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FORUMIAS

INDEX

How have the recommendations of the 16th Finance Commission of India enabled the states to improve their fiscal position? 2

Critically analyze the WhatsApp and DPDP Act litigation as a 'stress test' for Indian constitutionalism. Evaluate the judiciary's role in protecting digital privacy against the dual challenges of state surveillance and corporate dominance..... 4

Evaluate the judicial recognition of homemaking as productive labor. Analyze its implications for gender justice and the equitable determination of maintenance and matrimonial entitlements..... 5

Critically analyze the constitutional challenges of digital tax searches in balancing sovereign revenue power with informational privacy. Evaluate the need for calibrated proportionality in the information age..... 7

Why is maritime security vital to protect India's sea trade? Discuss maritime and coastal security challenging the global rules-based maritime order in present times..... 9

What do understand by the concept freedom of speech and expression? Does it cover hate speech also? Critically examine the Supreme Court's evolving jurisprudence on hate speech.....11

What are the continued challenges for women in India against Digital Space? Evaluate the impact of rapid AI innovation on women's digital safety in India.....13

Analyze the normalization of war as a global spectacle. Further also evaluate how the 'rest of the world' can reject violence-driven politics to preserve their strategic autonomy.....14

How have the recommendations of the 16th Finance Commission of India enabled the states to improve their fiscal position?

Introduction

Amid fiscal consolidation pressures highlighted in the Economic Survey 2025–26 and Union Budget 2026–27, the Sixteenth Finance Commission has sought to recalibrate Centre-State transfers, reshaping States' fiscal capacity and autonomy.

Stable Vertical Devolution and Predictability

1. **Retention of 41% Share in the Divisible Pool:** The 16th Finance Commission maintained states' share in the divisible pool of central taxes at 41% (unchanged from the 15th FC), providing untied, predictable resources for five years (2026-31). This imparted semi-permanence to enhanced fiscal decentralisation. Predictable untied transfers strengthened States' budgetary planning and medium-term fiscal frameworks.
2. **Stability in Centre–State Fiscal Relations:** Despite the Centre's fiscal constraints, including higher capital expenditure commitments, maintaining 41% protected States' fiscal space. This reduced vertical fiscal imbalance, a long-standing concern in Indian federalism. Effective transfers remain robust despite cess/surcharge exclusions, with the Commission's grand bargain proposal, i.e. merging cesses into the regular tax base, offering potential for a larger divisible pool without revenue loss to either side.

Shift from Conditional to Untied Transfers

1. **Reduced Central Discretion:** Higher tax devolution limited dependence on centrally sponsored schemes (CSS), thereby: Allowing States to prioritise region-specific developmental needs. Enhancing cooperative and competitive federalism.
2. **Improved Budget Flexibility:** Untied funds improved States' ability to: Finance capital expenditure, manage counter-cyclical spending during shocks and reduce off-budget borrowings. Evidence from post-14th FC experience shows States increased capital outlay ratios when fiscal space improved, a trend likely sustained under the 16th FC framework.

Encouraging Production-Linked Incentives through Contribution' Criterion

1. **Introduction of GSDP-Based Contribution Metric:** A new 10% weight for Contribution to GDP (measured via square root of GSDP share) rewards economically efficient states, replacing the earlier tax/fiscal effort criterion. Combined with adjusted weights (income distance 42.5%, population 17.5%, area/forest/ecology/demographic performance 10% each), this incentivises investment, job creation and growth-oriented policies. This partially rewarded economically stronger States. Balanced the equity-heavy income distance formula.
2. **Fiscal Discipline and Long-Term Sustainability:** The Commission capped states' fiscal deficit at 3% of GSDP, mandated discontinuation of off-budget borrowings and projected combined Centre-state debt falling from 77.3% to 73.1% of GDP by 2030-31. By discontinuing revenue-deficit grants (states have scope to raise revenues and rationalise expenditure), it promotes self-reliance. Economic Survey 2025-26 highlights this discipline as key to lowering interest burdens and improving credit ratings, freeing resources for productive spending.

Rationalising the Grant Structure

1. **Discontinuation of Revenue Deficit Grants:** Unlike earlier commissions, the 16th FC discontinued revenue deficit grants. This nudged States toward fiscal self-reliance. Reduced dependency on gap-filling transfers. Encouraged stronger Own Tax Revenue (OTR) mobilisation.
2. **Shift Towards Norm-Based Equalisation:** Although explicit equalisation grants were limited, the formula-based devolution implicitly addressed fiscal disability through income distance, enabling poorer States to maintain minimum service standards.

Empowerment of Local Bodies

1. Total grants of ₹9.47 lakh crore include ₹4.4 lakh crore (rural) and ₹3.6 lakh crore (urban) local bodies; split 80:20 basic/performance components, plus special infrastructure and urbanisation premium grants.
2. This strengthens third-tier governance, reduces state-level burden for service delivery and enhances accountability through third-party verification, directly improving fiscal outcomes at the grassroots.

Enhancing Fiscal Discipline through Implicit Market Signalling

1. Although the explicit tax effort/fiscal discipline criterion was dropped, States remain constrained by: FRBM targets, market-based borrowing limits and GST Council oversight.
2. Thus, fiscal prudence continues to influence States' borrowing costs and credit ratings, indirectly sustaining discipline.

Macroeconomic Impact on State Finances

According to Union Budget 2026–27 estimates:

1. Effective transfers remain above pre-14th FC historical averages.
2. States combined fiscal deficit is projected to stabilise near 3% of GSDP.
3. Capital expenditure as a share of total expenditure remains elevated.
4. These trends indicate improved fiscal sustainability and development orientation.

Conclusion

Indian federalism thrives on shared responsibilities and shared destinies. The Sixteenth Finance Commission strengthens this partnership by deepening fiscal autonomy while preserving macroeconomic stability.

Critically analyze the WhatsApp and DPDP Act litigation as a 'stress test' for Indian constitutionalism. Evaluate the judiciary's role in protecting digital privacy against the dual challenges of state surveillance and corporate dominance.

Introduction

With India's digital economy nearing \$1 trillion as noted in the Economic Survey 2025–26 and with Budget 2026-27 data centre tax holidays till 2047, the WhatsApp–DPDP litigation tests constitutional privacy protections in a data-driven republic.

Puttaswamy Legacy and the Digital Stress Test

1. The 2017 K.S. Puttaswamy judgment constitutionalised privacy under Article 21, mandating the triple test of legality, necessity and proportionality.
2. In 2026, the WhatsApp appeals and DPDP challenges (referred to a five-judge bench) apply this doctrine to metadata exploitation and state exemptions in an AI-driven economy.

Corporate Dominance and WhatsApp's Coercive Consent

1. WhatsApp's 2021 policy update forced 500+ million Indian users into metadata sharing with Meta via a take-it-or-leave-it clause.
2. Despite end-to-end encryption, metadata maps social graphs, devices and locations more revealingly than content. Consent under market dominance may become economic compulsion, not autonomy.
3. The CCI's ₹213 crore penalty and Supreme Court's February 2026 observations, You can't play with the right of privacy... Follow India's Constitution or leave, expose how monopoly power renders consent illusory, unlike stronger GDPR protections in Europe. **For Example-** The CCI termed WhatsApp India's digital town square.

State Surveillance Risks and DPDP Act Exemptions

1. Sections 7 and 36 of the DPDP Act 2023 grant sweeping exemptions to government agencies on vague grounds. **For Example-** exemptions in the interest of sovereignty and public order
2. The executive-appointed Data Protection Board lacks independence, while amendments affecting the Right to Information Act, 2005 weaken the public interest override potentially chilling investigative journalism. These provisions risk legitimising mass surveillance without adequate checks, turning citizens into data subjects.

Judiciary as Constitutional Gatekeeper

1. The Supreme Court is rigorously applying the proportionality test in WhatsApp hearings (demanding undertakings by March 2026) while refusing interim stay on DPDP.
2. This demonstrates its evolving role as the final arbiter balancing individual autonomy against corporate surveillance capitalism and state overreach.

Economic and Democratic Implications

1. Economically, robust privacy is essential for trust in India's fast-expanding digital sector. **For Example-NITI Aayog DPI reports.**
2. Weak protections risk FDI flight and innovation chill. Democratically, the outcome will decide whether constitutionalism evolves to protect the digital self with the same vigour as the physical self.

Way Forward

1. Establish an independent Data Protection Authority with judicial members in appointments.
2. Mandate granular, revocable consent and prohibit take-it-or-leave-it policies for significant data fiduciaries.
3. Impose narrow, time-bound national security exemptions with mandatory judicial review.
4. Introduce data portability, localisation for sensitive data and annual privacy impact assessments. Align DPDP with Puttaswamy via amendments restoring RTI safeguards and competition-privacy convergence.
5. Global Context such as EU: GDPR model (rights-centric), US: Market-driven regulation and China: State-centric control. India's constitutional choice will define its geopolitical digital alignment.

Conclusion

If the Court favors state and corporate interests over individual autonomy, it risks transforming the citizen into a subject of data. A robust ruling is required to ensure that Constitutionalism evolves to protect the Digital Self with the same vigor as the Physical Self.

Evaluate the judicial recognition of homemaking as productive labor. Analyze its implications for gender justice and the equitable determination of maintenance and matrimonial entitlements.

Introduction

With women spending 363 minutes daily on unpaid domestic work versus 123 for men (Economic Survey 2025-26) and contributing 15-17% GDP equivalent (NITI Aayog Gender Index), Budget 2026-27's ₹5.01 lakh crore Gender Budget (9.37%) highlights Delhi HC's February 2026 verdict recognising homemaking as productive labour.

Advancing Gender Justice

The recent verdict of the Delhi High Court marks a doctrinal shift from viewing maintenance as charity to recognising marriage as an economic partnership. By affirming that a homemaker does not "sit idle" but performs labour foundational to household stability, the Court aligns matrimonial law with constitutional equality.

Historical Evolution from Charity to Partnership

- 1. Traditional Jurisprudence:** Maintenance under Section 125 CrPC (now Section 144 of the Bharatiya Nyaya Suraksha Sanhita) was historically framed as preventing destitution. The wife was treated as a dependent claimant.
- 2. Emerging Partnership Doctrine:** Recent rulings, including those of the Delhi and Madras High Courts, conceptualise marriage as a joint enterprise where: one spouse's market income, the other's domestic labour. Together produce family wealth and status. This reflects a shift from "economic dependency" to "shared contribution." The shift began with Supreme Court's *Kirti v. Oriental Insurance* (2021), quantifying homemaker compensation in motor accident cases. Delhi HC's February 2026 judgment by Justice Swarana Kanta Sharma marks the latest milestone, rejecting the "idle spouse" label.

Constitutional Foundations of Recognition

- 1. Article 14 and Substantive Equality:** Formal equality ignores structural disadvantages. Recognising unpaid care work corrects historical invisibilisation of women's labour.
- 2. Article 15(3) and Protective Discrimination:** Judicial interpretation supports affirmative recognition of women's socio-economic vulnerabilities arising from traditional marital roles.
- 3. Dignity under Article 21:** The Supreme Court in *Rajnish v. Neha* emphasised uniform maintenance guidelines to ensure fairness and dignity, recognising economic imbalance post-separation.

Valuing the Invisible

- 1. Opportunity Cost of Domestic Labour:** Time spent in caregiving entails: foregone income, career stagnation and skill obsolescence. The Delhi HC distinguished between capacity to earn and actual earning, recognising labour-market re-entry barriers.
- 2. National Accounting Gap:** Time Use Surveys (2019) show women spend nearly 7-8 times more hours on unpaid care work than men. Yet GDP accounting excludes it. NITI Aayog's gender discussions acknowledge unpaid work as a barrier to female labour force participation, affecting India's demographic dividend.
- 3. Maintenance as Economic Equalisation:** The Court reframed maintenance: Not as charity but as compensation for joint contribution and lost economic opportunity. This aligns with global trends in equitable distribution jurisprudence.

Implications for Matrimonial Entitlements

- 1. Maintenance:** Shift from "bare survival" to **standard-of-living parity**: comparable lifestyle and recognition of unpaid service
- 2. Matrimonial Property Debate:** India lacks a community-of-property regime. However, judicial recognition lays groundwork for: treating assets acquired during marriage as joint effort and considering homemaking as indirect financial contribution. Madras HC in *Kannaian Naidu v. Kamsala Ammal* treated property accumulation as a joint effort.
- 3. Burden of Proof Relaxation:** Courts have rejected unrealistic demands (e.g., income tax returns from homemakers), ensuring procedural fairness.

Gender Justice and Social Transformation

- 1. Correcting Structural Patriarchy:** The recognition dismantles patriarchal stereotypes that undervalue unpaid care work. It prevents economic "civil death" post-separation, affirming homemakers as stakeholders rather than supplicants. **For Example-** 41% women in caregiving vs 21.4% men per Economic Survey.
- 2. Reducing Feminisation of Poverty:** Post-divorce economic vulnerability disproportionately affects women. Maintenance parity reduces downward mobility.
- 3. Normative Shift:** Homemaking transitions from moral appreciation to legally cognisable labour.

Challenges and Limitations

- 1. Subjective Valuation:** Quantifying domestic labour lacks uniform metrics across socio-economic classes.
- 2. Legislative Vacuum:** Without statutory reform of the Hindu Marriage Act, 1955 or Special Marriage Act, implementation remains uneven.
- 3. Risk of Reinforcing Gender Roles:** Recognition must not entrench expectation that caregiving is exclusively women's responsibility.

Way Forward

1. Codify homemaker valuation guidelines in Hindu Marriage Act and Special Marriage Act amendments.
2. Mandate standardised economic assessment tools (e.g, replacement-cost or opportunity-cost methods) for family courts.
3. Integrate with Gender Budget schemes for skill-re-entry programmes and pension credits for homemakers.
4. Direct State Finance Commissions to recognise unpaid care in local body grants.
5. Supreme Court issue binding guidelines under Article 141 for uniform application.
6. Marriage must reflect constitutional morality, not patriarchal hierarchy.

Conclusion

The Delhi High Court's stance is a significant step toward Economic Gender Justice. It transitions the homemaker from a "supplicant" to a "stakeholder." For this to become a societal reality, the legislature must codify the Economic Value of Domestic Work.

Critically analyze the constitutional challenges of digital tax searches in balancing sovereign revenue power with informational privacy. Evaluate the need for calibrated proportionality in the information age.

Introduction

Budget 2026-27 ushers New Income Tax Act 2025 with data-centre tax holiday till 2047; Economic Survey 2025-26 projects \$1 trillion digital economy; NITI Aayog's Data Imperative flags privacy risks. Intensifying debate on whether digital tax searches disproportionately intrude upon constitutionally protected informational privacy.

Constitutional Recalibration in the Information Age

1. The decision in *Vishwaprasad Alva v. Union of India* represents a pivotal moment in India's fiscal constitutionalism.
2. At issue is whether search powers historically designed for physical premises under income-tax law can legitimately extend into "virtual digital space", smartphones, cloud accounts and metadata ecosystems, without violating Articles 14 and 21.

From Spatial Privacy to Informational Autonomy

1. **The Physical Search Doctrine:** In *Pooran Mal v. Director of Inspection*, the Supreme Court upheld intrusive tax searches under Section 132, privileging revenue enforcement against evasion. Privacy concerns were secondary in a pre-digital era.
2. **Post-Puttaswamy Constitutional Order:** The nine-judge bench in *Justice K.S. Puttaswamy v. Union of India* recognised informational privacy as intrinsic to dignity under Article 21. Digital devices, unlike cupboards, contain the "informational totality" of an individual's life, medical records, political beliefs, professional secrets and biometric identifiers. Thus, spatial intrusion has transformed into existential informational access.

The Constitutional Conflict of Revenue Power vs. Digital Personhood

The petition argues Section 247 violates the four-fold Puttaswamy test:

1. **Legality:** Executive authorisation with secret "reason to believe" lacks judicial oversight.
2. **Legitimate Aim:** Revenue collection is valid, but anticipatory digital mirroring risks roving inquiry.
3. **Necessity & Proportionality:** Wholesale device imaging exceeds tax needs; metadata, biometrics and third-party chats are collateral damage. This creates Article 14 arbitrariness and Article 21 dignity breach.

Broader Constitutional and Geopolitical Dimensions

1. **Article 14: Non-Arbitrariness:** Executive-controlled authorisations with sealed "reasons to believe" limit effective judicial review.
2. **Basic Structure Doctrine:** Unchecked digital surveillance could erode rule of law and constitutional morality.
3. **Global Digital Democracy Context:** India's stance influences global norms in data governance. As a leading digital economy, excessive surveillance risks reputational and trade implications in cross-border data regimes.

Need for Calibrated Proportionality

- 1. Economic Imperative vs Privacy** India's digital economy (projected \$1 trillion+) faces evasion via encryption/cloud. Yet unchecked powers chill legitimate business and FDI in data centres (Budget incentive). NITI Aayog warns weak safeguards undermine DPI trust and Viksit Bharat@2047.
- 2. Geopolitical & Democratic Stakes** As global data-sovereignty debates intensify (GDPR vs surveillance models), India's ruling will set precedent. Excessive state reach risks portraying India as surveillance state, affecting cross-border data flows and QUAD tech cooperation.
- 3. Evaluating Calibrated Proportionality** Unfettered digital searches fail stricto sensu proportionality. A 1974 framework cannot govern 2026 cloud ecosystems without safeguards. The Supreme Court's preliminary observations signal acceptance of power but insistence on recalibration to preserve "informational liberty".

Way Forward

1. Mandate particularised warrants specifying devices, apps and data categories.
2. Introduce necessity threshold: digital search only after summons fail.
3. Impose temporal/subject limits (relevant financial years only).
4. Require third-party segregation and privileged-data protocols.
5. Ensure recorded, reviewable processes with judicial oversight.
6. Amend Act to align with DPDP Rules 2025 and create Data Protection Board role in tax searches.

Conclusion

As Dr. B.R. Ambedkar warned, constitutional morality requires restraint in power's exercise. In the information age, sovereign revenue authority must operate within a principled firewall protecting digital dignity and liberty.

Why is maritime security vital to protect India's sea trade? Discuss maritime and coastal security challenging the global rules-based maritime order in present times.

Introduction

India's sea trade carries 95% volume & 70% value (Economic Survey 2025-26); 85% oil imports transit IOR. Budget 2026-27 allocates ₹5,165 cr to ports & ₹7.85 lakh cr to defence. NITI Aayog Blue Economy report flags IUU & kinetic threats. Post-IRIS Dena sinking in Indian ocean makes it an ocean of great gamble.

Why Maritime Security is Indispensable

- 1. Backbone of India's External Trade:** Over 95% of India's trade by volume and 70% by value moves through sea routes, sustaining \$825 bn exports (FY25) and \$1-trillion digital/blue economy goals. Key ports such as Jawaharlal Nehru Port and Visakhapatnam Port serve as critical trade gateways. Any disruption in

shipping lanes can significantly impact exports, imports and supply chains. **For Example-** Sagarmala & PM Gati Shakti target doubling port capacity; any breach costs billions in insurance, delays and lost FDI.

2. Energy Security Imperatives: India imports nearly 80–85% of its crude oil, Energy security hinges on secure SLOCs: disruption in Strait of Hormuz/Bab-el-Mandeb spikes inflation and fiscal deficit.

3. Strategic Geography of the Indian Ocean: India's peninsular geography places it at the centre of the Indian Ocean sea lanes connecting Europe, Africa and East Asia. This geographic advantage enables India to act as a net security provider in the region through naval deployments and humanitarian assistance operations.

4. Protection of Maritime Infrastructure: India's expanding maritime economy, ports, offshore energy assets and submarine communication cables, requires robust protection from threats such as sabotage, cyber attacks and terrorism.

Maritime and Coastal Security Challenges in the Contemporary Era

1. Escalating Naval Conflicts and Geopolitical Rivalry: US submarine sinking of Iranian frigate IRIS Dena in Sri Lanka's EEZ, widened US-Israel-Iran war into India's neighbourhood exposing absence of war-zone restrictions in high seas demonstrate how maritime spaces are becoming theatres for great-power competition.

2. Threats to the Rules-Based Maritime Order: Unilateral military actions and power politics risk undermining United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) and the principles of freedom of navigation.

3. Non-Traditional Maritime Threats: Maritime security threats increasingly include: Piracy and maritime terrorism, IUU fishing and smuggling networks, Drug trafficking across the Arabian Sea and Cyber threats targeting port infrastructure. Such threats complicate enforcement across vast maritime spaces.

4. Coastal Security Vulnerabilities: 7,517 km coastline and 2.02 million sq km EEZ creates surveillance and enforcement challenges. The 2008 Mumbai attacks exposed vulnerabilities in coastal monitoring and maritime intelligence coordination.

5. Strategic Competition in the Indian Ocean: Increasing presence of external powers in the IOR—through naval bases, port investments and surveillance—has intensified geopolitical competition. Infrastructure initiatives and maritime deployments influence regional balance and strategic autonomy.

Way Forward

1. Accelerate Integrated Maritime Domain Awareness with real-time data fusion (Navy-Coast Guard-AI).

2. Operationalise Operation Sankalp 2.0 for convoy protection in high-risk areas.

3. Strengthen IORA & Colombo Security Conclave for rule-based norms.

4. Invest in anti-drone, underwater drones & cyber-hardened ports via Budget outlay.

5. Push UNCLOS-compliant Code of Conduct for IOR and revive MILAN as confidence-builder.

6. Mandate third-party audits of sanctions' impact on neutral shipping.

Conclusion

The sinking of the frigate is not just a tactical victory but a strategic destabilizer. For India, 2026 demands a shift from passive observation to active maritime mediation to prevent a full-scale IOR war.

What do understand by the concept freedom of speech and expression? Does it cover hate speech also? Critically examine the Supreme Court's evolving jurisprudence on hate speech.

Introduction

With 1,318 hate speech incidents in 2025 (India Hate Lab Report, 13% rise), Economic Survey 2025-26 stressing social cohesion for Viksit Bharat and Budget 2026-27's inclusive welfare push, Supreme Court's jurisprudence on hate speech demands scrutiny.

Conceptual Understanding of Freedom of Speech and Expression

- 1. Constitutional Foundation:** Freedom of speech and expression is guaranteed under Article 19(1)(a) of the Constitution. It includes: freedom to express ideas through speech, writing, press, art and digital media; Freedom of political dissent and public debate and freedom to criticise government policies. The right is not absolute and is subject to reasonable restrictions under Article 19(2) on grounds such as public order, morality, defamation and incitement to offence.
- 2. Democratic Significance:** Freedom of expression is essential for: deliberative democracy and public participation; accountability of political institutions and protection of minority viewpoints. The Supreme Court has repeatedly described free speech as the lifeblood of democracy.
- 3. Supreme Court:** The Supreme Court has expanded its ambit to include freedom of the press and right to know while consistently holding that speech threatening constitutional values falls outside protection.

Does Freedom of Speech Cover Hate Speech?

- 1.** The answer is no; hate speech is a prejudicial discourse that marginalises groups on grounds of religion, caste, race, ethnicity or gender, enjoys no constitutional shield.
- 2.** It undermines dignity (Article 21), equality (Article 14) and fraternity (Preamble). It operates through dog-whistles and subtle exclusion rather than explicit incitement, creating psychosocial harm and reinforcing power hierarchies.
- 3.** The 267th Law Commission Report defined it as speech exposing targeted groups to hatred or violence. In *Amish Devgan v. Union of India* (2020), the Court clarified that such speech erodes participatory equality and fails constitutional morality.

Evolving Jurisprudence of the Supreme Court

The Court's approach has progressed in three phases:

- 1. Incitement-centric Phase (1957-2015):** *Ramji Lal Modi* (1957) case it was upheld restrictions on speech promoting enmity if it had a calculated tendency to disrupt public order. *S. Rangarajan* (1989) and *Shreya*

Singhal (2015) raised the bar to imminent lawless action, striking down vague provisions like Section 66A IT Act.

2. Dignity-centric Phase (2018-2020): In Tehseen Poonawalla (2018) issued binding guidelines against mob lynching, mandating nodal officers and suo motu FIRs. Amish Devgan (2020) introduced a three-pronged test: content (targeting a group), intent (deliberate malice) and impact (harm to dignity and equality).

3. Enforcement & Restraint Phase (2023-2026): Directions for prompt FIR registration were issued, yet compliance remains poor. In January 2026, the Supreme Court indicated closure of most hate speech PILs pending since 2021, redirecting petitioners to High Courts while preserving remedies. The Gauhati High Court's February, 2026 notice to Assam CM on alleged communal speeches reflects this delegated approach.

Critical Evaluation of the Supreme Court's Approach

1. Absence of a Clear Definition: Despite evolving jurisprudence, Indian criminal law still relies on broad provisions relating to promoting enmity, leading to inconsistent enforcement.

2. Enforcement Deficit: Judicial directives are often poorly implemented by law enforcement agencies and regulatory bodies. For instance, directions on suo motu FIR registration have seen uneven compliance across states.

3. Balancing Free Speech and Regulation: Courts must prevent hate speech without chilling legitimate political criticism or dissent. Over-broad laws risk arbitrary application and censorship.

4. Digital Amplification: The rise of social media has transformed hate speech into a networked phenomenon, spreading rapidly and influencing public discourse. Existing legal frameworks struggle to address such digital dynamics.

Way Forward

1. Enact a narrowly tailored central law on hate speech incorporating the Amish Devgan test and 267th Law Commission recommendations.

2. Establish an independent monitoring mechanism with periodic state compliance reports.

3. Mandate platform accountability under IT Rules for proactive removal of verified hate content.

4. Provide regular training to police, Election Commission officials and judiciary on context-sensitive adjudication.

5. Promote counter-speech campaigns and digital literacy to build societal resilience.

Conclusion

The Supreme Court has successfully moved the needle from viewing hate speech as a mere law and order problem to a threat to the Constitutional idea of Fraternity. However, for this jurisprudence to be effective, it requires a clear legislative anchor and a shift from judicial monitoring to consistent executive enforcement.

What are the continued challenges for women in India against Digital Space? Evaluate the impact of rapid AI innovation on women's digital safety in India.

Introduction

With 45% rural women internet users facing 16-58% online harassment (Economic Survey 2025-26), Budget 2026-27's ₹1.5 lakh crore IndiaAI Mission allocation and NITI Aayog's Gender-Responsive AI Framework underscore escalating digital threats amid AI-driven vulnerabilities.

Persistent Challenges in Digital Space

- 1. Technology-Facilitated Gender-Based Violence (TFGBV):** Women encounter pervasive online harassment, cyberstalking and doxxing, amplified by anonymity and weak enforcement. **For Example-** UN Women, 16–58% of women globally report experiencing online harassment. Social media platforms often amplify misogynistic narratives through algorithmic engagement. This discourages women from participating in the digital public sphere, undermining democratic participation.
- 2. Deepfake and Synthetic Media Threats:** AI-generated deepfake technology has emerged as a major threat to women's dignity and privacy. Non-consensual intimate imagery (NCII) is increasingly used for extortion, intimidation, and reputational damage. **For Example-** NCRB data shows crimes against women rising to 4.45 lakh in 2022, with digital extensions like impersonation and threats persisting. The anonymity of digital platforms allows perpetrators to operate with limited accountability.
- 3. Algorithmic Bias and Digital Erasure:** AI systems trained on historically biased datasets often reproduce patriarchal stereotypes. Women's voices are frequently underrepresented in search results and content moderation decisions. AI models tend to reinforce stereotypes about gender roles in professional or leadership contexts. This phenomenon is often described as "algorithmic misogyny."
- 4. Digital Literacy and Awareness Deficit:** Despite growing connectivity, many women lack awareness about: Lack of digital literacy exacerbates risks: only 22% AI professionals are women (UN Women report), leading to biased tools ignoring vernacular nuances. The Digital Personal Data Protection Act 2023 provides safeguards, but its effectiveness depends on digital literacy and awareness.
- 5. Socio-Cultural Constraints and Victim Blaming:** Traditional social norms often lead to: victim-blaming attitudes toward women facing online harassment. Family-imposed restrictions on women's digital usage. This creates a secondary digital divide, where women withdraw from digital spaces despite having access.

Impact of Rapid AI Innovation on Women's Digital Safety

- 1. Automated Stalking and Data Surveillance:** AI-enabled data scraping tools allow individuals to track personal information across multiple platforms. Such tools threaten the right to privacy under Article 21. Women journalists, activists, and professionals are particularly vulnerable.
- 2. Amplification of Online Harassment:** AI accelerates threats via deepfakes and NCII: by 2026, synthetic media costs have plummeted, enabling "digital character assassination" (UNFPA consultation). This increases the scale and speed of online harassment.

3. **Representation Gap in AI Development:** Women remain underrepresented in the AI workforce. According to United Nations Development Programme, women constitute around 22% of AI professionals and less than 14% in senior roles. This lack of diversity reduces gender-sensitive design in AI systems.

4. **Psychological and Economic Impact:** Digital insecurity creates a “chilling effect” on women’s online engagement. **For Example-** 2025 Digital Wellness studies highlight that 60% of young women experience digital anxiety due to online threats. Economic exclusion follows: self-censorship reduces workforce participation, reversing digital inclusion gains.

5. **Algorithmic Misogyny Reinforces Biases:** Western-centric datasets cause “shadow-bans” on women’s health/rights discussions.

Way Forward

1. Mandate gender-specific Algorithmic Impact Assessments pre-deployment, per IndiaAI Summit 2026.
2. Enhance DPDP Act 2023 with real-time deepfake detection and victim-centric redress.
3. Boost women’s representation in AI via targeted skilling (Budget’s ₹10,000 crore women empowerment fund).
4. Roll out community-led “Cyber-Didis” in SHGs for grassroots literacy and response.
5. Enforce platform accountability through fines and ethical guidelines aligned with UN Women Casebook.

Conclusion

Technological progress must empower society; ensuring women’s digital safety is essential for inclusive innovation and a truly equitable digital future.

Analyze the normalization of war as a global spectacle. Further also evaluate how the ‘rest of the world’ can reject violence-driven politics to preserve their strategic autonomy.

Introduction

Amid US-Iran-Israel war escalation (IRIS Dena sinking, March 2026), Budget 2026-27’s ₹7.85 lakh crore defence (15% rise), Economic Survey 2025-26’s 7.4% GDP amid conflicts and NITI Aayog’s Viksit Bharat scenarios underscore war’s performative nihilism.

From Territorial Wars to Geopolitical Performance

1. The character of war in the 21st century has undergone a fundamental transformation. Traditionally, wars were fought for **territorial conquest, resource control, or ideological dominance**. However, contemporary conflicts increasingly function as **geopolitical performances**—designed to demonstrate technological superiority, strategic dominance, and domestic political resolve.

2. The Israel-US-Iran tensions and earlier conflicts such as the **Iraq War** illustrate how wars can be prolonged spectacles driven by **power signalling rather than clear strategic objectives**. This normalization of war reflects a deeper **crisis of global governance and moral accountability**.

3. During the Cold War, conflicts were shaped by ideological competition between superpowers. In contrast, contemporary wars increasingly reflect **symbolic demonstrations of power**. Military strikes are often conducted to **signal deterrence and technological superiority** rather than achieve decisive victory. Precision missile strikes and cyber operations enable limited conflict without full-scale war. Thus, warfare increasingly resembles **strategic messaging rather than territorial transformation**.

Drivers Behind the Normalization of War as Spectacle

1. Technological Militarisation and AI-Driven Warfare: Rapid advances in artificial intelligence, drone warfare, and cyber capabilities have transformed conflict. AI-assisted targeting systems and autonomous weapons reduce the human visibility of violence. Real-time drone footage converts battlefield events into media narratives. This technological mediation creates psychological distance from the human costs of war.

2. Media Amplification and Digital Spectacle: The modern information ecosystem transforms war into global spectacle. High-definition battlefield imagery circulates instantly across digital platforms. Governments utilise strategic communication campaigns to shape domestic and international perceptions. Consequently, war becomes performative politics, where narrative control is as important as battlefield outcomes.

3. Strategic Nihilism and Erosion of International Norms: Increasing disregard for international law reflects the erosion of post-1945 norms. Institutions such as the United Nations Security Council often remain paralysed due to geopolitical rivalry and veto politics. This institutional paralysis encourages unilateral military actions, weakening the rules-based international order.

4. Domestic Political Incentives: Governments may employ external conflicts to consolidate internal legitimacy. Military action often generates nationalistic mobilization. External threats can divert attention from economic or political crises. This dynamic reinforces the normalisation of militarised statecraft.

Consequences for Global Governance and Human Security

The transformation of war into spectacle produces multiple systemic risks:

1. Humanitarian Impact: Civilian casualties and displacement increase dramatically and conflicts undermine global humanitarian norms.

2. Economic Disruptions: Supply chains and energy markets become vulnerable. The **International Monetary Fund** warns that prolonged geopolitical tensions threaten global economic recovery.

3. Erosion of Moral Responsibility: Repeated exposure to mediated violence fosters **global desensitization**, weakening public pressure for peaceful resolution.

Strategic Options for the 'Rest of the World'

Despite the dominance of great powers the rest i.e., **middle powers and Global South countries** retain significant agency.

1. Strategic Autonomy and Non-Alignment 2.0: Countries such as India are reviving principles of **strategic autonomy**, avoiding rigid bloc politics. Platforms like the **BRICS** and **G20** provide opportunities for **collective diplomatic balancing**.

2. Strengthening Multilateral Norms: Global South nations can advocate reforms in international governance: revitalising multilateral diplomacy, promoting adherence to international humanitarian law and supporting mediation and conflict resolution mechanisms. These efforts can counter unilateral militarism.

3. Building Economic and Technological Resilience: Economic resilience is crucial to preserving autonomy. The Union Budget 2026–27 emphasises supply-chain diversification and technological self-reliance to protect economies from geopolitical shocks. Reducing dependency limits vulnerability to great-power coercion.

4. Normative Leadership by Middle Powers: Countries with democratic legitimacy can promote human-centric global governance. India's initiatives such as "Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam" diplomacy emphasise peaceful coexistence and cooperative security. Normative leadership can reshape global discourse away from militarism.

Way Forward:

To counter the normalization of war as spectacle:

1. Strengthen IORA/BRICS for rule-based IOR norms, rejecting performative escalations.
2. Diversify energy via renewables (Budget's ₹1.39 lakh crore domestic defence push).
3. Mandate UNSC reforms for veto accountability per NITI Viksit Bharat@2047.
4. Launch counter-narratives via digital diplomacy to combat media desensitisation.
5. Enforce economic sanctions on performative actors through WTO/G20 coalitions.

Conclusion

In The Argumentative Indian, Amartya Sen stresses ethical public reasoning; similarly, resisting spectacle-driven wars requires collective moral courage to defend multilateralism, strategic autonomy, and peaceful coexistence.