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EDITORIAL ANALYSIS

The Case for Truth and Reconciliation in Punjab

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 The Indian Express

21 July 2026

GS1

GS2

 Every fact web-verified against primary sources

THE LIFT LINE

A society cannot bury a wound and call it healing. Punjab needs to be allowed to remember, so that it can finally move on.

WHY THIS EDITORIAL MATTERS FOR YOUR EXAM

Punjab's troubled decade is not just history, it is a living case study in how a democracy repairs the social fabric after political violence. The syllabus treats communalism, regionalism and secularism as forces to be managed, and it treats the state's response to internal disorder as a test of constitutional maturity. A truth-and-reconciliation approach asks the deeper question examiners increasingly pose, whether justice means only punishment, or also acknowledgement, truth-telling and the rebuilding of trust between citizen and state.

GS Paper 1: Indian society, the roots of communalism and regionalism, and the social consequences of the events of 1984 and the militancy of the 1980s and 1990s. **GS Paper 2:** the functioning of the state, the mechanisms of justice, centre-state trust, and the constitutional limits within which any reconciliation body must operate. For **Prelims**, hold the specifics: **transitional justice** as the field concerned with redress after mass abuses; **truth and reconciliation commissions (TRCs)**, the best known being **South Africa's post-apartheid TRC** chaired by Archbishop **Desmond Tutu**; the distinction between **restorative justice**, which centres victims, acknowledgement and repair, and **retributive justice**, which centres punishment. For **Mains**, this is a rich answer on balancing the rule of law with social healing, where the strongest position insists that reconciliation must supplement, never replace, accountability and the rights of victims.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

Punjab lived through more than a decade of militancy from the early 1980s, a period of insurgency, counter-insurgency and heavy loss of civilian life. The anti-Sikh violence of **1984**, which followed the assassination of the Prime Minister, left a wound that successive commissions of inquiry, special investigation teams and court

cases have probed for decades without producing a settled sense of closure for victims. The state ultimately restored order and constitutional government, and Punjab returned to the democratic mainstream. Yet the memory of those years, on all sides, has never been fully acknowledged in a shared public account.

Around the world, societies emerging from such periods have experimented with **transitional-justice** mechanisms. The South African TRC offered conditional acknowledgement and truth-telling in exchange for full disclosure, on the reasoning that a documented, publicly owned truth can do what scattered litigation cannot, namely give victims recognition and deny anyone the comfort of denial. The relevance to Punjab is not that any foreign model can be copied, but that the underlying need, acknowledgement and closure within the rule of law, is universal.

THE CORE ARGUMENT / ISSUE

What courts alone cannot deliver

Criminal trials establish individual guilt in specific cases, and they matter. But a fragmented set of cases, stretched over decades, cannot produce a shared account of what a community went through. Victims are left without recognition, and the wider society is left with rumour and grievance. A truth process is designed to fill precisely this gap by centring the victim's experience rather than a single accused's **culpability**.

Restorative alongside retributive justice

The choice is often posed as reconciliation versus justice, but this is a false binary. **Retributive justice** punishes wrongdoing and must continue for grave crimes. **Restorative justice** adds acknowledgement, the recording of testimony, and, where appropriate, **reparation** and memorialisation. A credible Indian mechanism would run alongside the courts, uphold the rights of victims, and operate strictly within the constitutional framework and the rule of law, not as an amnesty for serious crime.

Federal trust and national unity

Any such process must strengthen, not weaken, the bond between Punjab and the Union. Handled with sensitivity and balance, acknowledgement can rebuild trust between citizen and state and affirm that the constitutional order hears its people. Handled carelessly, it could reopen divisions. The design, **mandate** and leadership therefore matter as much as the idea.

DIMENSION	RETRIBUTIVE APPROACH	RESTORATIVE / TRC APPROACH
Central question	Who is guilty and how are they punished	What happened and how do we acknowledge it
Focus	The accused	The victim and the society
Outcome sought	Conviction and sentence	Truth, acknowledgement, closure, repair
Relationship to rule of law	Core of it	Must operate within it, not replace it

HOW TO THINK ABOUT THIS (ANALYTICAL FRAME)

Use the frame of **acknowledgement before closure**. A grievance festers not only because a wrong was done but because it was never publicly recognised. The analytical sequence runs, documented truth first, then acknowledgement by the state and society, then closure and repair, all resting on a foundation of the rule of law and continued accountability for grave crimes. Apply this test to any post-conflict situation, whether it is the healing of a region or the redress of historic injustice, and ask whether the mechanism on offer produces recognition for victims or merely draws a line under an unexamined past. Only the former heals.

THE DIAGRAM IN WORDS

Unhealed 1984 and militancy legacy + scattered court cases -> victims without acknowledgement + persisting grievance -> credible victim-centred truth process within constitutional limits -> documented truth + state acknowledgement + accountability preserved -> closure + restored federal trust + national unity

WAY FORWARD

- 1 **Centre the victims.** Any mechanism must be built around the testimony, dignity and recognition of those who suffered on all sides, not around political point-scoring.
- 2 **Operate within the Constitution and the rule of law.** A truth body should complement the courts and preserve accountability for grave crimes, never function as a blanket amnesty.
- 3 **Ensure credible, non-partisan leadership.** The legitimacy of the process depends on a widely trusted, impartial chair and a transparent, time-bound mandate.
- 4 **Tie truth to repair and memory.** Pair documented findings with reparation where warranted and with shared memorialisation, so that acknowledgement translates into durable closure and reconciliation.

PYQ LINKAGE AND PRACTICE

This theme links to GS1 questions on communalism, regionalism and the social forces that threaten unity, and to GS2 questions on the mechanisms of justice and centre-state relations. UPSC has asked about the causes and consequences of communal violence and about the role of institutions in maintaining national integration. A candidate should be able to weigh restorative and retributive justice and to argue for reconciliation without diluting the rule of law.

Practice question: “In healing the legacy of political violence, acknowledgement and truth-telling can achieve what criminal trials alone cannot.” Examine this proposition in the Indian context, keeping the rule of law and the rights of victims central. (250 words, 15 marks)

Sources: The Indian Express, Ministry of Home Affairs

Source: The Case for Truth and Reconciliation in Punjab — Ujiyari.com | Free UPSC & State PCS Editorial Analysis

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