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Abstract

Simplifying the GST rate structure by consolidating rates into two to three is desirable. Multiple rates may help make the Indian GST progressive, but they also open up scope for misclassification of commodities and associated revenue leakages. Moreover, various GST rates and frequent changes in the tax schedules increase the tax compliance costs. GST rate-wise taxable values and tax liabilities differ across States and largely depend on households' consumption patterns. Therefore, rate rationalisation in the GST may have state-specific revenue impacts. In the absence of revenue protection after the GST transition period, the question is how the revenues of states can be protected. Setting tax rates for heterogeneous commodities (serving different consumer groups with varying income levels) is challenging in developing countries. Therefore, policymakers often face the dilemma of whether to tax or exempt a commodity. Exemptions of commodities shrink the tax base, increasing the tax burden on taxable commodities. The high presence of the informal sector (in supply chains) typically makes tax enforcement challenging. This paper highlights the challenges the GST Council may encounter before rate rationalisation and offers possible options for mitigating the revenue impacts.

Key Words: Goods and Services Tax (GST), rate rationalisation, revenue impact assessment, revenue protection, consumption of goods and services, India.

JEL Codes: H71, E21, E62.

1. Introduction

Simplifying the GST rate structure has been an issue the GST Council has been discussing during its last several meetings. There are seven GST rates in India – Nil rate, 0.25%, 3%, 5%, 12%, 18%, and 28%. In addition, there are a few specific rates, for example, 1% (applicable to tax collection at source and composition taxpayers involved in manufacturing), 1.5% (relevant to the construction of affordable residential apartments, cutting and polishing diamond and diamond job works), 6% (applicable to brick kilns under composition scheme, without input tax credit [ITC], and composition taxpayers involved in providing services), and 7.5% (applicable to construction of residential apartments other than affordable residential apartments). Exports are zero-rated, and items falling under the 'Nil rate' cannot claim ITC against inputs and capital goods. Some selected items (e.g., coal and lignite, tobacco and tobacco products, aerated waters, carbonated beverages made from fruit or containing fruit juice, and certain motor vehicles) attract GST compensation cess and the applicable GST rate.

The multiple rate structure makes Indian GST vulnerable to revenue leakages and prone to litigation. Misclassification of commodities into lower tax brackets cannot be ruled out, which results in revenue leakages. Fixing tax rates based on prices and marketing features of the products (e.g., packaging and labelling) further increases the scope for misclassification of commodities and erodes the tax base. Additionally, multiple rate structures and frequent changes in tax schedules increase the compliance costs of taxation.

It is worth noting that goods and services available in the Indian market are not homogeneous. The price, quality, quantity, and marketing features (e.g., packaging, labelling, and branding) vary significantly depending on the segment of consumers that the good or service targets. Depending on purchasing power (disposable income), the propensity to consume, and the preferences and habits of consumers, there is a significant variation in the products available in Indian markets. Setting tax rates for heterogeneous commodities (serving different consumer groups with varying income levels) is challenging in developing countries. The political economy of taxation plays a significant role here, as products targeting lower-income consumers are often exempt from taxation. Given the considerable presence of the informal sector in manufacturing, trading, and services in India, imposing taxes on certain commodities (mostly consumer goods) targeting consumers from lower economic strata may shift the supply chain from the formal sector to the informal sector. Therefore, policymakers often face the dilemma of whether to tax or exempt a commodity. Exemptions of commodities shrink the tax base, increasing the tax burden on taxable commodities. Additionally, exemptions lead to a cascading effect of taxes.[1] Additionally, a high presence of the informal sector (in supply chains) often makes tax enforcement challenging. In other words, unlike in developed countries, various goods and services in India cater to different consumer groups. Income and consumption inequality in our society are the major drivers for product differentiation. Therefore, setting a single GST rate for a single item may not be efficient from an equity aspect of taxation when heterogeneity prevails in terms of quality, quantity, and features. The rationale behind this argument is that setting a

[1] When the inputs of the exempted goods are taxed and outputs are exempted, ITC adjustments are not permissible, increasing the exempted goods' prices. Exempted goods are often used as inputs for other goods and services, resulting in a cascading of taxes through the prices of exempted goods.

differential GST rate could make the GST progressive. Therefore, a single GST rate for products may be regressive. Therefore, the rationale behind the multiple rate structure of the GST is to make the GST system progressive.

Secondly, Indian GST has evolved from the erstwhile Central VAT (CenVAT) and State VAT systems (Mukherjee, 2021). Revenue protection or neutrality was a fundamental objective to achieve consensus on tax reforms in a federal setup. Therefore, in setting tax rates across items, policymakers emphasised the prevailing CenVAT and State VAT rates. The assumption behind this move was that, even after removing the cascading effect of taxes, setting tax rates at or even lower than the rates prevailing in the Central VAT and State VAT systems would help achieve revenue neutrality through higher market efficiency, resulting in higher economic growth and tax buoyancy during the post-GST period. It is worth highlighting that, following the introduction of the GST on 1 July 2017, the GST Council has reduced GST rates on several occasions for various commodities. The changes aimed to mitigate the impact of the GST on the Indian economy in terms of inflation and economic growth. This resulted in a revenue impact for the Union and State governments. The GST compensation helped states cope with the shortfall in the State GST collections. The Union government managed the GST revenue shortfall by imposing cesses and surcharges on the Union excise and customs duties (Mukherjee, 2022).

Given the present GST return system, this paper highlights the challenges of assessing the revenue impact of the GST rate rationalisation. The following section presents the challenges associated with assessing GST revenue across different tax rates. To substantiate the argument that differential revenue impacts exist across states due to the rationalisation of the GST rate structure, Section 3 presents the distribution of average monthly per capita consumption expenditure across GST rate categories based on the recent consumer expenditure survey. Section 4 discusses the possible measures to mitigate revenue uncertainties associated with restructuring the GST rate structure. In section 5, we draw our conclusions.

2. Challenges to Assess the Revenue Impact of the GST Rate Rationalisation

Before changing the GST rate structure, it is essential to know the composition of GST revenue across GST rates for the general, union, and state governments. Since a state's consumption is the primary basis for the GST, the composition of GST revenue across GST rates will likely differ across states, depending on the composition of people's consumption baskets across goods and services. Suppose the revenue protection or neutrality is the only guiding principle for restructuring the GST rate structure. In that case, the revenue interests of states cannot be ignored, especially after the GST compensation period. The revenue from the GST constitutes a significant share of own tax revenue of states. Without GST compensation, achieving consensus for rate rationalisation would be difficult if states forego revenue due to the change (or simplifications) in the GST rate structure.

This section examines the challenges policymakers face in evaluating the revenue impact of GST rate rationalisation across goods and services.

Assessing the GST collection across rates from the present GST return system is challenging. In GSTR-1, tax rate-wise monthly outward supplies are collected from regular (or normal) taxpayers. In GTSR-1, tax rate-wise taxable value (or turnover) and tax liabilities across tax components are available for various outward supplies. In GSTR-2B, the available input tax credit across inward supplies (including imports) is available. However, there is no information on the tax rate-wise details of the available ITC in the GSTR-2B. In the GSTR-3B, no information is available on a tax rate-wise basis. Therefore, only one could assess the taxable value and tax liabilities across GST rates from the GSTR-1. However, revenue realisation across tax rates will depend on the available (or eligible) ITC and subsequent adjustments of ITC with tax liabilities. The share of tax payments in credit and cash will likely vary across tax rates. The ITC chain's length depends on a commodity's backwards linkages. The size of the ITC amount will depend on the taxable input content of the value of outputs. Therefore, assessing revenue across GST rates is challenging due to this constraint.

Taxpayers under the composition scheme file a monthly return in the form CMP-08 and an annual return by filing GSTR-4. Neither CMP-08 nor GSTR-4 captures tax rate-wise turnovers and tax liabilities. Therefore, assessing the GST collection from these taxpayers across GST rates is also impossible.

These constraints are well known to the policymakers, as in reply to a question to the Parliament (Lok Sabha Unstarred Question No.1012, answered on 2 December 2024), it is stated that “From the data collected from the tax payers through the returns, the amount of GST collected at different tax rate cannot be calculated.” However, it is estimated that the proportion of GST collected (excluding Compensation Cess and other payments) under various tax slabs in the financial year 2023-24 is as follows (Table 1).

Table 1: Composition of GST Revenue across GST Rates in 2023-24

Rate Slab	Percentage
5%	6-8%
12%	5-6%
18%	70-75%
28%	13-15%
Others	1-2%

Source: Compiled from Lok Sabha Unstarred Question No.1012, answered on 2 December 2024.

Without a clear understanding of the composition of GST revenue across GST rates, assessing the revenue impact of any rate rationalisation would not be free from uncertainty. It is also worth highlighting that the distribution of GST revenue across tax rates may vary over time, depending mainly on people's consumption patterns (behaviours). The distribution of GST revenue will also differ across states and regions (rural and urban). The question is: how will the union and state governments address the revenue uncertainties? Will there be any mechanism to ensure revenue protection? Could an alternative guiding principle (other than revenue protection) be devised?

In another instance, the minutes of the 45th GST Council meeting (held at Lucknow on 17 September 2021) report GST collection across rates as presented in Table 2. The minutes do not indicate whether the data reported is attributed to which year, and whether this includes GST cess and other collections (late fees and interests). This confirms that revenue composition across GST rates will differ over time. For example, a 5% GST rate yields 6-8% revenue in 2023-24, whereas it is 13.6% in Table 2. Similarly, an 18% GST rate generates 40-45% of the total GST revenue in 2023-24, whereas it is only 61.4% in Table 2.

Table 2: Composition of GST Revenue across GST Rates

Tax Rate	Percentage Contribution
3%	1%
5%	13.6%
12%	7%
18%	61.4%
28%	17%

Source: The minutes of the 45th GST Council meeting (held at Lucknow on 17 September 2021, Page 56 of 121).

The state's GST revenue comprises state GST collection and the IGST settlement on the SGST account. Information on rate-wise IGST settlement cannot be assessed based on the present GSTR system. Since IGST settlement constitutes a significant share of the State GST revenue, not having information on rate-wise IGST settlement makes it challenging to attribute revenue realisation across GST rates. It is also worth noting that IGST collection from a state is not the revenue to be realised in the state. It will be adjusted to the destination states where goods and services will be ultimately consumed. Similarly, the GST compensation cess collection from a state is not the state's revenue. Therefore, given the GST return system, states cannot easily assess the revenue across GST rates. Revenue uncertainties will prevail if there is any significant change in the GST rate structure from the current structure.

Rao (2022) presents the GST rate-wise revenue collection in Karnataka for the year 2021-22 (Table 3). It shows that the composition of the GST revenue across rates differs from the all-India average, as presented in Table 2. Except for the share of 12% GST rate in total GST collection (without GST cess) in Karnataka (i.e., 8.4%) (Table 3), shares of other tax rates fall within the range presented in Table 1. The revenue contribution of the 12% GST rate in Karnataka is higher than the all-India average. This further reinforces that the revenue impact of the GST rate rationalisation will differ across states, and there will be no mechanism to perceive the changes as long as revenue is not realised.

Table 3: Tax Rate-wise Revenue Collections in Karnataka in 2021-22 (Rs. Crore)

GST Rate	CGST	SGST	IGST	GST Cess	Total - Without GST Cess	Total - With GST Cess
5%	3,907.00	3,907.70	5,334.00	215.70	13,148.70	13,364.40
12%	6,188.23	6,187.70	4,672.40	2.97	17,048.33	17,051.30
18%	43,573.80	43,571.20	55,038.70	1,464.75	1,42,183.70	1,43,648.45
28%	7,253.90	7,253.90	15,033.90	9,595.32	29,541.70	39,137.02
Total	60,922.93	60,920.50	80,079.00	11,278.74	2,01,922.43	2,13,201.17

GST Rate	CGST	SGST	IGST	GST Cess	Total - Without GST Cess	Total - With GST Cess
5%	6.4	6.4	6.7	1.9	6.5	6.3
12%	10.2	10.2	5.8	0.0	8.4	8.0
18%	71.5	71.5	68.7	13.0	70.4	67.4
28%	11.9	11.9	18.8	85.1	14.6	18.4
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Source: Rao (2022).

So far, we have discussed how GST revenue cannot be assessed across rates with certainty. To substantiate this, we present the distribution of the average monthly per capita consumption expenditure (MPCE) across GST rate categories in the next section.

3. Distribution of Average MPCE across GST Rate Categories

The distribution of the GST burden across consumer groups differs depending on the size and composition of the consumption expenditure. A progressive tax system helps the government mobilise revenue without impacting inequality. Redistribution of resources (or income) is another objective of any tax system, and an ideal tax system reduces post-tax inequalities. The scale and composition of goods and services consumption vary across states and regions (rural and urban), depending on people's disposable income and consumption habits/ preferences. In other words, states' tax bases will vary depending on their population size, average MPCE, composition of average MPCE across GST rates, and the state's urbanisation level.

In the GST regime, harmonising tax rates facilitates the assignment of item-wise GST rates for commodities covered in the National Sample Survey Office (NSSO)'s Household Consumer Expenditure Survey (HCES) for 2022-23 (hereafter referred to as HCES 2022-23).

The HCES 2022-23 covers 448 lines of items, 51 of which are sub-totals and totals. We have excluded seven items from the list for the average MPCE, as they are exempt from GST.[2] Therefore, we have 390 items of consumption for which the average MPCE is available for rural and urban areas at the all-India level.

Assigning GST rates across 390 items of goods and services cannot be done without following a subjective approach. Multiple GST rates, price-based rate fixation, and setting GST rates based on the marketing or physical features of commodities (e.g.,

[2] Items are cooked meals received free in the workplace, cooked meals received as assistance, second-hand books, journals, etc., house/garage rent (imputed), other consumer taxes & cesses, second-hand clothing, and second-hand footwear.

packaging and labelling, as well as the material composition of the product) make it challenging to assign specific GST rates across commodities (Mukherjee, 2024). To overcome this challenge, we classify the GST rate structure into nine categories, viz., exempt, very low (exempt to 5%), low (5%), lower middle (5 to 12%), middle (12%), upper middle (12 to 18%), upper (18%), high (28%), and very high (>28%). Some selected items (e.g., tobacco and tobacco products, aerated waters, carbonated beverages of fruit drinks or carbonated beverages with fruit juice, and certain motor vehicles) attract a GST rate of 28% along with GST compensation cess, and we have classified them under a very high category (>28%). In addition, we classify the items which are not either under the GST (e.g., electricity, alcoholic beverages for human consumption) or the date of introduction of GST is yet to be recommended by the GST council (e.g., petrol/gasoline/motor spirit, diesel, natural gas) under 'Out of GST' category.

The distribution of items across GST rates is presented in Table 4. Among the 390 items, 154 are exempted or attract a 5% GST. Of these 154 items, 105 (i.e., 68%) are food items, while the rest are non-food items. Seventy-four items attract a GST rate of 5% to 12%; 35 are food items, and 39 are non-food items. One hundred thirty-six items attract a GST rate of 12% to 18%; 22 are food items, and the rest are non-food items. Three of the four items attracting a 28% GST are non-food items. Similarly, out of 10 items attracting a GST rate of more than 28%, nine are non-food items. This indicates that most items attracting GST rates of 12% or above are non-food items.

The distribution of average MPCE across GST rates shows that 45% of total expenditures fall under the exempted to very low (5%) GST rates category in rural and urban areas (Table 4). One-fourth of total spending falls under the '5 to 12%' GST rate category in rural areas. In urban areas, 23% of total expenditure falls under the '5 to 12%' GST rate category. 18% of total spending in rural areas and 20% of total expenditure in urban areas are subject to GST rates ranging from 12% to 18%. In both regions, only 1% of total expenditure is subject to a GST rate of 28%. This is mainly on non-food spending. Only 2% of total outlays attract a GST rate higher than 28% across all regions. This is primarily on non-food expenditures. This shows that the distribution of consumption expenditure varies across regions (i.e., rural and urban areas). Therefore, the GST capacity will vary depending on the distribution of the total population between rural and urban areas in a state, as well as their average consumption expenditure and consumption patterns. Apart from the average MPCE, the composition of average MPCE across GST rates is vital for the GST base. Therefore, depending on the composition of consumption expenditure across GST rates, the GST base will vary across states.

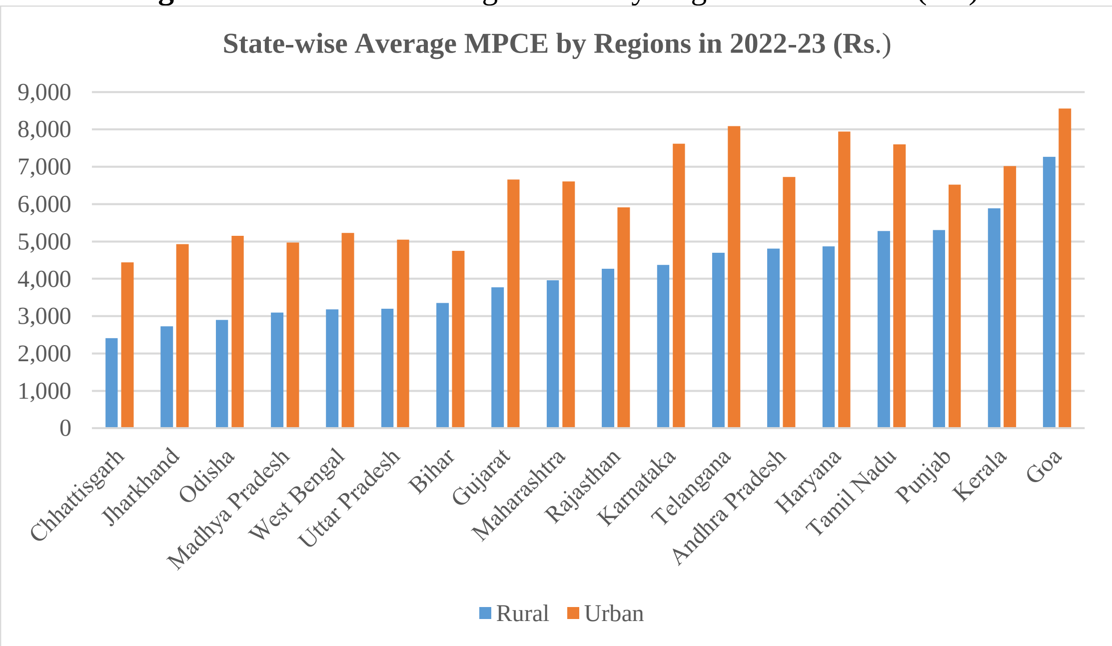
Table 4: GST Rate Category-wise Distribution of Items of Consumption and Average MPCE

GST Rate Category	Total (Food & Non-Food)		Average MPCE: Rural (Rs.)		Average MPCE: Urban (Rs.)	
	No. of Items	% Share	Amount	% Share	Amount	% Share
(i) Exempt	90	23.1	896.97	24.1	1,765.36	27.6
(ii) Very Low (Exempt to 5%)	64	16.4	791.19	21.3	1,102.28	17.2
(iii) Low (5%)	40	10.3	533.32	14.3	891.67	13.9
(iv) Lower Middle (5 to 12%)	34	8.7	382.91	10.3	548.87	8.6
(v) Middle (12%)	21	5.4	93.01	2.5	186.71	2.9
(vi) Upper Middle (12 to 18%)	28	7.2	79.3	2.1	139.98	2.2
(vii) Upper (18%)	87	22.3	511.61	13.8	938.58	14.7
(viii) High (28%)	4	1	42.21	1.1	69.73	1.1
(ix) Very High (>28%)	10	2.6	69.49	1.9	114.02	1.8
(x) Out of GST	12	3.1	319.7	8.6	646.78	10.1
Total	**390**	**100**	**3,719.71**	**100**	**6,403.98**	**100**
Exempt to 5% (i+ii)	154	39.5	1,688.20	45.4	2,867.60	44.8
5% to 12% (iii+iv)	74	19.0	916.2	24.6	1,440.50	22.5
12% to 18% (v to vii)	136	34.9	683.9	18.4	1,265.30	19.8
28% (viii)	4	1.0	42.2	1.1	69.7	1.1
>28% (ix)	10	2.6	69.5	1.9	114	1.8
Total	**378**	**96.9**	**3,400.00**	**91.40**	**5,757.10**	**90.00**

Source: As in Table 1.

The average MPCE varies across states and regions (Figure 1). Among major states, the highest average MPCE is reported in Goa for rural and urban areas. Although the average MPCE in rural areas of Kerala is the second-highest, that for urban areas stands at sixth among 18 major states. The average MPCE in urban regions of Telangana is the second highest, while that in rural areas stands at the seventh position. The average MPCE of Chhattisgarh is the lowest among all major states in 2022-23.

Figure 1: State-wise Average MPCE by Regions in 2022-23 (Rs.)



Source: As in Table 1.

We analyse the distribution of average MPCE across GST rate categories for Chhattisgarh and Goa in Table 5. This highlights that, depending on consumer preferences, the distribution of average MPCE across GST rate categories will differ for states and, therefore, the GST base and tax collection. The share of average MPCE on GST-exempted goods is higher in Goa compared to Chhattisgarh across all areas. On the other hand, the share of average MPCE in the 'exempt to 5%' and '5 to 12%' GST rate categories is higher in Chhattisgarh compared to Goa, across all regions. The share of average MPCE in the '12 to 18%' GST rate categories is higher in Goa, across all areas, compared to Chhattisgarh. The expenditure share falling under the very high (>28%) tax rate category is higher in Chhattisgarh than in Goa. This indicates that in Chhattisgarh, the GST base is primarily concentrated in lower GST rate categories, compared to Goa. It is worth noting that the NSSO's HCES 2022-23, or any other household expenditure survey, does not capture institutional consumption or the consumption of tourists. The consumption patterns of institutional consumers and tourists will vary from state to state, depending on their preferences. In addition, GST collection also depends on investments in a state's public infrastructure, such as roads, ports, railways, water supply, hospitals, and education, where input tax credit adjustments are either not permissible or limited, as services provided by these infrastructures are exempt from GST.

Table 5: Distribution of Average MPCE across GST Rate Categories in Chhattisgarh and Goa (%)

GST Rate Category	Chhattisgarh		Goa		C-A	D-B
	Rural (A)	Urban (B)	Rural (C)	Urban (D)		
(i) Exempt	26.0	24.8	26.9	27.5	**1.5**	**2.7**
(ii) Very Low (Exempt to 5%)	14.9	15.3	15.0	14.4	-0.5	-0.9
(iii) Low (5%)	15.6	15.8	11.5	15.4	-0.2	-0.4
(iv) Lower Middle (5 to 12%)	9.7	9.4	6.3	6.7	-3.0	-2.7
(v) Middle (12%)	1.9	2.2	2.9	2.9	**1.0**	**0.7**
(vi) Upper Middle (12 to 18%)	2.0	1.8	2.0	2.1	**0.2**	**0.3**
(vii) Upper (18%)	14.2	15.1	18.5	17.1	**2.9**	**2.0**
(viii) High (28%)	1.5	1.2	1.1	1.2	-0.3	0.0
(ix) Very High (>28%)	1.8	1.5	2.1	0.9	-0.9	-0.6
(x) Out of GST	12.5	12.9	13.6	11.7	-0.8	-1.1
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0		

Source: As in Table 1.

The analysis of this section confirms that, given the size and composition of the average MPCE across GST rate categories, any changes in the GST rate structure will have a differential impact on states' tax bases. In the next section, we address how to mitigate the impacts on states' revenues due to restructuring the GST rate structure.

4. Measures to Mitigate Revenue Uncertainty Related to the Restructuring of the GST Rate Structure

The revenue impact of the rate rationalisation will depend on the revised rate structure and resulting changes in the tax base. Consumer behaviours will primarily drive the change in the tax base. Own-price, cross-price, and income elasticities of demand will vary across commodities and services. Therefore, the ultimate revenue impact of the changes in the GST rate structure will depend on the tax rate for the affected commodities and the direction of the changes, whether they are increased or decreased. The possibility of passing the tax hike/ fall to consumers also depends on the market conditions of the commodity or service. Therefore, several factors will determine the revenue impact of the GST rate changes. Given the GST return system, assessing GST collection across various GST rates is a challenging task. This will create revenue uncertainty for governments. If states perceive that the proposed restructuring of the GST rate structure will result in a revenue shortage, they may be reluctant to accept it.

Therefore, the union and state governments require financial reassurance to accept the proposal to simplify the GST rate structure. The collection of the GST compensation cess has been extended until 31 March 2026. The proceeds from the GST cess are now used to service the back-to-back loans of Rs. 2.69 lakh crore taken by the union government during 2020-22 to compensate states for the shortfall in the GST cess collection. Additionally, the Union government pays states the arrears of GST compensation from the proceeds of the GST compensation cess. Designing an additional GST, in lieu of the GST compensation cess, on commodities that currently attract GST cess may be desirable after 31 March 2026. This will generate additional revenue for both state and federal governments. If the additional GST becomes a concurrent tax like CGST and SGST, the states will receive 70.5% of the proceeds from the additional GST (50% + 41% of 50%). If the additional GST becomes a Union tax, states will receive 41% of the proceeds as tax devolution. The scope and coverage of the additional GST may be extended beyond the present goods that attract GST cess, considering the health and environmental impacts of commodities. The additional revenue source may help states mitigate the revenue uncertainty associated with GST rate structuring.

5. Conclusions

Given the current GST return system, assessing GST revenue across different GST rates is a challenging task. Moreover, the composition of the GST revenue across GST rates will vary across states and over time, depending on the size and composition of the consumption basket. The revenue impact assessment of any changes in the GST rate structure cannot be free from uncertainty. Since GST contributes a significant share of states' tax revenue, revenue uncertainty related to restructuring the GST rate structure may make states reluctant to the changes.

We propose that designing an additional GST, in lieu of the GST compensation cess, on commodities that currently attract GST cess may be desirable after 31 March 2026. This will generate additional revenue for both state and federal governments. If the additional GST becomes a concurrent tax, the states will receive 70.5% of the proceeds from the additional GST. If the additional GST becomes a Union tax, states will receive 41% of the proceeds as tax devolution. The scope and coverage of the additional GST may be extended beyond the present goods that attract GST cess, considering the health and environmental impacts of commodities. The additional revenue source may help states mitigate the revenue uncertainty associated with GST rate structuring.

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