

**P.L.RAJ IAS & IPS ACADEMY****Building Bureaucrats Since 2006****August 24, 2026 – Dinamani Newspaper – Tit bits**

1. The Union Petroleum Ministry has urged the states to give priority to measures for rapidly expanding the transition from Liquefied Petroleum Gas (LPG) to Piped Natural Gas (PNG) for household cooking needs. In a recent letter to the Chief Secretaries of the states, Petroleum Ministry Secretary Neeraj Mittal stated:

- i. Rapidly increasing the use of PNG can reduce the transportation and distribution burden of LPG.
- ii. To accelerate the expansion of PNG usage, the Central Government has issued the LPG Control Orders, 2026, and the Natural Gas and Petroleum Products Supply Orders, 2026, under Section 3 of the Essential Commodities Act, 1955.
- iii. No dual LPG and PNG connections in areas where PNG is available:
 - Under these orders, households should not have both LPG and PNG connections. In areas where underground piped PNG is available for cooking, LPG supply will be stopped to households that do not apply for a PNG connection even after being given due notice.
 - For this purpose, PNG Coordination Committees must be formed in each area by authorised city gas distribution companies and public-sector oil marketing companies.
 - These committees will identify households eligible for PNG connections and issue statutory notices to consumers and residents' welfare associations in this regard.
 - The committees will conduct awareness campaigns to accelerate the increase in PNG connections.
- iv. District administration should assist:

- Although the process of forming these committees is already underway, assistance from the district-level administration is crucial for ensuring the transition from LPG to PNG within the stipulated period.
- District administrations should help obtain statutory permissions for using the routes or land required for PNG distribution. They should also assist in verifying consumer details and resolving consumer grievances.
- Officials of the Food and Civil Supplies Department would be well suited for this task, as they have official contact with LPG distributors and are capable of working directly at the field level.

v. Nodal officer to be appointed:

- State Chief Secretaries should direct the Food and Civil Supplies Department to appoint a nodal officer at the district level for this task. The nodal officer should work in coordination with the PNG Coordination Committee.
- The Central Government is determined to expand PNG usage within a specified timeframe. Therefore, the states have been urged to accord priority to this matter.
- LPG imports were disrupted following the US-Iran war in West Asia.
- Against this backdrop, the Central Government is stepping up efforts to expand the use of PNG.

2. National Security Adviser Ajit Doval will travel to China on Monday (August 24). He will participate in the 25th India-China Special Representatives' talks to be held in Beijing on Tuesday (August 25).

- i. Ajit Doval and Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi have already been appointed as Special Representatives to hold discussions on the boundary issues between the two countries. These Special Representatives' talks have been held since 2003.
- ii. India and China share a 3,488-km-long border. There are territorial disputes at several points along the border. In addition, China lays claim to the Indian state of

Arunachal Pradesh. China claims that Arunachal Pradesh is part of Tibet, which it has already occupied, and refers to the region as "South Tibet." China also gave new names to several places there in 2017. India strongly condemned and opposed this move.

- iii. The border issue became particularly serious after clashes between troops of the two countries in the Galwan Valley in 2020. Subsequently, talks were held gradually, and the two countries agreed to disengage their troops from the disputed areas. As a result, border tensions have now eased considerably.
- iv. Chinese President Xi Jinping is expected to visit India to participate in the BRICS Summit to be held in New Delhi on September 12 and 13. The two leaders are likely to take decisions on several important issues during the visit. In this context, the Ajit Doval-Wang Yi talks assume significance.

3. More than 10 days have passed since the Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha were adjourned sine die, but the Monsoon Session of Parliament has not been formally prorogued. Congress General Secretary Jairam Ramesh has alleged that this indicates that the Central Government is attempting to convene a special session to pass the Delimitation Bill.

- i. According to the 131st Constitutional Amendment Bill (Delimitation Bill) introduced in Parliament last April, the Central Government plans to increase the maximum number of Lok Sabha seats to 850 in order to provide 33 per cent reservation for women in the Lok Sabha. Similarly, under the Bill, 33 per cent reservation for women would be provided in the Legislative Assemblies of the states and Union Territories.
- ii. However, the Bill did not secure the two-thirds majority required for passage in the Lok Sabha. Opposition parties, particularly the southern states, except Andhra Pradesh, did not support the Bill.
- iii. The southern states have expressed concern that if delimitation is carried out on the basis of this Bill, it would severely penalise states that have effectively

controlled their population. They have also pointed out that their strength in the Lok Sabha would be reduced.

- iv. Against this backdrop, the Central Government is attempting to reintroduce the Bill with certain amendments. It is reportedly likely to include a provision to increase the number of Lok Sabha constituencies in all states by 50 per cent.

4. As part of the “Lokayan 26” global maritime voyage, the Indian Navy’s sail training ship INS Sudarshini, along with naval personnel, arrived at the port of Lisbon in Portugal.

5. British driver and McLaren racer Lando Norris won the Dutch Grand Prix race in Formula 1. In the 12th race of the ongoing season, Norris registered his second consecutive victory.

6. India celebrated its third National Space Day on August 23, 2026.

7. The Indian High Commission in the Maldives has announced that a major milestone has been achieved in the country’s largest infrastructure project, being implemented with Indian financial assistance.

- i. The Greater Malé Connectivity Project, also known as the Thilamalé Bridge Project, involves constructing a 6.74-km-long bridge and road network across the sea to connect the Maldivian capital Malé with the islands of Villingili, Gulhifalhu and Thilafushi.
- ii. The project is being implemented with a \$400 million loan from India (approximately ₹3,828 crore) and \$100 million in financial assistance from the United States (approximately ₹957 crore). It is the largest infrastructure project in

the Maldives.

- iii. An agreement to implement the project was signed in 2021 with India's Afcons Infrastructure. More than 75 per cent of the project has now been completed.

8. The Ilankai Tamil Arasu Kachchi (ITAK) has urged that a nationwide referendum be conducted among the people of Sri Lanka on the country's 22nd Constitutional Amendment.

- i. Sri Lanka's 22nd Constitutional Amendment, 2026, provides for increasing the retirement age of Supreme Court judges from 65 to 67 and setting the retirement age of High Court judges, district judges and magistrates at 62. Several opposition parties have filed petitions before the country's Supreme Court, arguing that the amendment is unconstitutional.

9. The Scale and Location of Encroachments

- Ecologically Sensitive Zone: Persistent and expanding encroachments have plagued the protected forest areas of the Agasthyamalai biosphere, which encompasses Tamil Nadu's Kalakkad Mundanthurai Tiger Reserve (KMTR), Srivilliputhur-Megamalai Tiger Reserve (SMTR), and the Kanyakumari Wildlife Sanctuary.
 - SMTR Encroachment Area: In the Srivilliputhur-Megamalai Tiger Reserve alone, a massive 5,072 hectares of forest land has been encroached upon.
- i. The Nature of Encroachers and Structures
 - While indigenous tribal communities and poor laborers reside in huts for basic livelihood, wealthy individuals have set up holiday homes and luxury resorts.
 - Shockingly, 118 active or retired Government employees—spanning the military, police, CRPF, forest department, revenue department, electricity board, and school education—have illegally occupied 15 hectares of protected land.
 - Additionally, 116 Government and public utility structures have been constructed

in this protected zone without any prior permission.

(ii) Supreme Court's Mandate and Legal Proceedings

- A Supreme Court bench consisting of Justices Vikram Nath and Sandeep Mehta held a hearing on Wednesday (August 19, 2026) regarding the encroachments.
- The court issued a severe warning that if the state fails to swiftly clear the encroachments as previously ordered, it will order the deployment of paramilitary forces to carry out the eviction.
- Tamil Nadu's counsel, Jaideep Gupta, argued that over 4,600 families reside in the SMTR forest area, cultivating silk-cotton (elavam panju). Because many have lived there for generations, he requested more time, stating they must be provided alternative housing before eviction and confirming that commercial resorts in the area have already been shut down.

(iii) The Human and Environmental Cost

- Encroaching on natural wildlife paths forces animals into human settlements.
- Between January and August 2026, wild elephant attacks in the Nilgiris district claimed at least 7 lives. Furthermore, in the O-Valley region near Gudalur, tiger attacks killed 2 people within a two-week span.

(iv) Historical Precedents of Ignored Environmental Warnings

- The Gadgil Report (2011): An expert committee led by ecologist Madhav Gadgil warned the Union Ministry of Environment in 2011 that cutting down hills for roads and building tourist lodging in ecologically sensitive areas would invite major disasters.
- Wayanad Disaster (Kerala): In 2020, the Kerala State Disaster Management Authority warned that 4,000 families needed to be relocated from high-risk zones. This warning was ignored, resulting in a devastating landslide in July 2024 (in Mundakkai and Chooralimala) that killed over 400 people and destroyed countless households.
- Himalayan Sinking: Uncontrolled construction has made daily landslides a reality

in Uttarakhand and Himachal Pradesh, with the Himalayan town of Joshimath facing the imminent threat of sinking.

(v) Proposed Remedies and Way Forward

- The state must swiftly arrange alternative housing and livelihoods for the 4,600 families currently residing in the Agasthyamalai forest areas.
- Strict legal and disciplinary action must be initiated against the 118 Government employees who knowingly encroached on protected forest lands.
- The State Government must prioritize ecological safety and act decisively without fearing vote-bank politics or opposition criticisms to prevent future encroachments.

10. The National Crisis of Government School Closures

- **Decline in Schools and Enrollment:** Across India, 94,000 Government schools have been closed over the last 10 years, leading to a massive decline of 2.26 crore students enrolling in Government institutions.
- **Shift to Private Education:** The nationwide share of Government school students has plummeted from 71% in 2005 to 49.24% in 2024–25.
- **Funding Disputes:** Under the Right to Education (RTE) Act of 2010, a funding split of 65% from the Central Government and 35% from State Governments was recommended. However, the Central Government has refused to release its educational funding share to states that do not align with its specific school policies.

(i) The Enrollment Crisis in Tamil Nadu Districts

- **Nilgiris District:** In 48 Government schools, not a single student newly joined Class 1, and 20 schools recorded zero total students.
- **Trichy District:** A total of 44 Government primary schools registered fewer than 10 children.
- While school closures in Tamil Nadu are comparatively lower than in other states, many schools are turning into single or double-teacher schools, making them

highly vulnerable to eventual closure.

(ii) Case Studies: Turning Dilapidated Schools into Places of Hope

The dedication of individual teachers, supported by local communities, successfully revived several failing schools:

- Naduppalayam Primary School (Erode District):
 - In 2018, this Panchayat Union school had only 2 students left.
 - Headmaster Shaktivel engaged local villagers to address their concerns. He introduced specialized English instruction and weekly training sessions to boost students' creativity.
 - Today, the school's enrollment has surged to 90 students.
- Mugappair Corporation Primary School (Chennai):
 - Originally started in 1935, the student strength had dwindled to only 35 students by 2009.
 - Headmistress Krishnaveni took charge and introduced targeted administrative and educational improvements with local support.
 - Enrollment grew to 205 students, and the teaching staff expanded from 2 to 6. Remarkably, the school now supports and educates 27 children with autism.
- Municipal Muslim Urdu Primary School, Panruti (Cuddalore District):
 - Originally established in 1926, the school had only 5 students remaining in 2014.
 - Headmistress Premalatha, alongside fellow teachers and local public support, initiated major outreach efforts.
 - The school now boasts 200 children (60 in kindergarten classes and 140 in Classes 1 to 5) serviced by 5 active teachers.
- Government Middle School, Ramanathapuram (Thiruvottiyur, Chennai):
 - When Headmistress Muthuselvi took charge in 2013, the school had only 130 students.

- Leveraging the local MLA Constituency Development Fund and Corporation Funds, the school built two new buildings to upgrade its infrastructure. Teacher work culture was modernized, and extra staff were appointed.
- The student body has expanded to 567 students, supported by 11 Government teachers and 10 School Management Committee-appointed teachers.

(iii) Key Strategies for Policy Reforms

- Kindergarten as the Gateway: Starting LKG and UKG classes in all Government and Government-aided schools is highly critical. When parents enroll children in private kindergartens, they rarely move them to Government schools for Class 1. Government kindergarten options act as vital entryways that secure long-term enrollments.
- Urgent Need for Systematic Auditing: The State Government must thoroughly analyze why student numbers fall. It must audit infrastructure quality, classroom availability, clean toilet facilities, and teacher shortages to strategically protect Government schools.