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Unpacking the Global 'Happiness' Rankings

Context

- The 2025 World Happiness Report again ranks Finland as the world's happiest nation, while India sits at 118 and Pakistan, despite severe crises, places higher at 109.
- These contrasts raise a deeper question: What does global happiness really measure? And why do economic realities tell a different story? India, a rapidly expanding economy of **\$3.7 trillion**, trails far behind Pakistan, which survives on **IMF**
- Understanding this gap requires examining how happiness is defined, reported and perceived.

Beyond GDP: The Mirage of Measurement

- The World Happiness Report relies on the **Cantril Ladder**, a self-reported scale supported by variables such as GDP, life expectancy, social support, freedom, generosity and corruption perception.
- While these markers seem comprehensive, they overlook a critical truth: happiness is profoundly shaped by expectations and cultural context.
- Countries with **lower expectations** often report higher well-being because citizens adapt to hardship.
- In contrast, societies with rising aspirations, like India, experience dissatisfaction not because lives worsen but because expectations rise faster than outcomes.
- This form of **restlessness** signals ambition rather than despair. The United States illustrates this paradox: despite immense wealth, it ranks only 24 due to declining trust and rising social anxiety.
- Even the report acknowledges that **social trust** and belief in community kindness are stronger predictors of happiness than income.
- India's challenge, therefore, is not limited to economic development but to relational well-being.

The Politics of Perception: When Data Becomes Distortion

- A 2022 paper by the Economic Advisory Council to the Prime Minister showed that indices like Freedom House rely on small pools of Western experts, embedding **subjective** and sometimes **ideological**
- The World Happiness Report shares this vulnerability.
- Authoritarian states may score better simply because citizens cannot freely express dissatisfaction.
- Democracies, by contrast, are penalised because open debate, criticism and media scrutiny make problems visible.

- India's scores often fall during noisy political cycles or intense public scrutiny — reflecting **transparency**, not unhappiness.
- India's ranking has fluctuated widely across the decade, from 94 to 144.
- Yet these swings rarely align with economic performance. What they track instead is public sentiment shaped by scandals, political turbulence or social debate.
- Thus, global rankings can mistake **democratic cacophony** for societal unhappiness.

Trust, Fairness, and the Invisible Architecture of Well-Being

- True well-being depends less on income than on trust, trust in institutions, communities and neighbours.
- Finland's high-ranking stems from extraordinary **institutional trust**.
- A lost wallet is likely to be returned, reflecting a belief in fairness.
- India's trust ecosystem is more uneven. Institutional trust varies, but social and familial trust remain strong, forming informal safety nets that global indices rarely measure.
- The COVID-19 crisis demonstrated this clearly: millions returned to villages because **community bonds** offered security unavailable in cities.
- Western frameworks often carry a **WEIRD bias**, shaped by Western, Educated, Industrialised, Rich and Democratic norms.
- They privilege individualistic trust systems and overlook collective ones. India, with its familial and community-based networks, rarely fits neatly into these paradigms.
- However, India is changing. Initiatives such as **Tele-MANAS**, workplace well-being programmes and public campaigns around mental health show a growing recognition that emotional health is not a luxury but a public policy priority.

Toward a More Holistic Path: Pairing Aspiration with Empathy

• Rebuilding Social Capital

- India needs stronger community fabric, shared public spaces, inter-generational engagement and collective activities.
- Research shows that larger households and belief in community kindness greatly enhance happiness.

• Restoring Institutional Trust

- Simplified, transparent public services build trust. When everyday interactions, from ration cards to transport systems, work reliably, citizens feel respected and secure.

• Integrating Mental Health into Economic Strategy

- Mental health is directly tied to productivity. WHO estimates that every dollar spent on psychological well-being yields four dollars in returns, highlighting mental health as an economic imperative.

Conclusion

- Happiness rankings do not simply measure joy, they capture expectations, values and cultural dynamics.
- India's ranking is less a verdict on misery than a reflection of its **ambition**, its desire for cleaner air, better governance and fuller lives. Its dissatisfaction speaks not of despair but of aspiration.
- As The Pursuit of Happiness suggests, happiness is not a possession but a **pursuit**.
- India's journey is ongoing. A country that debates, questions and dreams is not unhappy, it is **unfinished**, still shaping its true idea of happiness.

Unpacking the Global 'Happiness' Rankings FAQs

Q1. Why does Finland consistently rank as the happiest country?

Ans. Finland consistently ranks as the happiest country because it has high social trust, strong welfare systems, and a deep belief in fairness and community support.

Q2. Why does India score low despite rapid economic growth?

Ans. India scores low because rising aspirations, uneven institutional trust, and shrinking social connections reduce perceived life satisfaction.

Q3. How can Pakistan rank higher than India despite economic instability?

Ans. Pakistan can rank higher because happiness rankings depend on perceptions, and countries with lower expectations often report higher satisfaction.

Q4. What role does social trust play in happiness?

Ans. Social trust plays a central role in happiness because people feel more secure, supported, and hopeful when they trust their communities and institutions.

Q5. What must India focus on to improve its happiness ranking?

Ans. India must focus on rebuilding social capital, strengthening institutional trust, and integrating mental health into public policy to improve its happiness ranking.

Source: **The Hindu**

Time to Sort Out India's Cereal Mess

Context

- The recent controversy over paddy procurement during Tamil Nadu's short-term kuruvai season has underscored the need to **critically re-examine** India's overall **foodgrain procurement system**.
- The Tamil Nadu Civil Supplies Corporation (TNCSC), which procures paddy on behalf of the Food Corporation of India (FCI), faced delays, administrative gaps, and allegations of corruption, problems intensified by a predictable rise of nearly two lakh acres in paddy cultivation.

- The issue reflects a broader national pattern: farmers increasingly find paddy a **safe bet** due to assured returns through procurement, raising questions about the long-term sustainability of such incentives.

Paddy Procurement Data

- The glut is not confined to Tamil Nadu. Nationwide, paddy procurement (as rice) reached **86 lakh tonnes** by October 31, 2025, a sharp rise from 82.08 lakh tonnes the previous year.
- Central pool stocks for rice and wheat have consistently exceeded mandated norms over the last three years.
- **Rice stocks** alone stood at 356.1 lakh tonnes in October 2025, more than triple the norm of 102.5 lakh tonnes.
- While wheat stocks fluctuate more closely with actual consumption needs, rice has remained consistently oversupplied.
- Between 2022 and 2025, annual rice procurement held steady at 525–547 lakh tonnes, whereas offtake under the National Food Security Act (NFSA) remained much lower at 392–427 lakh tonnes.
- In contrast, **PDS utilisation** for wheat exceeded procurement in two of the last three years.
- Despite these mismatches, the Union government allocates around ₹2 lakh crore annually in food subsidies.
- This **rising surplus in rice** contrasts sharply with shortages of other essential commodities such as pulses and oilseeds, highlighting structural imbalances in crop production and procurement priorities.

Edible Oil Imports

- India's dependence on imports for pulses and edible oils is persistent and costly.
- According to the Agriculture Ministry's 2024–25 report, India imported **₹1.2 lakh crore** worth of edible oil and **₹30,000 crore** of pulses in 2023–24. Nearly **55%** of edible oil needs are met through imports.
- Global disruptions, especially from the Russia-Ukraine conflict, sharply increased import costs, even though the imported quantities remained within **135–157 lakh tonnes** annually over the past six years.
- Domestic oilseed production has stagnated despite steady cultivation area. Since 2014, annual production has crossed **400 lakh tonnes** only once, raising concerns about the long-term viability of the sector.

Systemic Questions Raised

- This situation raises several pressing questions. **First**, is India's rice procurement policy, justified historically for food security, still sustainable when stocks are far above requirement?
- Excessive emphasis on paddy encourages monoculture, undermines soil health, and worsens water scarcity, especially in regions like Punjab and Tamil Nadu.
- Second, why have policy efforts to strengthen pulses and oilseed production yielded **limited results**, failing to replicate the success of the 1960s Green Revolution?
- Third, should the country continue with the **centralised model** of procurement, storage, and transport by agencies like FCI, despite growing inefficiencies?

Leakages and Inefficiencies in the Public Distribution System

- Reports such as the one by the Indian Council for Research on International Economic Relations (ICRIER) have highlighted leakage rates of nearly **28%** in rice and wheat.
- Although authorities contest such findings, there is broad consensus that the PDS still suffers from diversion, identification errors, and logistical inefficiencies.
- Originally intended to manage food shortages, the PDS has evolved into a **vast welfare mechanism**, but one that remains vulnerable to systemic gaps.

Crop Diversification as a Strategic Imperative

- In light of these challenges, crop diversification emerges as a **critical pathway forward**.
- However, farmers' hesitation to diversify is rooted in real concerns: market risks, uncertain returns, and inadequate institutional support.
- Overcoming such resistance requires a combination of:
 - Area-specific market studies
 - Financial incentives and transitional support
 - Reliable procurement mechanisms for alternative crops
 - Technical guidance and risk-mitigation strategies
- Given India's rice surplus, enabling **free export of rice**, rather than imposing sudden restrictions, would help stabilise domestic prices and offer farmers more flexibility.

Strengthening Farmer-Centric Institutions: FPOs, SHGs, and Cooperatives

- A promising avenue for reform lies in empowering **Farmer Producer Organisations (FPOs)**, self-help groups, and cooperative societies.
- These institutions can bridge the gap between farmers and markets, reduce reliance on middlemen, and improve supply chain organisation.
- Currently, FPOs are still emerging, but their potential is considerable:
 - They can facilitate direct linkages between farmers and industries (e.g., papad manufacturers sourcing blackgram directly).
 - They can provide crucial services such as **soil health** awareness and crop diversification training.
 - They can take up procurement functions, as seen in West Bengal's use of FPOs for paddy procurement.

Conclusion

- The Tamil Nadu paddy procurement controversy is not an isolated **administrative lapse** but a reflection of deeper structural imbalances, overproduction of rice, inadequate diversification, heavy import dependence for essential foods, and mounting fiscal burdens.
- Collaborative efforts involving farmers, agricultural scientists, food security experts, and policymakers are essential to redesign a system that is financially prudent, environmentally sustainable, and **nutritionally balanced**.
- Only through such a collective and forward-looking approach can India ensure that its food security strategy remains robust, **equitable**, and **sustainable** in the decades to come.

Time to Sort Out India's Cereal Mess FAQs

Q1. Why did paddy procurement in Tamil Nadu face problems during the kuruvai season?

Ans. Paddy procurement in Tamil Nadu faced problems because of delays, administrative lapses, and corruption allegations, which were worsened by an unexpected increase in cultivated area.

Q2. What does the national data show about rice stocks in recent years?

Ans. National data shows that rice stocks in the central pool have consistently exceeded required norms, indicating a growing surplus.

Q3. Why is India heavily dependent on imports of edible oils?

Ans. India is heavily dependent on edible oil imports because domestic oilseed production has stagnated despite a stable cultivation area.

Q4. What is one major reason farmers hesitate to diversify away from paddy?

Ans. Farmers hesitate to diversify because alternative crops do not offer the same level of assured returns as paddy under the MSP system.

Q5. How can Farmer Producer Organisations (FPOs) help address procurement challenges?

Ans. Farmer Producer Organisations can help by linking farmers directly with markets, improving supply chains, and taking on procurement responsibilities.

Source: **The Hindu**

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