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EDITORIAL ANALYSIS

The Happiness Deficit – What the 2026 World Happiness Report Tells Policymakers

INDIAN EXPRESS

20 March 2026

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CURATED & WRITTEN BY

Bharat Choudhary

UPSC Educator & Content Creator •

[linkedin.com/in/epicbharat](https://www.linkedin.com/in/epicbharat)

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GS2

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The Indian Express

MAINS RELEVANCE:

GS Paper 2

GS Paper 4



INTERVIEW ANGLE

"India ranks 116th on the World Happiness Report while being one of the world's fastest-growing economies. Does GDP growth alone guarantee well-being? What policy interventions should India adopt to improve social happiness metrics?"

WHY IN NEWS

The World Happiness Report 2026, published by the UN Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN), ranked India 116th out of 147 nations and issued a stark warning about social media's role in declining youth well-being in high-income countries — a finding with direct policy implications for India's rapidly digitising young population.

THE REPORT'S KEY FINDINGS

The **World Happiness Report 2026** goes beyond its annual country rankings to deliver two structurally important findings:

Finding 1 — The Social Media-Youth Unhappiness Correlation:

Teenagers using social media **5+ hours/day** report significantly lower life satisfaction — particularly among girls

Youth life satisfaction in the US, Canada, UK, Australia, and New Zealand has declined sharply since **2012** — the year smartphone penetration crossed mass adoption thresholds

Moderate usage (under 1 hour/day) shows no statistically significant negative correlation

The report cites Jonathan Haidt's "The Anxious Generation" framework — social media disrupts sleep, social comparison, and reduces face-to-face interaction

Finding 2 — The Happiness-Prosperity Disconnect:

Several wealthy nations (US: 24th, UK: 23rd, France: 27th) rank far below smaller Nordic states despite higher GDP per capita

Costa Rica (4th) — with GDP per capita far below most G7 nations — outranks all major industrial economies

Countries scoring highest on **social support** and **freedom to make life choices** show happiness resilience even at lower income levels

INDIA'S RANKING — READING IT RIGHT

India's position: 116th (out of 147 nations surveyed), up from 118th in 2025.

The six Gallup indicators and India's likely weak spots:

Indicator	India's Challenge
GDP per capita (PPP)	Low by global average; however improving rapidly
Social support	Moderate — joint family system provides buffer but urbanisation erodes it
Healthy life expectancy	Burden of NCDs, anaemia, malnutrition; life expectancy ~70 years vs Nordic ~83
Freedom to make life choices	Social restrictions — caste, gender, religion — constrain freedom for large sections
Generosity	India scores relatively better — high charitable and informal giving culture
Perceptions of corruption	India's weak point — Corruption Perceptions Index 2024: 96th globally

The editorial's argument: India's happiness gap is not primarily an **income gap** — it is a **social equity gap**, a **governance gap**, and increasingly, a **mental health gap** among urban youth.

THE SOCIAL MEDIA POLICY IMPERATIVE

The 2026 report's digital warning has India-specific urgency:

India has the **world's largest youth population** (~250 million aged 15–29)

India has **over 750 million internet users** — adding ~20 million annually

Social media penetration among 15–24 year olds: **>70%** (IAMAI, 2025)

Average screen time among Indian teens: **6.5 hours/day** — well above the report's 5-hour risk threshold

What the report recommends globally:

Digital literacy curriculum in schools — distinguish between healthy and harmful usage

Screen-time transparency tools by platforms (Apple Screen Time model)

Social media age restrictions — UK's Online Safety Act (2023) bans under-13 access; US states pursuing 16+ age gates

Smartphone-free school policies — already implemented in France (2023) and several Australian states

India's policy gap: India has the **Information Technology Act, 2000** (amended 2008), **IT Rules 2021** (intermediary guidelines), and **Digital Personal Data Protection Act, 2023** — but none directly address social media's impact on youth mental health. A **National Digital Well-being Policy** is absent.

THE EDITORIAL'S CORE ARGUMENT

The Indian Express editorial makes three interconnected arguments:

1. ECONOMIC GROWTH ≠ HUMAN FLOURISHING

India's GDP growth narrative (7%+ growth for consecutive years) should not be conflated with well-being. The happiness report's methodology deliberately separates GDP from the subjective experience of life — and India's 116th rank, despite strong growth, shows the gap between economic output and lived quality of life.

2. SOCIAL MEDIA IS A PUBLIC HEALTH PROBLEM

The editorial treats the 5-hour finding not as a parenting issue but as a **regulatory and public health challenge**. Platforms profit from maximising engagement; algorithmic design is explicitly built to extend screen time. The state must intervene — as it does with tobacco, alcohol, and food safety — to regulate products proven harmful to minors.

3. GOVERNANCE QUALITY DETERMINES HAPPINESS AT SCALE

The report's anti-corruption finding (top 20 happiest nations all score high on rule of law, low on corruption) is a direct challenge to India's governance ecosystem. The CPI score and happiness rank are strongly correlated — India's improving but still weak governance performance is a structural drag on national well-being.

HAPPINESS POLICY — WHAT WORKS

Nordic Model (Finland/Iceland/Denmark):

High social trust, universal healthcare, free education

Strong social safety net (unemployment benefits 70–80% of last salary)

Low inequality (Gini coefficient: 0.27–0.29 vs India's ~0.35)

High civic participation, strong local governance

Costa Rica Model:

Abolished standing army in 1948 (Article 12 of Constitution) — redirected defence spending to education and healthcare

Universal healthcare under **Caja Costarricense de Seguro Social (CCSS)** since 1941

Buen Vivir philosophy: well-being rooted in community, environment, and relationships — not consumption

Policy implications for India:

Mental Health Policy 2014 — needs a 2.0 with digital well-being component

Ayushman Bharat could include mental health coverage (NIMHANS estimates 10% of India needs mental health support — only 1% access care)

Pradhan Mantri Jan Arogya Yojana (PMJAY) — expand to include mental health hospitalisations

NEP 2020 — social-emotional learning components could address youth well-being

UPSC RELEVANCE

World Happiness Report (publisher: UN SDSN), Finland #1 (9th consecutive year), India 116th, Afghanistan 147th, Costa Rica 4th, Gallup World Poll methodology, 6 indicators (GDP/capita, social support, life expectancy, freedom, generosity, corruption perception), IAMAI data on India internet users.

Mains GS2: *International reports and India's governance gaps, digital regulation, mental health policy, social safety nets, comparative governance (Nordic model).* **GS4:** *Happiness as a governance goal, ethics of social media design, duty of state to protect youth from algorithmic harm, corporate social responsibility.*

★ FACTS CORNER — KNOWLEDGEPEDIA
WORLD HAPPINESS REPORT 2026:

Publisher: UN Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN)

Methodology: Gallup World Poll — average life evaluation score (Cantril Ladder: 0–10 scale)

Countries surveyed: 147

Finland: #1 for 9th consecutive year

India: 116th (up from 118th in 2025)

Afghanistan: 147th (last); Sierra Leone, Malawi in bottom 5

Costa Rica: 4th — highest ever for any Latin American nation

6 indicators: GDP/capita (PPP), social support, healthy life expectancy, freedom of choice, generosity, corruption perception

SOCIAL MEDIA + YOUTH WELL-BEING FINDINGS:

Risk threshold: 5+ hours/day social media → significant reduction in life satisfaction

Most affected: Teenage girls in US, Canada, UK, Australia, New Zealand

Safe zone: Under 1 hour/day — no statistically significant negative effect

Year of decline onset: ~2012 (smartphone mass adoption)

Reference: Jonathan Haidt — “The Anxious Generation” (2024)

INDIA DIGITAL STATISTICS (2025–26):

Internet users: 750+ million

Youth social media penetration (15–24): >70% (IAMAI 2025)

Average teen screen time: ~6.5 hours/day

India’s youth population (15–29): ~250 million (world’s largest)

INDIA POLICY LANDSCAPE:

IT Act, 2000 (amended 2008): Base internet regulation law

IT Rules 2021: Intermediary liability, grievance redressal

Digital Personal Data Protection Act, 2023: Data privacy; no youth screen-time provision

Mental Health Policy 2014: Needs update for digital well-being

NIMHANS estimate: 10% of Indians need mental health care; only 1% access it

COMPARATIVE MODELS:

Costa Rica: Army abolished 1948 (Article 12); CCSS universal healthcare since 1941; GDP per capita ~\$14,000 but ranked 4th in happiness

Finland Gini: ~0.27; India Gini: ~0.35 (higher inequality)

UK Online Safety Act (2023): Bans under-13 from social media

France (2023): Banned smartphones in all schools

OTHER RELEVANT FACTS:

Corruption Perceptions Index 2024: India 96th globally (Transparency International)

Cantril Ladder: 0 (worst possible life) to 10 (best possible life) — self-reported life evaluation scale

PMJAY: PM Jan Arogya Yojana — health insurance ₹5 lakh/family/year; mental health hospitalisations not yet covered

Ayushman Bharat Digital Mission (ABDM): Health ID linked to medical records — could integrate mental health data

Sources: Indian Express, UN SDSN Happiness Report, IAMAI

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Bharat Choudhary

UPSC Educator & Content Creator

 [linkedin.com/in/epicbharat](https://www.linkedin.com/in/epicbharat)

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