

NTA reforms should have meaningful continuity: SC

Reforms in the agency must be institutionalised and not a knee-jerk reaction to a catastrophe, says the top court; it questions the government hopping from one panel to other in search of solutions

Krishnadas Rajagopal

NEW DELHI

The Supreme Court on Wednesday emphasised the need for institutionalising reforms within the National Testing Agency (NTA) while indicating that the government must not hop from one committee to the next in search of solutions.

The court made it clear that the constitution of the new Nandan Nilekani task force must not be seen as a move to discard “lock, stock, and barrel” an earlier panel headed by a former Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) chief.

The testing agency has been under the Supreme Court’s scanner since the National Eligibility-cum-Entrance Test-Undergrad-

Structural solutions

The top court is hearing petitions alleging ‘recurring, systemic, and catastrophic failure’ in the NTA ecosystem

- A seven-member committee formed in 2024 under ISRO’s former Chairman K. Radhakrishnan had recommended a series of structural reforms in the NEET system

- The Centre has also constituted a ‘task force’ chaired by Infosys co-founder Nandan Nilekani to usher in ‘new technological reforms’ in the NTA

uate (NEET-UG) 2026 paper leaks. The Centre has constituted the “task force” chaired by Mr. Nilekani, Infosys co-founder, to usher in new technological reforms which would make the conduct of public exams under the NTA leak-proof. But a Bench headed

It should not be that a committee gives recommendations, then a new committee is formed which removes the old one, lock, stock and barrel

JUSTICE P.S. NARASIMHA
SC judge



by Justice P.S. Narasimha persisted to question the Centre on what it has done so far to implement the recommendations of an earlier committee headed by former ISRO Chairperson K. Radhakrishnan to improve the NTA’s exam processes.

The court was hearing petitions by the Federation of All India Medical Association and United Doctors Front highlighting that 2026 paper leak was part of a “recurring, systemic, and catastrophic failure” of the NTA in conducting the NEET-UG exam.

“It should not be that a committee gives recommendations, then a new committee is formed which removes the old one, lock, stock and barrel,” Justice Narasimha said.

The reforms must be vibrant, institutionalised, and carried on within the NTA by successive officers. They should not be a knee-jerk reaction after a catastrophe, he said.

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NTA reforms should have continuity: SC

The reforms in testing agency should focus on building an “institutional memory”, the Supreme Court said.

It should not be that a committee proposes a set of reforms which are implemented in one exam, after which senior NTA officers are shifted out and the reforms are undone in the next exam, Justice Narasimha said. There ought to be meaningful continuity in resolving systemic problems within the NTA, the court said.

The court pointed out to how the Union Public Service Commission has been conducting public exams without a hitch.

“Life changes with every exam. The system changes with every exam. There are new technological challenges. How are you facing them? Have you developed the necessary infrastructure? Have you the software systems required in place?” Justice Narasimha asked Solicitor-General Tushar Mehta, appearing for the Union government and the NTA.

The court referred to an August 4 affidavit filed by the Union government, listing several senior appointments to be made to the NTA.

Mr. Mehta agreed to the need for a “permanent mechanism” to introduce reforms and maintain their continuity as keepers of the NTA’s institutional memory. He suggested that Mr. Radhakrishnan could be requested to be made a member of the Nilekani task force.

Justice Narasimha asked the Union government to first file an affidavit explaining what it had done to implement the nuanced guidelines recommended by the Radhakrishnan Committee.

The government, in its affidavit, hailed the Public Examinations (Prevention of Unfair Means) Act of 2026 and the forming of the task force under Mr. Nilekani as “landmark measures” against future paper leaks.

Any structural change in the design of the NEET-UG would be undertaken only in consultation with and the concurrence of the Union Health Ministry and the National Medical Commission, the government said. The government said it was creating an “institutional memory” bank drawn from experiences after every public examination. A formal “Learnings Note” is prepared recording the challenges encountered, the actions taken and the practices to be carried forward.

Kolkata blaze kills 9; at least 5 victims from Bangladesh

Senjuti Sengupta
Shrabana Chatterjee

KOLKATA

At least nine people, a child among them, were killed after a fire broke out in the early hours of Wednesday at a hotel in the Mirza Ghalib Street area of Kolkata in West Bengal. Five of the deceased were Bangladeshi nationals, one from Bihar and one from West Bengal, and two were yet to be identified. Around 60 people were rescued from the building.

The police said the fire started around 2 a.m. inside Sikha Inn, located on the second floor of Florence Mansion, a five-storey building that has several guesthouses and inns, largely frequented by Bangladeshi nationals visiting Kolkata. The narrow metal staircase made it difficult for the occupants to escape, the police said.

"I was on the third floor and suddenly saw a lot of smoke coming into the



Deadly fire: Police personnel near the building in Kolkata where a fire broke out on Wednesday. PTI

room. The entire floor was enveloped in smoke and I jumped out of the window to escape the fire," said Izaj Ahmed, one of the survivors. Local people and survivors said the building did not have any firefighting equipment.

A five-member special investigation team, led by the Deputy Commissioner of the Detective Department of Kolkata Police, has been set up to probe the incident. The police have registered a first information

report (FIR), said Kunal Agarwal, Additional Commissioner of Kolkata Police (Crime). The FIR has been filed under several sections of the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, including culpable homicide not amounting to murder and negligence, and under Sections of the West Bengal Fire Services Act. The hotel's owner, Bireshwar Mitra, is absconding, said the police.

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Kolkata blaze kills 9; at least 5 from Bangladesh

Chief Minister Suwendu Adhikari said the tragedy was a “grim reminder of the legacy of negligence left behind by the previous regime”. He said the government was working tirelessly to “undo the damage of that era and to enforce the safety standards that should have been in place all along”.

Several West Bengal Ministers, including Fire and Emergency Services Minister Kaushik Chowdhury and Urban Development Minister Agnimitra Paul, reached the site early in the morning. Ms. Paul said that 10 guesthouses were operating from the building. She blamed the previous Trinamool Congress government for issuing licences for such installations, adding that her government has completed only 100 days in office.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi said he was “extremely pained” to learn about the loss of lives. “My condolences to those who have lost their loved ones in this tragedy. May the injured recover at the earliest. The local administration is assisting those who are affected,” he said in a post on X.

The Bangladesh Deputy High Commission in Kolkata issued a helpline -- +8801717291266 (WhatsApp) and +918274821452 -- for families of the injured and the dead. An official said the commission is open round-the-clock and bodies will be repatriated to Bangladesh once the identities of the deceased are confirmed. Of the five Bangladeshi victims identified, four are from a family that had come from Kushtia.

J&K an 'important part of India'; will re-evaluate travel advisory: U.S. envoy

Peerzada Ashiq

SRINAGAR

On his maiden visit to Jammu and Kashmir, Sergio Gor, U.S. Ambassador to India and Special Envoy to South and Central Asia, on Wednesday praised the Centre and Chief Minister Omar Abdullah for their efforts to "keep India's important place safe".

"J&K is an important part of India and it's an incredibly beautiful place. I am thrilled to see this place. Delhi and the Chief Minister have made incredible steps to keep this place safe. We will have some fol-



Boosting ties: U.S. Ambassador Sergio Gor with Jammu & Kashmir Chief Minister Omar Abdullah. X/@USAMBINDIA

low-ups to Washington and Delhi," Mr. Gor said after meeting Mr. Abdullah at the latter's residence here.

Referring to J&K as "an important part of India" is a departure from the past,

when Kashmir was referred to as "an unresolved issue between India and Pakistan". Mr. Gor hinted at re-evaluating the travel advisory for J&K, which remains in the 'Level 4- Do

not travel' category. "We will be looking at travel warnings. It should be downgraded. It [J&K] is a beautiful area and a lot of Americans want to come here," he said.

Mr. Abdullah said that the meeting was "good opportunity to discuss relations between two countries and what the U.S. can do with J&K". "There are some legacy issues which over time we will be working to resolve," he added.

Pakistan summoned U.S. Chargé d'Affaires Natalie Baker and lodged a "strong demarche" over remarks by Mr. Gor.

Rajnath, Japanese Defence Minister to hold talks today

Saurabh Trivedi

NEW DELHI

Defence Minister Rajnath Singh will hold a bilateral meeting with his Japanese counterpart, Shinjiro Koizumi, in New Delhi on Thursday, with the two sides expected to discuss ways to further strengthen defence and security cooperation and enhance strategic trust in the Indo-Pacific.

According to the Ministry of Defence, the Ministers are expected to exchange views on deeper maritime security cooperation and closer collaboration in defence equipment and technology under the 'Make in India' framework, particularly following Japan's revision of its Three Principles on Transfer of Defence Equipment and Technology.

The meeting is also expected to provide an opportunity to identify new areas of collaboration and prepare a road map for ad-



Shinjiro Koizumi during a visit to the Navy's Western Command in Mumbai. @MODJAPAN_EN

vancing bilateral defence and security cooperation, with both countries sharing a vision of a free, open, resilient and prosperous Indo-Pacific.

Mr. Koizumi, on his maiden visit to India, visited the Western Naval Command in Mumbai on Wednesday. He held discussions with the Chief of the Naval Staff, Admiral Krishna Swaminathan, and Flag Officer Commanding-in-Chief, Western Naval Command. Vice-Admiral Saniav

Vatsayan. He also visited the indigenously built guided-missile destroyer *INS Chennai*.

The two-day visit underscores the growing momentum in India-Japan defence ties and comes weeks after Japanese Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi's visit to New Delhi for the Annual Summit with Prime Minister Narendra Modi, where the two sides agreed to deepen defence and security cooperation.

JPSC-JSSC Reform Manch calls off stir after Jharkhand govt. scraps 22 recruitment exams

Amit Bhelari

PATNA

The JPSC-JSSC Reform Manch on Wednesday announced the suspension of its agitation for two months following the Jharkhand government's notification on the cancellation of 22 recruitment examinations.

The State government late on Tuesday notified the cancellations citing complaints of irregularities and "facts brought before the government during the CID investigation".

Besides these, six examinations have been postponed, followed by a CID probe. Another 17 examinations will be investigated by the agency, taking the number of exams under

Another 17 exams will be investigated by the CID, taking the number of exams under lens to 23

the scanner to 23.

The JPSC-JSSC Manch clarified that "the movement has not been terminated". "If our remaining demands are not met within two months, we will resume the movement..." they said.

The cancelled exams include those conducted by the Jharkhand Public Service Commission (JPSC) and the TSR Data Processing Private Limited (TDPL) since 2014. The 11th to 13th JPSC exams, as well as the CDPO and JSSC-CGL exam-

inations were cancelled.

The State government said it will urge the High Court to constitute a fast-track court for the trial of cases regarding irregularities in JPSC and JSSC.

It also said that a committee formed to suggest reforms in the conduct of examinations in the State, which was announced on Monday, will submit its report within two months.

"An Internal Monitoring Cell will be constituted within JPSC/JSSC and a committee will be constituted under the chairmanship of Amitabh Kaushal (IAS)," it added.

In a related development, the successful candidates of JSSC-CGL continued their protest for the third consecutive day.

'Water for Vizag data centres not at the cost of city's needs'

A.P. IT Minister says quantum of Polavaram water earmarked for industries will be used to meet needs of upcoming facilities through dedicated pipelines, asks people not to believe 'misinformation'

Sambasiva Rao M.
AMARAVATI

Water from the Polavaram project will be provided to the data centres proposed to be established in Visakhapatnam from the quantum earmarked for industries and without affecting the drinking and agriculture needs of the area, asserted Andhra Pradesh Education, IT and Electronics Minister Nara Lokesh.

Replying to a question raised by Nellimarla MLA Lokam Naga Madhavi on the concerns being raised on the proposed data centres, in the Legislative Assembly on Wednesday, Mr. Lokesh said misinformation was being deliber-



Nara Lokesh.

ately spread on the issue.

Andhra Pradesh had achieved the target of attracting data centres of 6.5 GW capacity in Visakhapatnam, he said, adding that Google's decision to establish its facility in the port city had encouraged other global technology companies to consider setting up their units too in the city.

On water needed for the data centres, Mr. Lokesh said that 3,000 tmc of Godavari water was annually flowing into the Bay of Bengal, and a portion of it would be diverted through the Polavaram project and brought to Visakhapatnam by gravity.

Upon becoming fully functional, the 6.5-GW capacity data centres would require about 3 tmc of water, he said. "Water required for the facilities will be met from the allocation earmarked for the industries," Mr. Lokesh said, adding that dedicated pipelines would be laid instead of diverting water from the existing city infrastructure.

Observing that water consumption was declining with technological ad-

vances, he cited the air-cooling systems used at a data centre he visited in the U.S.

"Drinking, irrigation and industrial requirements of Visakhapatnam will be protected, and drinking water from Polavaram will reach the city by gravity within 18 months," the Minister asserted.

Wider ecosystem

Mr. Lokesh said data centres would create a wider ecosystem involving advanced chips, cooling systems, transformers, power electronics, logistics, warehousing, real estate, transport, hospitality, retail and maintenance services. He said manufacturing and industries were also being attracted to Rayalaseema.

'Transmission constraints threaten India's renewable energy expansion'

Jacob Koshy

NEW DELHI

Insufficient transmission lines have emerged as a major obstacle to India's rapid expansion of renewable energy capacity, leading to many solar power projects being "curtailed" during daylight hours, rating agency ICRA said on Wednesday. Curtailment occurs when a power generator is forced to reduce or stop producing electricity due to oversupply and grid congestion.

Around 37% of renewable energy capacity at substations affected by curtailment in the northern, western, and southern regions operates under a Temporary General Network Access (T-GNA), and this capacity faces 30% to 50% curtailment during the day, ICRA said in a statement.

T-GNA is a short-term arrangement that allows a re-



Renewable energy will account for more than 35% of power generation by 2029-30.

newable energy project to use available capacity on the inter-State transmission system, typically for periods ranging from a single time block to about 11 months. Prolonged T-GNA use can affect a power supplier's revenues. ICRA says projects operating under T-GNA are particularly vulnerable to curtailment, raising their operational costs.

In western India, where about 55% of the affected

capacity was under T-GNA, peak curtailment reached 8,617 MW as of August 6; the corresponding figure for the northern region was 5,573 MW.

Better infrastructure

Virishkumar Kadam, senior vice-president and group head of corporate ratings at ICRA, said at a press briefing that timely execution of intra-State and inter-State transmission infrastructure, along with greater storage capacity, would be critical to sustaining renewable energy additions. Apart from "transmission constraints", the impediments included delays in firming Power Purchase Agreements, land acquisition, and distribution company finances.

The constraint comes even as India's renewable energy pipeline remains substantial. ICRA said more than 150 GW of re-

newable projects were under construction as of June 30 this year. It estimates that renewable energy, including large hydro, will account for more than 35% of electricity generation by the financial year 2029-2030, compared with 22% in 2024-2025.

Grid adequacy is key

However, bids for new renewable energy projects have slowed sharply. After 40.6 GW was awarded in 2024-25, awards fell to 14.7 GW in 2025-26 and stood at 4.7 GW through August 10 this year.

ICRA also estimated that 40 GW to 45 GW of capacity with bids awarded remained without signed PPAs as of April 2026.

Mr. Kadam said the nature of new biddings is also changing, with greater focus on firm and dispatchable renewable energy (FDRE) and round-the-clock (RTC) power.

India to build hospital in West Bank; seeks to deploy field hospital in Gaza

Kallol Bhattacharjee

NEW DELHI

India has reiterated its developmental and health-related commitments to the state of Palestine and emphasised the need for a 'two-state solution' to the Israel-Palestinian conflict. India's message was conveyed during the ongoing visit of Secretary of the Ministry of External Affairs, Sripriya Ranganathan, to Ramallah, the administrative headquarter of the Palestinian Authority (PA).

Ms. Ranganathan, the highest-ranking Indian diplomat to visit the West Bank since Hamas's October 7, 2023 attack, discussed a range of Indian initiatives with Palestinian officials,

including the deployment of an Indian field hospital in Gaza Strip, said the Indian Representative Office in Palestine. On Wednesday, the Indian and Palestinian teams launched the construction work of a super-specialty hospital in Jenin, West Bank.

"She highlighted India's expanding support to the Palestinian health sector, including essential medicines and anti-cancer drugs, an Artificial Limb Fitment Camp, and the deployment of an Indian field hospital in Gaza. During the engagement, the Secretary also handed over a consignment of medicines from the Government of India to the Palestinian Ministry of Health, reaffirm-



Sripriya Ranganathan

ing India's continued support to Palestinian healthcare services," the Indian mission in Ramallah said in a statement.

Ms. Ranganathan met Dr. Majed Abu Ramadan, the Minister of Health of the State of Palestine and Dr. Varsen Aghabekian Shahin, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, and reiterated

ed India's support for a "two-State solution" and pitched for addressing the "humanitarian situation in Gaza". Ms. Ranganathan called on Dr. Mohammad Mustafa, Prime Minister of Palestine on Wednesday. "Discussions focused on further strengthening the longstanding India-Palestine partnership and advancing bilateral cooperation across key areas of mutual interest," the Indian mission said.

On Wednesday, the Indian and Palestinian teams jointly carried out the groundbreaking ceremony for the 200-seat super-specialty hospital that will be built in the Arrabeh city in Jenin Governorate in northern West Bank.

Iran warns Gulf countries against helping U.S. after UAE cuts trade ties

Iran's armed forces warn that helping or facilitating U.S. military operations will amount to participation in war; the UAE announced that it would sever economic ties with Iran after it alleged that Iranian missiles attacked vessels near its coast

Agence France-Presse
TEHRAN

Iran's armed forces warned Gulf countries against assisting the U.S. military on Wednesday, hours after the United Arab Emirates announced it was severing economic ties with Tehran following new attacks on shipping.

The Gulf is dotted with U.S. military installations, including in the UAE, which said on Tuesday that Iran had fired two ballistic missiles at vessels off its coast.

Despite a recent lull in hostilities between the United States and Iran, the Strait of Hormuz – which



War scare: A satellite image shows aircraft at Prince Sultan Air Base in Saudi Arabia. REUTERS

Tehran has blockaded and through which vessels departing most UAE ports must pass – remains a flashpoint, and attacks on commercial ships have

continued. A framework U.S.-Iran deal aimed at reopening the vital trade corridor collapsed, and although both sides recently said messages were being

exchanged, U.S. President Donald Trump on Tuesday insisted talks were off, taunting Iran with a social media post depicting the strait as a “NEW U.S. Territory”.

‘Participation in war’

Iranian armed forces chief of staff Ali Abdollahi warned on Wednesday “that any assistance or facilitation provided to the aggressor U.S. military amounts to participation in the U.S. military operation”, according to the Mehr news agency.

The war between Iran and the United States broke out on February 28 with U.S.-Israeli attacks on

the Islamic republic, which retaliated with missile and drone strikes across the region.

Since the start of the conflict, many West Asian countries have said they would not allow the United States to use their territory as a launchpad for attacks, though Mr. Abdollahi cast doubt on those promises.

“It seems unlikely that such a large number of military aircraft, particularly refuelling aircraft, could be present at regional bases without knowledge of host countries,” said Mr. Abdollahi, adding Gulf countries “should know that we are fully aware of the situation”.

ISLAMABAD

Pakistan extends airspace ban for Indian aircraft till September 24



REUTERS

▶ Pakistan on Wednesday extended the closure of its airspace to Indian aircraft until September 24. The decision comes ahead of the expiry of the previous restriction on August 23. Pakistan and India imposed matching airspace restrictions on each other's airlines after the Pahalgam terrorist attack in April 2025. PTI

‘HATE SPEECH’

Arrest warrant against Mahua for skipping court summons



TMC MP Mahua Moitra

Ravik Bhattacharya

Kolkata, August 19

THE KRISHNANAGAR court on Wednesday ordered the immediate issuance of an arrest warrant against TMC MP Mahua Moitra for non-compliance with summonses in an alleged hate speech case. Meanwhile, Moitra said she would challenge the order in a higher court.

Noting that she had failed to appear despite repeated summonses, the 3rd Judicial Magistrate Court held in its order that the Krishnanagar MP showed “no respect for the court of law”. “The series of disobedience of the order of this court.... goes to show the lackadaisical approach of the accused to comply with the court order and accordingly this court is left with no other option but to issue a warrant of arrest against her,” the court said.

The Lok Sabha MP did not appear on at least four hearing dates — August 4, 12, 18 and 19. Moitra, however, has maintained that she wanted to be represented by her lawyer in court.

On June 17, a case was filed against Moitra at the Court of Chief Judicial Magistrate, Krishnanagar, on the complaint of Chaina Nandi, also a resident of Krishnanagar. The complainant alleged that the Lok Sabha MP had made remarks against the Union Home Minister, Army personnel, and “certain religious beliefs and symbols revered by” the Hindu community.

MINUTES OF RBI'S MPC MEETING: GOV SAID INFLATION IS EXPECTED TO TAPER FROM ITS PEAK IN Q3

RBI policy panel signals rate hike risk as inflation rises

George Mathew
Mumbai, August 19

THE RESERVE Bank of India's (RBI) Monetary Policy Committee (MPC) has signalled a cautious, wait-and-watch approach on the policy rate, with members calling for close monitoring of inflation before going for any policy tightening.

Members of the MPC indicated that as headline inflation is projected to peak at a level as high as 5.9% in Q3 2026-27, a "case for a hike may emerge" during the course of the year.

According to minutes of the MPC meeting held on August 5, RBI Governor Sanjay Malhotra said he would prefer to wait for more certainty to emerge on the inflation trajectory in terms of the persistence of realised prints at these or higher levels, the forecast and the likely levels to which inflation may normalise and settle, for any recalibration of the policy rate.

"We also need to be watchful as the risks of higher food, fuel and other input prices translating into a broad-based increase in inflation, and de-anchoring of expectations persist. Any evidence of these risks

• Inflation developments in 2026 & RBI's forecast

