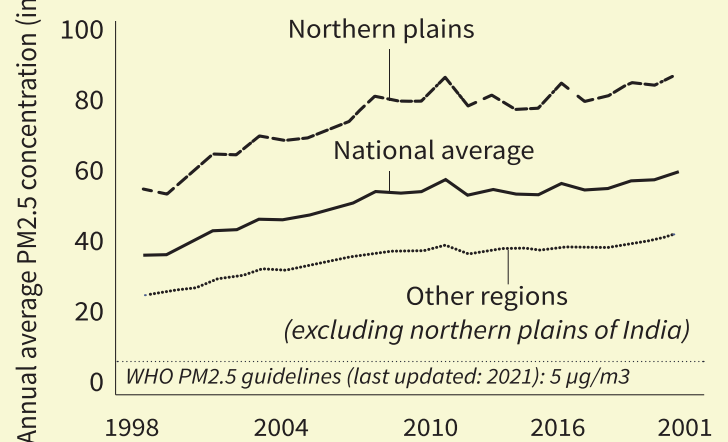
State	PM2.5	loss of life years
Delhi	126.51 (PM2.5)	11.9 (loss of life years)
Uttar Pradesh	94.36	8.76
Haryana	90.12	8.34
Bihar	86.2	7.96
Punjab	70.27	6.4
Tripura	67.3	6.11
West Bengal	64.79	5.86
Jharkhand	63.99	5.78
Chhattisgarh	63.29	5.71
Rajasthan	54.66	4.87

Chart 4 | The chart shows the annual average PM2.5 concentrations in India, the northern plains and all other regions

Northern plains

National average

Other regions (excluding northern plains of India)

WHO PM2.5 guidelines (last updated: 2021): 5 µg/m3

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DAILY NEWS ANALYSIS
Page 04

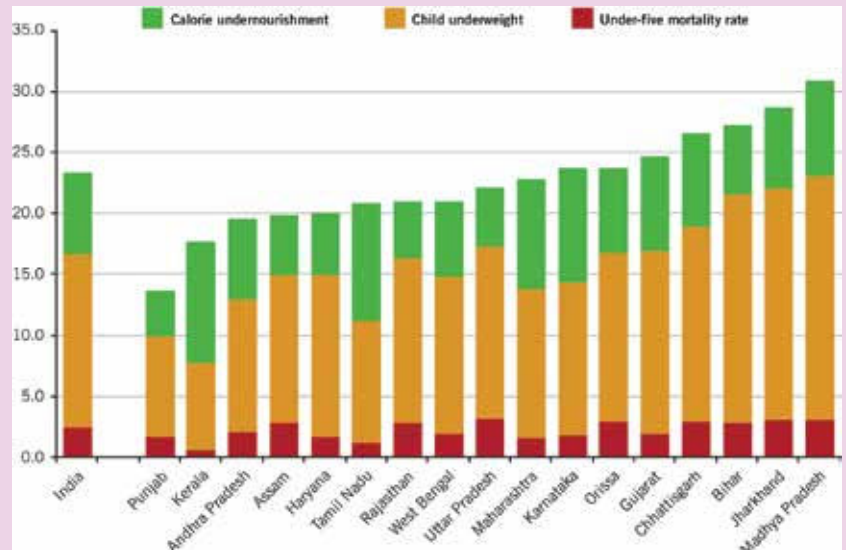# STATE OF HUNGER INDEX, 2022

CONTEXT: The Global Hunger Index (GHI), 2022, ranked India 107 among 121 countries, behind Nigeria (103) and Pakistan (99). The GHI provides a composite measurement and tracks undernourishment and hunger at the national level across three dimensions: calorie undernourishment, child malnutrition, and under-five mortality. The GHI is computed using four indicators — the prevalence of calorie undernourishment; and of stunting, wasting, and mortality among children below the age of five; and under-five mortality rate.

According to the State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World report of 2022, India is home to 22.43 Crore undernourished people. Disparities are evident among States.

The State Hunger Index: The State Hunger Index (SHI) provides a composite measurement and tracks undernourishment and hunger at the national level across three dimensions: body mass index (BMI) undernourishment among the working-age population, child malnutrition, and under-five mortality. The SHI is computed using four indicators — the prevalence of body mass index (BMI) undernourishment among the working-age population; and of stunting, wasting, and mortality among children below the age of five; and under-five mortality rate. The SHI scores range between 0 and 100, with higher scores indicating more hunger. Scores below 10 signify low hunger, 10-20 moderate, 20-30 serious, 30-40 alarming, and 50 or above extremely alarming.

Data for stunting, wasting, and mortality among children below the age of five are sourced from the fifth round of the National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5), while the prevalence of BMI undernourishment is computed using NFHS-5 (2019-21) and Wave 1 of the Longitudinal Ageing Study in India (2017-18). The calculation of the SHI score involves combining the normalised values of the four indicators using the techniques recommended by the GHI.

India's GHI score has deteriorated over the last half a decade, primarily due to the increasing prevalence of calorie undernourishment. According to the Food and Agriculture Organization, the proportion of calorie undernourishment in India has been escalating since 2017, reaching 16.3 % in 2020, equivalent to the 2009 statistic.

Among the 17 States they assessed, Punjab led the list, with Kerala and Andhra Pradesh following closely as top performers. On the other hand, Madhya Pradesh, Jharkhand, Bihar, and Chhattisgarh were ranked as the least-performing States. In the SHI, Bihar, Jharkhand, and Chhattisgarh scored 35, which places them in the 'alarming' category. Gujarat, Uttar Pradesh, Assam, Odisha, Madhya Pradesh, Tripura, Maharashtra, and West Bengal all scored above the national average (29). The performance of these States resembles that of African nations such as Haiti, Niger, Liberia, and Sierra Leone. On the other hand, Chandigarh scored 12, and Sikkim, Puducherry, and Kerala all scored below 16. These States, along with Manipur, Mizoram, Punjab, Delhi, Arunachal Pradesh, Andaman and Nicobar Islands, and Tamil Nadu, fall under the 'moderate hunger' category. All the other States, which scored below the national average and above 20, have a problem of 'serious hunger'. No State falls under the 'low hunger' category.

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