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India's Economic Churn and the Nectar of Growth

- Throughout history, civilizations have often faced moments of great crisis that test their resilience and capacity for renewal. India, drawing on the wisdom embedded in its cultural narrative, has long embraced the idea that struggle is a precursor to success. This notion parallels the mythological event of **Samudra Manthan**—the churning of the ocean—where turbulent upheaval ultimately yielded nectar. Similarly, India's economic transformations have repeatedly followed periods of challenge, leading to revival and growth. From the economic liberalization of 1991, which emerged as a response to a severe crisis, to the surge in digital adoption propelled by the COVID-19 pandemic, adversity has consistently acted as a catalyst for resilience and progress.
- In the present day, despite some sceptics declaring India's economy as stagnant or "dead," the actual data paints a markedly different picture—one of rapid expansion, improved economic buffers, and widening inclusivity in opportunity.

Features of India's Economic Growth

- India's growth story is resilient and broad-based. Recent GDP figures underscore an economy firmly on stable footing. In the first quarter of the fiscal year 2025-26, real GDP grew by 7.8%, marking the strongest performance in five quarters. This growth is spread widely across key sectors: manufacturing expanded by 7.7%, construction by 7.6%, and services surged by 9.3%. Nominal GDP also increased by 8.8%, supported by robust consumption, heightened investment, and reform-driven improvements in logistics that reduce costs and boost efficiency.
- India has now ascended to become the world's fourth-largest economy and remains the fastest-growing among major economies, outpacing even the United States and China in growth rates. If current trends persist, India is projected to surpass Germany before the decade concludes, thereby securing its place as the world's third-largest economy in terms of market exchange value.
- This trajectory has earned recognition from global financial institutions. Notably, S&P Global recently upgraded India's sovereign credit rating for the first time in 18 years. This upgrade acknowledges India's fiscal discipline, monetary credibility, and sustained growth momentum. Beyond reducing borrowing costs, this rating upgrade directly counters narratives that suggest India's economy is stagnating or faltering.

Growth With Inclusion

- India's growth is not merely about numbers but about the breadth of social impact. Between 2013-14 and 2022-23, nearly 250 million Indians have moved out of multidimensional poverty. This transformation is built on extensive delivery of essential services such as universal access to bank accounts, clean cooking fuel, healthcare coverage, reliable tap water, and direct benefit transfers.
- Such interventions empower households to make independent economic decisions, fostering self-reliance. Unlike rapid growth models reliant on authoritarian methods, India's democratic approach emphasizes consensus-building, competitive federalism, and dependable last-mile delivery—achieved through a robust digital public infrastructure. This approach frames India's economy as a marathoner's journey—steady, enduring, and designed for lasting success.

Crucial Factors Driving India's Economic Growth

1. **Energy Security as a Growth Enabler:** India ranks as the third-largest consumer of energy globally and is the fourth-largest refiner and importer of liquefied natural gas (LNG). The country has developed a substantial refining capacity of 5.2 million barrels per day, with ambitious plans to expand further by the end of this decade. Given the forecast that India's energy demand will double by 2047, the nation's role will be pivotal in maintaining global energy stability, representing nearly one-quarter of the expected incremental demand worldwide. Government reforms have expanded exploration acreage, opened previously

restricted basins, and introduced transparent, competitive bidding through the Open Acreage Licensing Policy. Pricing reforms, particularly in the natural gas sector, have encouraged further investment. Incentives like premium payments for deepwater projects reflect a balanced strategy that marries energy security with innovation.

2. **Transitioning to a Green Future:** India's commitment to cleaner energy is demonstrated by the rise in ethanol blending from a mere 1.5% in 2014 to 20% today, a shift that has significantly saved foreign exchange while directly benefiting farmers. The deployment of compressed biogas plants, mandated blending programs, and investments in emerging technologies such as green hydrogen showcase India's ambition to lead the clean energy transition. Criticism of India's continued purchase of Russian crude oil often overlooks the legality and necessity of these imports. Unlike crude from Iran or Venezuela, Russian oil is not subject to outright sanctions but instead falls under a price cap regime designed to maintain global supply. India's adherence to these rules has helped stabilize global oil markets, preventing potential price spikes that might have exceeded \$200 per barrel.

Rather than profiting from the situation, India's longstanding refining and export practices have contributed to supply chain stability, even supporting European markets. Domestically, government subsidies, tax reductions, and mandatory supply quotas have shielded Indian consumers from volatile price fluctuations, reflecting the state's duty to protect its citizens.

Industrial and Digital Transformation

- Supported by production-linked incentives and infrastructure upgrades under the **Pradhan Mantri Gati Shakti** initiative, key sectors such as semiconductors, defense, electronics, and renewable energy are rapidly scaling. The recent approval of four new semiconductor projects under the **India Semiconductor Mission**, alongside renewed Japanese investment, signals a strategic push to build resilient technology supply chains.
- The digital economy amplifies these gains further. With globally leading digital payment systems like **UPI** and a thriving startup ecosystem, India is not only exporting goods but also digital solutions. The integration of digital platforms with physical infrastructure creates a multiplying effect—reducing friction, enhancing productivity, fostering formalisation, and sustaining investment and consumption cycles.

Conclusion

- Independent projections suggest that by 2038, India could emerge as the world's second-largest economy by purchasing power parity, with a GDP exceeding \$34 trillion. Achieving this ambitious trajectory will require continued reforms, robust human capital development, and abundant access to clean energy.
- India's history teaches that every period of doubt and challenge has been followed by transformative breakthroughs—whether the **Green Revolution**, the **IT revolution**, or the **digital revolution**. In this context, the current economic churn is poised once again to yield the nectar of growth and renewal.

Giving Wings to India's Youth

India's economic progress in the twenty-first century is deeply intertwined with its Shram Shakti, or labour power. Over the last decade, under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, India has experienced a remarkable ascent from being the world's tenth-largest economy in 2014 to its current position as the fourth largest. Alongside this impressive growth, the country has also witnessed significant transformations in employment patterns, social security frameworks, and the empowerment of its youth. Consequently, the narrative of India's development is inseparable from the

workforce's role and the policies that have been implemented to harness the potential of its demographic dividend.

Employment Growth and Formalisation

One of the most notable features of India's recent economic performance is the simultaneous expansion in employment opportunities. Data from RBI-KLEMS highlights a dramatic shift: while the decade leading up to 2014 generated only 2.9 crore jobs, the following ten years produced an astounding 17 crore jobs. This surge in employment has been accompanied by accelerated formalisation of the workforce. Evidence from the Employees' Provident Fund Organisation (EPFO) shows that an increasing number of workers are being absorbed into the formal sector, thereby gaining access to structured protections and social benefits. However, the transformation is not just about the quantity of jobs but also about the quality and security that formal employment brings.

Expanding Social Security

In 2015, a mere 19% of India's population was covered under at least one social protection scheme. By 2025, this figure rose dramatically to 64.3%, encompassing approximately 94 crore people. This expansion has made India home to the second-largest social security system globally, a development recognized by the International Labour Organization as one of the fastest expansions of its kind worldwide. This accomplishment reflects a deliberate policy effort to ensure that economic growth translates into tangible social welfare, protecting workers and enhancing their dignity by securing their livelihoods alongside increasing productivity.

Harnessing the Demographic Dividend

India's demographic profile presents both an opportunity and a challenge. With 65% of its population under the age of 35, the country holds a distinct advantage compared to many Western nations grappling with ageing populations. This Yuva Shakti, or youth power, has long been acknowledged as one of India's greatest assets, yet its full potential remained untapped. Realizing this demographic dividend requires making the youth employable, integrating them into the formal economy, equipping them with financial literacy, and ensuring robust social protection measures. As India moves towards the vision of Viksit Bharat by 2047, the transformation of this youthful potential into economic prosperity will be critical.

The Pradhan Mantri Viksit Bharat Rozgar Yojana

- Unveiled in the Union Budget of 2024-25 and reaffirmed in the Prime Minister's Independence Day address, the Pradhan Mantri Viksit Bharat Rozgar Yojana stands as the most ambitious employment initiative in India's history. With a substantial outlay of ₹1 lakh crore, the scheme aims to create over 3.5 crore jobs within two years. The program is divided into two parts: Part A provides first-time employees with up to ₹15,000 in direct financial assistance, while Part B offers employers a subsidy of up to ₹3,000 per new hire each month. This design lowers barriers for young job seekers and reduces hiring risks for enterprises.
- Furthermore, the scheme incorporates Direct Benefit Transfers and mandates social security enrolment from the very first day of employment, promoting transparency, formalisation, and long-term labour market resilience. Importantly, the program emphasizes the manufacturing sector, complementing initiatives like Make in India, the National Manufacturing Mission, and the Production-Linked Incentive scheme. By empowering both workers and businesses, the initiative acknowledges that employment creation is a shared responsibility between the state, the market, and society.

Employment as Nation-Building

Beyond the statistics and policy mechanics, the Pradhan Mantri Viksit Bharat Rozgar Yojana symbolizes a broader shift in India's development paradigm. Employment is now seen as central to nation-building—a foundation for dignity and equality that ensures no ambition is left unfulfilled and no young person is deprived of opportunity. In this vision, a self-reliant Bharat is one where every individual has

access to meaningful work, labour is formalised and secure, and social protection systems are strong enough to cushion against global shocks.

Conclusion

- India's growth story increasingly reflects a model of inclusive development, where economic expansion, job creation, and social security intertwine. The rapid rise from the world's tenth to fourth-largest economy over a decade demonstrates the strength and dynamism of India's labour force. Meanwhile, the massive expansion in social protection underscores the country's commitment to equity and welfare. With the introduction of the Pradhan Mantri Viksit Bharat Rozgar Yojana, the government has laid the groundwork for a structural transformation of the labour market, bridging the gap between aspiration and opportunity.
- As India approaches the milestone of 2047, the vision of Viksit Bharat will rest heavily on how effectively the country can transform its demographic dividend into sustained national prosperity.

Noise Pollution is Rising but Policy is Falling Silent

Context

Noise pollution in urban India has become one of the most overlooked public health and environmental challenges of the modern era. Across cities, sound levels regularly surpass the permissible limits, especially in sensitive zones such as schools, hospitals, and residential neighborhoods. This surge in noise pollution is far more than just a minor annoyance; it fundamentally undermines the constitutional guarantees of peace, dignity, and the right to life. Despite the existence of regulatory frameworks, widespread institutional indifference, fragmented governance, and the cultural normalization of noise have contributed to a crisis that remains largely invisible and dangerously unaddressed.

Monitoring without Accountability

The Central Pollution Control Board (CPCB) initiated the National Ambient Noise Monitoring Network (NANMN) in 2011, with the intention of establishing a real-time noise monitoring system. However, after more than a decade, this system functions primarily as a passive data collector rather than a proactive tool for reform. The effectiveness of NANMN is compromised by improper placement of sensors, which are often installed 25 to 30 feet above ground, violating CPCB's own guidelines and reducing data reliability. Moreover, the data that is collected seldom leads to actual enforcement measures. In contrast, European countries have used health data related to noise pollution to overhaul zoning laws, implement speed limits, and quantify the economic damage caused by urban noise at approximately €100 billion annually. India, by comparison, has been unable to convert its noise monitoring efforts into meaningful governance, leaving noise regulation politically and administratively stagnant.

Constitutional and Legal Neglect

The failure to adequately regulate noise pollution extends beyond environmental concerns and borders on constitutional neglect. Article 21 of the Indian Constitution guarantees the right to life with dignity, which encompasses mental and environmental health. Additionally, Article 48A obligates the state to take proactive environmental protection measures. Despite this, designated "silence zones" such as hospitals and schools frequently experience noise levels exceeding the World Health Organization's (WHO) safe limits of 50 decibels during the day and 40 decibels at night. In reality, many urban areas register noise levels between 65 to 70 decibels. The Supreme Court has reiterated that noise pollution violates fundamental rights, as reflected in its 2024 ruling on the landmark Noise Pollution (V), In Re case. Nevertheless, enforcement of the Noise Pollution (Regulation and Control) Rules, 2000, remains largely superficial and symbolic.

Ecological Consequences, Civic Fatigue, and the Politics of Silence

The detrimental effects of noise pollution extend beyond human health to ecological systems. A 2025 study by the University of Auckland demonstrated that just a single night of urban noise and artificial light disrupted the sleep and vocal patterns of birds, diminishing both the complexity and frequency of their songs. This interference with avian communication is not merely an interesting ecological phenomenon; it signals a deeper environmental crisis where biodiversity is losing its voice. Such disruptions have the potential to trigger cascading ecological effects, impacting species interactions and reducing urban biodiversity.

From a societal perspective, urban noise pollution is not only a technical problem but also a political and cultural issue. Unlike visible pollutants such as smog or litter, noise pollution leaves no physical residue, which contributes to public fatigue and apathy. Persistent sounds like honking, construction noise, and drilling have become normalized as unavoidable nuisances, resulting in muted public outrage and a lack of coordinated institutional response. Agencies such as municipal authorities, traffic police, and pollution control boards often operate in isolation with minimal inter-agency collaboration. The absence of a comprehensive national acoustic policy—akin to air quality standards—further entrenches this problem.

Pathways to Reform

To address the crisis, noise monitoring needs to be decentralized, empowering local bodies with real-time access to noise data coupled with the authority to enforce regulations. Monitoring efforts must be tied directly to enforcement mechanisms that impose penalties for violations, enforce construction restrictions, and ensure zoning compliance. Public awareness campaigns should move beyond symbolic gestures like “No Honking Day” toward sustained behavioral change initiatives embedded within schools, driver education, and civic spaces. Urban planning must integrate acoustic resilience, designing cities not only for growth and mobility but also for sonic civility. This can be achieved through zoning reforms, soundproofing infrastructure, and guidelines that promote noise-sensitive construction.

Conclusion

Urban noise pollution in India represents a profound governance failure that reflects a lack of cultural awareness and constitutional responsibility. It silently undermines public health, disrupts ecosystems, and erodes civic dignity. This issue cannot be resolved by technology or legal measures alone; it requires fostering a culture of sonic empathy that redefines silence as an active and essential form of care. Unless India embraces a rights-based approach that combines data-driven monitoring, stringent enforcement, and comprehensive civic education, its urban environments will remain only nominally smart, while being increasingly unlivable due to noise.

India-China Relations Amidst Global Changes

Introduction

India and China, two ancient civilizations and emerging global powers, have experienced a fluctuating relationship characterized by alternating phases of confrontation and cautious cooperation. The recent friendly interaction between Prime Minister Narendra Modi and President Xi Jinping in Tianjin symbolizes a renewed effort to recalibrate ties, influenced largely by global disruptions such as the US-China tariff conflicts under President Donald Trump. Despite their shared historical and cultural roots, their relationship remains complex due to ongoing border disputes, geopolitical rivalry, and mutual strategic mistrust. Nonetheless, both nations acknowledge the importance of collaborating on issues like global governance, climate change, and international trade.

Historical Background of India-China Relations

- **Civilizational Links:** India and China have shared connections for thousands of years through Buddhism, ancient trade routes like the Silk Road, and rich cultural exchanges. Historical figures

such as Xuanzang and Bodhidharma facilitated significant intellectual and spiritual exchanges between the two civilizations.

- **Modern Developments:** Following India's independence in 1947, it was among the first countries to recognize the People's Republic of China (PRC). The 1954 Panchsheel Agreement, based on the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence, aimed to foster mutual trust and peaceful relations. However, the 1962 Sino-Indian War left lasting bitterness and mistrust.
- **Recent Trends:** Relations have seen fluctuations: cooperation in multilateral forums like BRICS, SCO, and climate negotiations contrasts with tensions caused by border skirmishes, China's infrastructure projects in Pakistan-occupied Kashmir (CPEC), and strategic competition in the Indo-Pacific.

Primary Sources of Tension

- **Border Disputes:** The unresolved Line of Actual Control (LAC), especially in regions like Aksai Chin and Arunachal Pradesh, remains a major flashpoint. The deadly 2020 Galwan Valley clash marked the most serious confrontation in decades.
- **China-Pakistan Partnership:** China's close alliance with Pakistan, including its support during military operations and at international forums, raises significant security concerns for India. The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), which passes through disputed territory, directly challenges India's territorial claims.
- **Diplomatic Challenges:** China frequently blocks India's efforts to gain permanent membership in the UN Security Council or to join groups like the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG). It also protects Pakistan from being labeled as a terrorism sponsor in international sanctions committees.
- **Trade Imbalance:** Bilateral trade between India and China has expanded but remains heavily skewed in China's favor, with India running a significant trade deficit.

Areas of Cooperation

- **Climate and Global Governance:** India and China have coordinated on climate change efforts within frameworks like the UNFCCC and the Paris Agreement, emphasizing fairness and the principle of "common but differentiated responsibilities." Both advocate for increased influence of the Global South in international institutions such as the IMF, World Bank, and WTO.
- **Multilateral Engagement:** At forums like the 2024 BRICS Summit in Kazan, the two countries acknowledged the importance of managing differences for global stability. Cooperation continues within the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) on issues like counterterrorism and regional security.
- **Economic Opportunities:** Despite political friction, trade between India and China reached \$136 billion in 2023. Sectors such as pharmaceuticals, information technology, and renewable energy present promising areas for collaboration.

External Influences on India-China Relations

- **US-China Trade Conflict:** The trade war initiated by the Trump administration disrupted global supply chains, prompting both India and China to reassess their economic and strategic approaches. India prioritizes strategic autonomy, aiming to maintain balanced relations without exclusively siding with either the US or China.
- **Multipolarity and BRICS Expansion:** With the inclusion of new members like Saudi Arabia and Egypt, BRICS is evolving into an influential bloc where India and China play critical roles in shaping alternative financial institutions such as the New Development Bank.
- **Leadership of the Global South:** Both nations project themselves as champions of developing countries, using joint platforms to enhance their bargaining power in climate negotiations, trade reforms, and technology governance.

Strategic Dimensions

- **Geopolitical Competition:** India aligns with the Quad (US, Japan, Australia) to ensure security in the Indo-Pacific, which China views with suspicion. China's growing presence in the Indian Ocean through ports in Sri Lanka, Pakistan, and Myanmar challenges India's maritime dominance.
- **Border Management:** Several agreements (1993, 1996, 2005, 2013) have aimed to maintain peace along the LAC, but incidents like the Doklam standoff (2017) and the Galwan clash (2020) highlight their fragility.
- **Economic Strategy:** Post-2020, India has restricted Chinese investments in sensitive sectors and banned certain apps on security grounds. However, India continues to rely on China for critical imports such as active pharmaceutical ingredients (APIs), electronics, and solar energy components.

Path Forward

- **Maintaining Strategic Autonomy:** India should sustain a balanced approach, avoiding forced alignment with either the US or China.
- **Confidence-Building Measures (CBMs):** Strengthen communication and disengagement mechanisms along the LAC. Revive annual leadership summits to foster dialogue and mutual understanding.
- **Economic Rebalancing:** Encourage self-reliance initiatives like Atmanirbhar Bharat while selectively promoting cooperation in green energy, digital technologies, and healthcare supply chains.
- **Strengthening Multilateralism:** Leverage platforms such as BRICS, SCO, and G20 to advocate for reforms in global financial and trade institutions.
- **Enhancing People-to-People Ties:** Reinvigorate cultural exchanges, educational partnerships, and tourism to rebuild trust at the societal level.

Conclusion

India-China relations are a nuanced blend of rivalry and cooperation shaped by historical legacies, geographic realities, and evolving global geopolitics. The recent cordiality in Tianjin, while largely symbolic, underscores a shared understanding that persistent confrontation is unsustainable. As US-China tensions escalate, both India and China must pursue pragmatic engagement to protect their national interests and contribute to a more balanced, multipolar world order.

The Rise of Private Coaching and the Current State of School Education in India

Introduction

Education forms the bedrock of social and economic advancement. For India's ambitious goal of becoming a developed nation by 2047, establishing a strong, equitable, and effective school education system is vital. However, the Comprehensive Modular Survey (CMS) on Education 2025 reveals troubling patterns within India's schooling landscape.

Key Insights from CMS 2025 on Education

- **Widespread Dependence on Private Coaching:** About 27% of school-going children across India attend private coaching classes. Urban areas report a higher rate (30.7%) compared to rural areas (25.5%). At the senior secondary level (Classes 11 and 12), 37% of students rely on coaching, primarily driven by board exams and competitive tests such as JEE and NEET.
- **Coaching Expenses:** Urban families spend approximately ₹4,000 annually on coaching. Although rural households spend less overall, costs surge to around ₹10,000 for higher secondary students.

- **Declining Enrolment in Government Schools:** Enrolment in government schools has dropped significantly from 74% in the 1970s to 51–56% in 2025. Parents increasingly favour private schools despite their higher average fees (₹25,000 per year versus ₹2,863 in government schools).
- **Mental Health and Stress:** Students face demanding schedules involving school, coaching, and homework, resulting in intense pressure. High-stress coaching hubs like Kota, Rajasthan, have witnessed tragic student suicides, igniting public concern over mental health.
- **Governance and Oversight Deficits:** Regulatory supervision of coaching centers remains weak, leading to unchecked proliferation of unregulated institutions. State-run schools struggle with issues like poor infrastructure, inadequate teacher quality, and subpar learning outcomes, leading to erosion of public trust.

Analysis of Core Issues

- **Emergence of a Parallel Education System:** The surge in private coaching reflects a parallel shadow education sector, fueled by perceptions of inadequacies in mainstream schooling. Data from the National Sample Survey (2017–18) showed that nearly 37% of students in Classes 11–12 attended coaching, indicating a persistent trend.
- **Growing Educational Inequity:** Wealthier families disproportionately access private coaching, exacerbating educational disparities. According to NITI Aayog's SDG India Index 2023, rural students face learning disadvantages despite paying relatively high tuition fees.
- **Eroding Confidence in Government Schools:** Problems such as teacher absenteeism, outdated pedagogy, insufficient digital tools, and poor infrastructure persist. Exceptions like Kerala and Delhi demonstrate that focused investment in infrastructure, teacher training, and accountability can revitalize public education.
- **Policy Shortcomings:** The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 emphasizes reducing rote learning and promoting holistic, competency-based education. However, implementation remains patchy, and competitive exams continue to encourage rote-based coaching. Draft Model Guidelines for Regulating Coaching Centres (2022) set standards on infrastructure, teacher qualifications, fees, and counseling, but enforcement remains weak.

Lessons from International Practices

- Finland excels in OECD's PISA assessments without heavy reliance on coaching.
- UK schools offer after-school programs blending academics, arts, and sports.
- China banned for-profit tutoring in core subjects in 2021 to ease family burdens.
- Singapore tackled tuition culture through government-led reforms like "Teach Less, Learn More" and revamped exams to emphasize understanding over memorization.

Recommendations for the Way Forward

- **Strengthening Public Schools:** Increase investments in infrastructure, digital classrooms, and teacher capacity-building. Scale successful initiatives such as Delhi's "Happiness Curriculum" and Kerala's Public Education Rejuvenation Mission nationwide.
- **Exam System Reforms:** Shift focus from high-stakes board and competitive exams toward continuous comprehensive evaluation, critical thinking, and multidisciplinary learning as outlined in NEP 2020.
- **Regulation of Coaching Institutions:** Implement transparent fee structures, enforce teacher qualifications, regulate coaching hours, and provide mental health counseling per Ministry of Education guidelines. Establish grievance redressal mechanisms for students and parents.
- **Promoting Equity and Affordability:** Expand scholarships, direct benefit transfers, and income-linked vouchers to alleviate financial burdens on disadvantaged families. Strengthen free digital learning platforms such as DIKSHA and SWAYAM as accessible alternatives to private coaching.

- **Addressing Mental Health:** Integrate counseling services into schools and coaching centers. Collaborate with the National Mental Health Programme to provide stress management workshops and peer-support initiatives.
- **Engaging Communities and Parents:** Raise awareness among parents about the downsides of excessive coaching and the importance of balanced development including sports, arts, and life skills. Empower School Management Committees (SMCs) under the Right to Education Act to enhance school governance.
- **Harnessing Technology:** Promote AI-driven personalized learning tools to complement classroom teaching and reduce reliance on expensive coaching. Support EdTech startups under initiatives like Digital India and Startup India, while safeguarding data privacy and ensuring inclusivity.

Conclusion

CMS 2025 uncovers a paradox: while private coaching sees rising investment, trust in the formal school system is declining. This duality risks deepening inequality, worsening mental health challenges, and entrenching a costly shadow education system. To realize the goal of quality education for all by 2047, India must embrace not only increased funding but a transformative shift toward inclusive, holistic, and student-centered education.

Sickle Cell: The Battle for Disability Justice

Context

The **Rights of Persons with Disabilities (RPWD) Act, 2016** was enacted to uphold the dignity, equality, and inclusion of persons with disabilities in India, aligning with the principles outlined in the **United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities**. However, recent developments highlight ongoing challenges in translating the Act's intent into meaningful implementation. The revised guidelines issued in March 2024, which assess disability status specifically for individuals with **sickle cell disease (SCD)**, **beta thalassaemia**, and other related blood disorders, reveal persistent tensions between progressive policy intentions and practical enforcement. Although the recognition of SCD under the Act is a step forward, the exclusion of this condition from employment reservation quotas and the inflexible certification procedures considerably weaken the law's transformative potential.

The Legal Framework and Its Limits

- The RPWD Act defines persons with **benchmark disabilities** as those who have a minimum of 40% impairment, making them eligible for a range of benefits, including free education, developmental assistance, and reservations in public sector employment. However, this framework relies heavily on **biomedical criteria**, which frequently fail to capture the lived realities of people with disabilities. Specifically, the guidelines for assessing disability in individuals with SCD emphasize **impairment scoring**, favoring disabilities that are visible or easily measurable. This approach neglects chronic, fluctuating, and largely invisible disabilities.
- Such a narrow definition conflicts with the Act's stated objective of recognizing disability not merely as a medical condition, but as a result of **social and structural exclusion**. By not extending the 4% employment reservation to individuals with SCD, the government effectively reduces the significance of recognizing this condition under the law, rendering it more symbolic than substantive in terms of protection and opportunity.

The Nature of Sickle Cell Disability and Barriers in Certification

- Sickle cell disease is a lifelong and painful blood disorder that disproportionately impacts marginalised communities such as **Adivasis and Dalits**. Although its symptoms may not always be outwardly visible, SCD involves recurrent episodes of intense pain (pain crises), anemia, organ damage, and frequent hospitalisation beginning from childhood. These debilitating episodes

disrupt education, severely limit employment prospects, and shorten life expectancy. Compounding these difficulties is the social stigma attached to the disease, which increases the vulnerability of affected individuals to discrimination in education, work, and healthcare access.

- Obtaining a disability certificate under the RPWD Act is crucial for accessing entitlements, yet patients with SCD face significant obstacles in this process. The certification requires confirmatory tests from government or accredited laboratories, followed by an assessment from a district medical authority. The disability scoring system is based on clinical factors such as the frequency of blood transfusions, neurological complications, and severity of pain. This rigid, clinical scoring often excludes individuals whose disability is episodic or largely invisible at the time of assessment.

Socioeconomic Consequences and the Way Forward

- The shortcomings of the current disability assessment framework have immediate and lasting socioeconomic impacts.
- Children with SCD frequently miss school due to hospital stays, while young adults struggle with interrupted career paths and recurrent job losses because of their health.
- The denial of job reservations exacerbates these difficulties by limiting stable employment opportunities.
- Moreover, economic exclusion is intensified by gaps in social protection. Although tax deductions and enhanced pension schemes exist for persons with certified disabilities, many individuals with SCD cannot benefit from them due to the restrictive scoring system and the complexity of obtaining certification.
- This creates a vicious cycle, where health challenges and social disadvantages reinforce one another.
- To ensure the RPWD Act truly fulfills its promise of equality, several critical reforms are needed. Firstly, employment reservations should be extended to persons with SCD and other chronic blood disorders, acknowledging these conditions as serious, lifelong disabilities.
- Secondly, the certification process requires reform to account for **fluctuating and invisible disabilities**. Moving away from rigid biomedical scoring, assessments should adopt a **rights-based approach** that factors in the wider socioeconomic impacts of chronic illness.
- Thirdly, outreach and support mechanisms must be strengthened for marginalised communities to ensure that access to disability certification and associated entitlements is not hindered by geographic or financial barriers.

Conclusion

While the inclusion of sickle cell disease under the RPWD Act is an important milestone, the lack of tangible rights and protections risks making this recognition a hollow gesture. Excluding SCD from employment reservations and relying on inaccessible certification processes undermines the foundational principles of dignity, equality, and inclusion that the Act was designed to uphold. Disability must be understood not only as an impairment but as a lived experience shaped by social, economic, and structural inequities. For India's disability rights framework to be genuinely inclusive, it must embrace chronic and invisible conditions like sickle cell disease and ensure that legal recognition is accompanied by real, enforceable rights.

Concealing Judicial Dissent: Undermining the Authority of the Judiciary

Context

- In constitutional democracies, the legitimacy of public power is not rooted solely in the existence of laws but in a deeper ethos—what South African jurist Etienne Mureinik termed the *culture of justification*. This principle holds that every act of public authority must be reasoned, explained, and defensible to the people it affects.

- Ironically, while India's judiciary often demands such justification from the executive and legislature, it fails to apply the same standard to its own internal functioning—particularly in the opaque system of judicial appointments. The recent controversy surrounding Justice B.V. Nagarathna's alleged dissent against the elevation of Justice Vipul M. Pancholi brings this contradiction into sharp focus, revealing the undemocratic nature of the Collegium system and its lack of transparency.

Opacity in the Collegium: A Democratic Deficit

- The Supreme Court of India has styled itself as a guardian of transparency and accountability. Yet when it comes to its own appointment mechanisms, especially the Collegium system, it resists openness. The Collegium—comprising the five senior-most judges of the Supreme Court—was institutionalised through judicial rulings in the *Second Judges Case* (1993) and *Third Judges Case* (1998). These appointments are deliberated behind closed doors and made public through brief, unexplained resolutions.
- Justice Nagarathna's reported dissent highlights the dangers of such secrecy. Despite apparently raising serious objections to Justice Pancholi's elevation, the Collegium's public resolution suggested unanimity. Her concerns came to light only through media leaks, and the written note detailing her opposition remains unavailable to the public. Within 48 hours, the government confirmed the appointment, and it remains unclear whether her dissent was ever formally acknowledged or weighed.
- This disjunction between private deliberations and public disclosures illustrates how the Collegium's secrecy undermines institutional legitimacy and corrodes the principle of public justification.

The Flawed Rationale for Secrecy

- The Court has traditionally justified the opaque nature of the Collegium on two grounds: protecting candidates' reputations and insulating the process from political interference. However, these arguments do not hold up under scrutiny.
- In several democratic jurisdictions, transparency in judicial appointments coexists with fairness and dignity. The United Kingdom's Judicial Appointments Commission, for instance, clearly outlines selection criteria and assessment methods, while South Africa's Judicial Service Commission conducts candidate evaluations in public hearings. These models demonstrate that institutional legitimacy is best achieved through openness, even if not without flaws.
- India's continued insistence on secrecy places it at odds with these democratic practices. If concerns about reputational harm are genuine, a better approach would be to design a disclosure system that balances honesty with respect. Similarly, political interference is not avoided through confidentiality; the executive still delays or obstructs certain appointments, proving that opacity is not a shield but a veil that hides dysfunction.

Democratic Stakes and Constitutional Consequences

- The implications of this issue extend far beyond a single judicial appointment. The individuals selected to interpret the Constitution wield power that shapes Indian democracy for generations. Judges decide on fundamental rights, federal balance, and the boundaries of state power. In entrusting unelected judges with such influence, democratic systems rely on their moral authority—an authority that must be anchored in public trust.
- This trust is severely undermined when the judiciary refuses to provide reasons for its decisions, especially when internal dissent is concealed. Transparency in appointments is not a mere procedural nicety; it is central to upholding constitutional morality. If public power must always be justified, the judiciary—charged with protecting the Constitution—must adhere to this obligation most faithfully.

Towards Institutional Reform and Justified Authority

- To maintain its credibility and autonomy, the Indian judiciary must reform the Collegium system. The current model of secretive deliberations is incompatible with the democratic aspiration for transparency from all state institutions.
- The limited move toward disclosure seen briefly in 2018, when more detailed reasoning accompanied Collegium recommendations, was a step in the right direction. Its reversal marked a troubling retreat into opacity. Rather than insulating the judiciary, such secrecy alienates it from public confidence.
- Contrary to fears that transparency would weaken judicial independence, it could in fact bolster it. A judiciary that holds itself to the same standards it imposes on others reinforces its role as a moral and constitutional authority. Justification, not secrecy, is the foundation of public legitimacy. Through openness and reasoned explanation, the Court would reaffirm its place in a democracy that thrives on accountability.

Conclusion

- The controversy surrounding Justice Nagarathna's dissent underscores a fundamental inconsistency: the Supreme Court demands transparency and accountability from other branches of government but shields its own decisions from public view. This double standard is unsustainable.
- If the judiciary continues to operate in secrecy, it risks eroding the very legitimacy that enables its constitutional authority. The Collegium system must evolve toward greater transparency. Refusing to do so would not only deny the public the justification they deserve but also betray the very principle on which constitutional democracies rest—that all power, no matter how high, must be justified.

India's Recent Maritime Reforms Require Significant Course Correction

Context

- The passage of the Indian Ports Bill, 2025, in the Rajya Sabha marks a pivotal moment in India's maritime governance. Alongside this, the enactment of the Coastal Shipping Act, 2025, the Carriage of Goods by Sea Bill, 2025, and the Merchant Shipping Act, 2025, forms a comprehensive legislative package intended to modernize India's maritime regulatory framework. These new laws aim to replace outdated provisions with standards more in line with international practices, reflecting the evolving global shipping industry.
- The government has praised these reforms for streamlining governance and enhancing India's competitiveness on the global stage. However, a closer examination reveals significant concerns that the reforms could centralize authority excessively, erode the federal structure, and impose disproportionate burdens on smaller operators, ultimately undermining the long-term success of these initiatives.

The Indian Ports Act, 2025: Modernizing Maritime Law

- India's maritime laws have long lagged behind the rapidly changing global landscape, with foundational statutes like the Indian Ports Act of 1908 and the Merchant Shipping Act of 1958 failing to reflect contemporary realities. The new legislative framework attempts to bridge this gap by aligning India's maritime governance with international conventions, modern financing mechanisms, and global liability standards.
- Proponents argue that the Indian Ports Bill, in particular, is designed to enhance ease of doing business, encourage sustainable port development, and bring coherence to a previously fragmented regulatory environment. These efforts are crucial for India's aspirations to broaden its trade relations, attract foreign investment, and elevate its standing in the global maritime community.

Critical Examination of the Ports Act 2025

- One of the most controversial aspects of the Ports Act is the creation of the Maritime State Development Council, chaired by the Union Minister of Ports. This body holds the power to compel States to follow centrally issued guidelines. Though framed as a tool for cooperative federalism, critics argue it serves as an instrument of central dominance, pressuring coastal States to prioritize central projects such as Sagarmala and PM Gati Shakti over their own regional concerns.
- This development threatens to curtail the fiscal autonomy and operational flexibility of States while saddling them with the on-the-ground responsibilities of port management. Essentially, the legislation consolidates control in New Delhi, undermining the federal principles enshrined in India's Constitution.
- Another alarming feature is the expansion of discretionary powers coupled with the restriction of judicial oversight. Clause 17 of the Ports Bill excludes civil courts from adjudicating port-related disputes, instead directing conflicts to internal resolution mechanisms controlled by the very authorities whose decisions are being challenged. Such an arrangement risks compromising impartiality and could deter private investment, which thrives on transparent and independent dispute resolution.
- More broadly, the bills grant vague and expansive regulatory powers that open the door to arbitrary enforcement. Smaller operators are likely to bear the brunt of increased compliance requirements, facing heavier burdens without sufficient support.

Additional Concerns within the Maritime Reform Package

- The Merchant Shipping Act, 2025, while advancing registration norms, safety protocols, and liability frameworks, introduces significant uncertainties regarding ownership safeguards. Whereas the earlier legislation mandated full Indian ownership of vessels registered under the Indian flag, the new Act allows partial foreign ownership, with exact thresholds to be determined by government notification.
- This ambiguity endows the executive with excessive discretion and raises fears that India could evolve into a flag-of-convenience jurisdiction, where foreign entities effectively control Indian-registered ships. Moreover, the provisions allowing Bareboat Charter-Cum-Demise registrations, although valid in principle, risk ceding long-term operational control to foreign lessors without clear enforcement mechanisms.
- Similarly, the Coastal Shipping Act, 2025, embodies tensions between protecting domestic cabotage and expanding central oversight. While it formally reserves coastal trade for Indian-flagged vessels, it empowers the Director General of Shipping to grant licenses to foreign vessels on broad grounds such as national security or strategic considerations. The absence of clear definitions for these criteria invites potential misuse, threatening the interests of domestic operators.
- Smaller stakeholders, especially those in the fishing sector, may find themselves disproportionately impacted by onerous reporting requirements and bureaucratic hurdles, often without adequate guidance or relief.

The Path Forward: Reforming the Reforms

- Together, these four laws represent an important acknowledgment of the necessity to update India's maritime governance. Yet, their heavy reliance on executive discretion, centralization of power, and insufficient protections for judicial independence and small operators threaten to undermine the reforms' intended benefits.
- India requires a legal framework that promotes maritime growth while safeguarding the federal balance and ensuring fair competition. Ownership thresholds and licensing criteria must be explicitly codified in legislation, rather than left to administrative notifications subject to executive whim.

- Dispute resolution systems need to incorporate independent judicial oversight, and States must have a meaningful participatory role in maritime planning and decision-making.

Conclusion

India's maritime reform package of 2025 is a bold attempt to overhaul century-old laws and align the country with international maritime standards, aiming to propel it into the league of modern maritime powers. However, the risks of excessive centralization, unchecked executive authority, and inadequate safeguards for smaller operators are serious and cannot be ignored.

For these reforms to truly lay the foundation for India's maritime future, they must be implemented inclusively, transparently, and with a firm respect for the principles of federalism. Only then can India's maritime sector realize its full potential while maintaining democratic governance and equitable growth.

National Sports Governance Act 2025 – Advancing Transparency and Accountability in Indian Sports

Context

Enacted during the Monsoon Session of Parliament in 2025, the National Sports Governance Act represents a landmark reform in India's sports administration. This law establishes a formal regulatory framework for recognising and overseeing national sports bodies, replacing the previously ad-hoc National Sports Development Code of India. Its objective is to put an end to decades of chronic misgovernance, political interference, and prolonged litigation that have plagued Indian sports administration.

Historical Background

- Despite India's early involvement in international sports — being the first Asian country to participate in the Olympics in 1900 — it lacked a dedicated sports governance law until 2025. For decades, sports federations operated as fiefdoms controlled by political leaders and entrenched interests, characterized by widespread electoral malpractice, office bearers overstaying their terms, and domination by individuals with little or no sports background. This systemic failure was explicitly highlighted by the 2014 Parliamentary Standing Committee.
- Currently, over 350 cases concerning malpractices in various sports federations are pending in courts across the country. In several instances, courts have had to intervene directly, appointing Committees of Administrators (CoA) to temporarily manage these federations, underscoring the urgent need for reform.

Global Penalties Resulting from Misgovernance

- The consequences of mismanagement have not been confined to domestic disruption but have also led to severe international penalties. For instance, the Wrestling Federation of India was suspended in 2023 for failing to conduct timely elections. Similarly, the Amateur Kabaddi Federation of India faced suspension in 2024 due to the absence of an elected governing body. The All India Football Federation (AIFF) was suspended by FIFA in 2022 after court-appointed administrators took charge, a suspension that adversely affected the Indian Super League season of 2025–26.
- These sanctions have had tangible impacts on athletes, many of whom faced career setbacks due to age and time constraints, while political administrators largely escaped accountability for their misgovernance.

Key Provisions of the National Sports Governance Act 2025

- The Act introduces a comprehensive institutional framework and governance norms to overhaul Indian sports administration. It empowers the central government to establish a National Sports Board responsible for recognising national sporting federations and their affiliated units. This move

aims to end the prolonged legitimacy disputes that rival federations within the same sport often engage in.

- Alongside the National Sports Board, the Act mandates the establishment of a National Olympic Committee, a National Paralympic Committee, and National and Regional Sports Federations for each sport. Each of these bodies is required to develop and enforce a code of conduct consistent with international best practices relevant to their respective sports.
- On governance, the Act stipulates that every federation's Executive Committee shall comprise up to fifteen members, including at least two distinguished sportspersons and four women. It also prescribes clear age and tenure limits to ensure the infusion of fresh talent and dynamism in sports administration.
- A significant innovation introduced by the Act is the creation of a National Sports Tribunal dedicated to resolving disputes related to sporting federations. This tribunal is designed to expedite litigation by having experts adjudicate matters, and its decisions can be appealed only to the Supreme Court, streamlining the dispute resolution process and reducing delays.
- Election oversight is another critical feature. The Act proposes the formation of a national panel of electoral officers to monitor federation elections and mandates that federations create their own election panels for their affiliates. Additionally, it includes provisions for disqualifying federations that fail to comply with election regulations.

Significance of the Act

- The National Sports Governance Act, 2025, stands as India's first comprehensive legislation on sports governance. By dismantling the monopolies held by political interests, it fosters accountability, transparency, and inclusivity within sports bodies. The law ensures representation for both sportspersons and women in decision-making roles, enhancing democratic participation in sports administration.
- Furthermore, by providing legal clarity and a robust framework, the Act helps India avoid future international sanctions and strengthens the country's position as a responsible member of the global sporting community. This legal foundation is vital for India's ambitions to host major international events such as the Commonwealth Games and the Olympics with credibility and integrity.

Conclusion

The National Sports Governance Act, 2025, sets the stage for a transparent, accountable, and inclusive sports administration system in India. By aligning governance structures with global best practices, the Act promises to empower athletes, restore India's international reputation, and advance the nation's goal of emerging as a leading sporting power. The success of this legislation will ultimately depend on its effective implementation, which can transform India's sports landscape for generations to come.

India's Bilateral and Multilateral Diplomacy

Introduction

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's recent four-day foreign visit combined a blend of bilateral diplomacy with active multilateral engagement. His meetings with the leaders of Russia, China, and Japan were complemented by India's participation in the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) Summit held in Tianjin. This visit occurred during a period of global uncertainty marked by intense great power rivalry, regional conflicts, and a noticeable erosion of multilateralism. India's diplomatic approach during this time reflects a carefully balanced strategy: leveraging bilateral relationships to protect and advance national interests while simultaneously using multilateral forums to raise concerns and foster institutional cooperation.

Key Bilateral Engagements

- India's engagements with Russia, China, and Japan reveal distinct strategic calculations.
- Regarding **India-Russia relations**, the optics of Prime Minister Modi travelling alongside President Vladimir Putin underscored the enduring resilience of the bilateral partnership. Despite Western sanctions and significant pressure from the United States, India continues to value Russia for its defence cooperation, energy supplies, and role in geopolitical balancing. This relationship sends a clear message that India will resist external attempts to dictate the nature of its ties with Moscow.
- In terms of **India-China relations**, the post-Galwan dynamic remains fraught with tension, yet dialogue at the highest levels persists. Modi's talks with President Xi Jinping signal India's understanding that managing competition with China requires ongoing communication. India also recognizes China's influential role in multilateral institutions such as the SCO, BRICS, and various global trade bodies, making engagement necessary despite challenges.
- With **India-Japan relations**, Modi reaffirmed India's commitment to the Quad—a strategic grouping including India, the United States, Japan, and Australia—prior to his visit to China. Japan remains a significant investor in India's infrastructure and technology sectors. India's balancing act involves maintaining strong ties with Japan, a US ally, while continuing engagement with China on critical regional issues.

Multilateral Dimension: The SCO Summit at Tianjin

- India's participation in the SCO provides a crucial platform to engage with key Eurasian players such as Russia, China, and Central Asian states while countering Pakistan's narratives. Having become a full SCO member in 2017, India leverages this forum to promote its regional and global interests.
- The **Tianjin Declaration** emerged as an important milestone. For the first time, the declaration explicitly addressed terrorism and called for bringing perpetrators to justice—an issue India had found previously neglected in SCO statements. India successfully highlighted the problem of selective approaches to terrorism, pushing back against double standards. The inclusion of references to terrorist activities in Pakistan's Balochistan underscored that these issues carry regional, not merely bilateral, implications.
- Despite internal differences among member states, the summit conveyed a sense of collective responsibility as leaders from China, Russia, India, and Central Asia convened in uncertain global circumstances. Discussions also covered the Middle East crises, including the Gaza conflict and strikes on Iran, where India expressed deep concern, emphasizing its independent foreign policy stance.

Geopolitical Context

- The evolving global order presents several challenges and opportunities for India.
- The **US factor** involves American efforts to encourage India to distance itself from Russia. However, India's emphasis on strategic autonomy means it continues to maintain its traditional ties with Moscow while expanding cooperation with Washington through the Quad and bilateral defence partnerships.
- A **multipolar world** is increasingly emerging, with institutions such as the SCO, BRICS, and the G20 providing alternative platforms for diverse voices. India positions itself as a bridge between the Global South and advanced economies, navigating this complex landscape with finesse.
- **Eurasian importance** remains high for India due to strategic considerations like connectivity, energy security, and counterterrorism. India's active participation in the SCO ensures it remains relevant in Central Asia, despite Pakistan's geographic advantage.
- **Domestic and Strategic Implications for India**
- India's insistence on addressing terrorism within the SCO counters Pakistan's attempts to internationalize Kashmir issues while simultaneously ignoring cross-border terrorism. This firm stance against double standards enhances India's credibility on the global stage.

- Strategically, India's engagement with Russia and China, alongside strong ties with Japan and Quad partners, demonstrates an adept balancing act. By pursuing multiple diplomatic avenues, India avoids over-dependence on any single bloc, preserving flexibility in its foreign policy.
- Multilateral forums like the SCO provide India with opportunities to test consensus, build coalitions around specific issues, and project an independent voice on global matters, such as the crises in Gaza and Iran.

Challenges and Criticisms

- Several hurdles remain. Within the SCO, China and Pakistan often coordinate positions, restricting India's maneuverability. Moreover, India's views on Afghanistan, China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and regional security issues do not always align with the SCO consensus.
- India faces the challenge of balancing its commitments to the Quad while actively participating in the SCO, managing potentially conflicting alliances. The references to terrorism in SCO declarations, although present, tend to be broad and lack enforceable mechanisms.
- Additionally, India must guard against perceptions that it is opportunistically switching between blocs rather than following a coherent and consistent foreign policy strategy.

Way Forward

- To strengthen its diplomatic posture, India must continue emphasizing strategic autonomy and multi-alignment rather than full alignment with any single bloc. Deepening defence and energy ties with Russia, balancing this with cooperation with Japan and Quad partners on technology and security, and maintaining constructive engagement with China in regional forums will help preserve India's independence in decision-making.
- Institutionalizing anti-terrorism cooperation within the SCO is essential. India should advocate for a permanent anti-terrorism task force that can facilitate intelligence sharing, monitor threats, and build consensus on combating terrorism. Moving beyond symbolic statements to actionable mechanisms will enhance the forum's effectiveness.
- India should also diversify its energy and defence partnerships. While Russia remains vital for defence supplies, investments in indigenous defence manufacturing and broadening import sources are crucial to reducing over-reliance. In the energy sector, India must balance long-term contracts with Russia and Central Asia by developing renewable energy collaborations with Japan, the European Union, and the United States.
- Beyond high-level diplomacy, India should promote people-to-people connections and economic integration with SCO countries. Encouraging academic exchanges, cultural diplomacy, tourism, and digital trade frameworks will deepen India's strategic and cultural ties across Eurasia.
- Finally, India must champion the interests of the Global South within forums like SCO and BRICS. By highlighting issues such as food security, debt sustainability, and equitable access to technology, India reinforces its leadership role among developing nations and aligns with its G20 presidency theme of "One Earth, One Family, One Future."

Conclusion

Prime Minister Modi's four-day foreign visit showcased India's dual diplomatic strategy: combining robust bilateral relations with active multilateral engagement. His efforts underline India's evolving role as a global balancer—maintaining strategic autonomy, countering terrorism narratives, and fostering multipolar solidarity. In a world of shifting alliances and uncertainties, India's ability to blend bilateral depth with multilateral breadth will be a defining factor in its diplomatic success.

Natural Calamities in North and North-Western India

Introduction

In recent weeks, the northern and north-western regions of India have been severely affected by a series of natural calamities. Punjab and Haryana have witnessed devastating floods, while Himachal Pradesh and Uttarakhand have suffered from landslides and cloudbursts. Additionally, rising river levels in Delhi and Jammu & Kashmir have further aggravated the situation, causing widespread human suffering, economic setbacks, and ecological damage. These disasters expose the increasing vulnerability of the Himalayan and sub-Himalayan ecosystems to extreme weather phenomena, a vulnerability that is exacerbated by climate change, unplanned development, and environmental mismanagement.

Scale of the Disaster

The scale of destruction varies across the affected regions. In Punjab, hundreds of villages and towns have been submerged, resulting in over 30 fatalities and the destruction of crops and infrastructure worth hundreds of crores. Haryana has experienced damage to villages and roads, although the severity is somewhat less than in Punjab. Himachal Pradesh faces disruptions due to landslides, flash floods, and cloudbursts, which have significantly affected transportation, tourism, and local livelihoods. Similar patterns of rainfall-induced disasters are seen in Uttarakhand and Jammu & Kashmir, where roads have been blocked and residents displaced. In Delhi, the rising water levels of the Yamuna River have created a persistent flood threat. Collectively, these calamities have led to loss of lives, displacement of thousands, destruction of agricultural produce, breakdown of transport networks, and a decline in tourism activities.

Causes of Disasters

- Several factors contribute to these calamities. Climatic influences include intensified monsoon patterns attributed to global warming, an increasing frequency of cloudbursts, and short-duration, high-intensity rainfall events. The warming of the Indian Ocean and Himalayan regions has altered precipitation cycles, as evidenced by data from the India Meteorological Department (IMD).
- Environmental degradation plays a critical role as well. Deforestation has compromised slope stability and the land's ability to retain water. Encroachment on floodplains and obstruction of natural drainage systems have worsened flooding. Additionally, activities such as sand mining and alteration of riverbeds have disrupted the natural morphology of rivers.
- Unplanned development further compounds the risks. Infrastructure projects like road widening, tunnels, and hydroelectric plants in the fragile Himalayan region increase vulnerability. Tourism-related infrastructure in Uttarakhand often exceeds the ecological carrying capacity, and construction in hazard-prone zones frequently neglects disaster-resilient standards.
- Policy and planning gaps also hinder effective disaster management. Responses tend to be reactive, emphasizing relief over prevention. Enforcement of land-use and building regulations is weak, and climate change adaptation is inadequately integrated into state-level planning processes.

Human and Economic Impact

- The human toll of these disasters is significant, with lives lost and many injured. Thousands of families have been displaced, facing psychological trauma alongside physical and material losses. Agricultural damage is widespread: paddy fields in Punjab and Haryana have been washed away, and fruit orchards and cash crops in Himachal Pradesh have been destroyed, threatening food security and farmer incomes.
- Infrastructure has suffered extensively. Bridges, highways, and village roads have been swept away, while urban flooding has led to breakdowns in power, water supply, and communication systems. Tourism, a vital economic sector in Himachal Pradesh and Uttarakhand reliant on religious and hill tourism, has been severely disrupted. Small businesses, hotels, and roadside economies have been among the hardest hit.

Ecological Dimensions

The Himalayan region, being geologically young and fragile, is naturally prone to landslides. Human encroachment and construction on riverbanks reduce the natural flood absorption capacity, while blockage of drainage channels intensifies disaster impacts. The region's biodiversity is also under considerable stress, with forests and wildlife corridors damaged by landslides and floods.

Climate Change Linkages

Reports by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) highlight South Asia's increasing vulnerability to extreme rainfall events and floods caused by glacial melt. The World Meteorological Organization's (WMO) State of Climate in Asia Report (2023) notes rising flood-related economic damages in India. Rising surface temperatures contribute to increased evaporation and sudden cloudbursts. Retreating glaciers in the Himalayas elevate the risk of Glacial Lake Outburst Floods (GLOFs), posing new challenges.

Governance and Institutional Aspects

- At the state level, Punjab, Haryana, Himachal Pradesh, and Uttarakhand are actively engaged in rescue and rehabilitation operations and are seeking special financial assistance from the central government. The National Disaster Response Force (NDRF) has been deployed, and central funds have been released under the State Disaster Response Fund (SDRF) and the National Disaster Response Fund (NDRF).
- However, challenges remain, including delays and inadequacies in disaster relief funds and weak coordination between states that share river systems. Additionally, a blame game between the Centre and the states has hampered swift and effective responses.

Preventive and Long-Term Strategies

- Effective disaster management requires a shift toward prevention. This includes expanding real-time weather forecasting and early warning systems through institutions like IMD and ISRO. Strengthening community-level preparedness with mock drills and awareness campaigns is also vital.
- Eco-sensitive planning must involve strict regulation of construction in vulnerable Himalayan and floodplain zones, implementation of carrying capacity studies before initiating new tourism or hydropower projects, and adoption of bioengineering techniques such as vegetative cover and slope stabilization.
- River and water management strategies should focus on protecting natural river courses and wetlands to enhance flood absorption capacity, adopting integrated basin-level planning across states, and restoring traditional water systems like ponds, stepwells, and johads.
- Agricultural adaptation is necessary to encourage climate-resilient crops and diversified cropping in flood-prone areas. Expanding crop insurance coverage under schemes like the Pradhan Mantri Fasal Bima Yojana (PMFBY) can provide a safety net for farmers.
- Institutional reforms should include strengthening the National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA), involving local governments, panchayats, and community groups in disaster planning, and mainstreaming climate change adaptation into state development plans.

International Best Practices

India can draw lessons from international experiences. Japan has developed advanced early warning systems and strict zoning regulations in flood-prone areas. The Netherlands employs river basin management and dike systems to control flooding effectively. Bhutan has implemented community-based preparedness programs to address the risks of Glacial Lake Outburst Floods. Adapting such practices to Himalayan-specific conditions could greatly benefit India.

Way Forward

Moving forward, India must transition from a reactive to a preventive disaster management approach. Infrastructure development should be aligned with environmental carrying capacity, and coordination

between the Centre and states should be strengthened for river basin and disaster planning. Prioritizing ecosystem restoration—including forests, wetlands, and natural river courses—is critical. Climate resilience must be mainstreamed into agriculture, housing, and urban planning, while community-driven disaster risk reduction initiatives should be encouraged to ensure long-term sustainability.

Conclusion

The recent floods, landslides, and cloudbursts across North and North-Western India illustrate the convergence of natural fragility, human-induced vulnerabilities, and the impacts of climate change. This moment calls for administrators, policymakers, and communities to adopt climate-resilient, ecologically sensitive, and preventive disaster management strategies to protect lives and livelihoods from future calamities.

GST 2.0: A Defining Chapter in India's Taxation History

Context

The **56th meeting of the Goods and Services Tax (GST) Council**, held on **September 3, 2025**, marks a turning point in India's tax reform journey. Far from being a routine administrative exercise, the decisions taken signal a fundamental transformation aimed at creating a simpler, more equitable, and growth-oriented taxation framework. These reforms resonate strongly with the broader national vision of **Viksit Bharat 2047**, as they go beyond technical adjustments to deliver changes that touch every segment of the population — from citizens and consumers to industries and entrepreneurs.

Comprehensive Overhaul of the GST Framework

One of the most striking reforms introduced is the **consolidation of the multiple GST rates** — previously set at 5%, 12%, 18%, and 28% — into a **more streamlined system**. This revised framework consists of:

- **A Standard Rate of 18%** for most goods and services
- **A Merit Rate of 5%** for essential items
- **A De-merit Rate of 40%** for luxury and socially harmful goods

This overhaul reduces compliance complexity, provides greater certainty to businesses, and aligns India's tax policy with international best practices. It also addresses long-standing demands from industry stakeholders, who had for years advocated for rationalisation and simplification of the GST rate structure. The Council's decision reflects its responsiveness and strategic foresight.

Tangible Gains for Consumers and Households

- The revised GST framework brings **immediate relief to households** by lowering the tax burden on daily-use items. Goods such as **soap, shampoo, toothpaste, kitchenware, and bicycles** now attract a reduced GST rate of **5%**, making them more affordable for consumers.
- More significantly, the complete **exemption of life and health insurance** from GST signals a clear move toward making financial security and healthcare more accessible, especially for **low-income groups and senior citizens**.
- Healthcare receives an additional boost through reduced or zero-rated GST on **life-saving medications, critical diagnostic equipment, and treatment of serious illnesses**. These measures not only improve affordability but also expand access to healthcare services across socio-economic strata.
- The reforms also extend to **agriculture**, where a reduction in GST on inputs such as **tractors, fertilizers, and farm machinery** lowers the cost of cultivation. These changes directly benefit farmers by enhancing productivity and providing economic relief at a time when agricultural incomes remain vulnerable.

Direct Economic Impact of the Reforms

1. **Support for Labour-Intensive and Traditional Sectors:** By lowering GST rates on goods produced by **labour-intensive industries** like **handicrafts, leather products, marble, and granite**, the reforms aim to stimulate demand and preserve traditional skills. These measures are designed not just to generate employment, but also to protect India's cultural industries and enhance their market competitiveness. This reflects a shift in tax policy from being revenue-centric to becoming a tool for **inclusive economic development**.
2. **Resolving Structural Distortions:** One of the most strategically significant moves in GST 2.0 is the rectification of **inverted duty structures**, which had created inefficiencies and discouraged investment in sectors such as **textiles and cement**. For instance, by reducing GST on **man-made fibres and yarn to 5%**, the government eliminates cascading taxes across the textile value chain, enhancing both domestic production and export potential.

Similarly, **reducing GST on cement from 28% to 18%** is expected to deliver a multiplier effect across sectors like **infrastructure and affordable housing**, unlocking new growth opportunities and supporting national development goals.

Institutional Strengthening and Procedural Reforms

- The announcement regarding the establishment of the **Goods and Services Tax Appellate Tribunal (GSTAT)** by the end of 2025 represents a critical advance in India's tax governance infrastructure. Once operational, the tribunal will provide a structured and timely mechanism for resolving disputes, enhancing legal certainty for taxpayers and boosting confidence in the tax system.
- Complementing this are procedural reforms, including **provisional refunds, risk-based compliance assessments**, and the **harmonisation of valuation rules**. These steps aim to reduce transaction costs, improve the ease of doing business, and foster a more predictable and trustworthy tax environment.

Balancing Reform with Fiscal Responsibility

Recognising the need for careful implementation, the Council has opted for a **phased rollout of the reforms**, beginning **September 22, 2025**. This calibrated approach ensures that while businesses and consumers begin to benefit from lower tax rates, **revenue stability is preserved**, preventing any fiscal shocks to government finances. This blend of **growth orientation and fiscal prudence** reinforces the credibility and sustainability of the GST reforms.

GST 2.0: A Reform for the People, by the People

- At its heart, GST 2.0 is not merely a structural change — it is a **people-centric reform**. Through simplification, lower taxation on essential goods, rectification of longstanding anomalies, and robust institutional mechanisms, the reform encompasses **citizens, farmers, workers, small business owners, and industrialists alike**.
- The government's inclusive and forward-thinking approach has been welcomed by industry bodies such as the **Confederation of Indian Industry (CII)**, which had long advocated for these changes. Their support during the implementation phase is expected to facilitate a smooth transition, ensuring that the benefits reach all stakeholders.

Conclusion: A Milestone in India's Economic Transformation

- The **56th GST Council meeting** will be remembered as a landmark moment in India's reform journey. By merging the objectives of simplification and inclusivity with the imperatives of growth and fiscal discipline, **GST 2.0 lays the groundwork for a taxation regime that is equitable, efficient, and future-ready**.
- These reforms go beyond administrative convenience; they represent a **vision of participatory governance** — one that is responsive to the aspirations of a rising economy and attuned to the needs of its people. In charting this path, India moves closer to its goal of becoming a **developed**

nation by 2047, with a taxation system that reflects its values of fairness, innovation, and shared prosperity.

Fixing Problems, Unlocking India's Growth Potential: The Promise of GST 2.0

Context: A Legacy of Reform

- India's economic development has long been shaped by bold, transformative reforms—from the liberalisation wave of 1991 to the rollout of the Goods and Services Tax (GST) in 2017. Each milestone has aimed to strike a balance between efficiency, inclusivity, and competitiveness in a changing global environment.
- On **September 3, 2025**, the **56th GST Council meeting** introduced a major overhaul, dubbed **GST 2.0**. Far from being a routine update, this initiative marks a significant step towards simplifying India's tax regime, fostering economic growth, and reinforcing institutional trust.

The Significance of GST 2.0

- A Simpler, Fairer Tax Framework:** GST 2.0 delivers by moving to a **two-rate structure**: 18% (standard) and 5% (merit), with very few items taxed at 40%. Streamlining rate classifications and clarifying tax rules. This rationalisation aligns India with global tax norms, reduces compliance burdens, and boosts investor confidence through greater predictability.
- Strengthening Institutional Trust:** A key institutional reform under GST 2.0 is the operationalisation of the **Goods and Services Tax Appellate Tribunal (GSTAT)**. With faster and more transparent dispute resolution, GSTAT enhances credibility and ensures that taxation is driven by fairness, not just revenue goals.

Relief for Households and Consumers

GST 2.0 brings **direct benefits to consumers**, especially across lower- and middle-income segments:

- Essentials like soap, toothpaste, shampoo, and packaged food** are now taxed at lower rates, reducing household expenditure and boosting consumption.
- The **construction sector** sees tax cuts on inputs like cement, lowering costs for housing and infrastructure projects.

These changes have a **multiplier effect** on allied industries like steel, tiles, and paints. Additionally, **GST reductions on essential drugs and medical devices** make healthcare more affordable and enhance India's standing as a global supplier of low-cost medicines.

Boosting Key Sectors and Exports

- Support for Labour-Intensive Industries:** Industries such as **textiles, handicrafts, leather, footwear, and toys** benefit from reduced tax rates, which:
 - Protect profit margins
 - Preserve jobs in rural and semi-urban areas
 - Encourage employment growth
 - Refunds on low-value consignments**, especially critical for **courier and e-commerce exports**
 - Improved liquidity and operational efficiency
 - Automated approvals within 3 days** cut down red tape
 - Lower compliance costs and reduced barriers to formal entry
 - Encourages MSMEs to scale up and tap into new markets

This reform strengthens the economic backbone of India—MSMEs—by enhancing their resilience and growth prospects.

Towards a Competitive and Inclusive Economy

GST 2.0 enhances India's image as a **business-friendly and investor-ready** destination:

- Simplified tax rates reduce litigation

- A more predictable regime aligns with global economic shifts
- Signals India's commitment to **ease of doing business, formalisation, and competitiveness**

Challenges Ahead

Despite its promise, GST 2.0's success will hinge on:

- **Effective implementation** across states and sectors
- **Addressing procedural delays** and compliance burdens
- **Building enforcement capacity** to handle expanded systems

The government must continue engaging with industry and stakeholders to ensure these reforms yield their intended impact.

Conclusion: A New Chapter in India's Growth Story

- **GST 2.0 is more than a tax reform—it's a strategic economic transformation.** By reducing the cost of living, empowering MSMEs, and enhancing global competitiveness, it sets the stage for inclusive, sustained growth.
- If implemented efficiently, GST 2.0 could become a defining milestone in India's journey toward becoming a globally competitive, innovation-driven economy.

India's Strategic Autonomy in a Multipolar World

Context

- India's pursuit of strategic autonomy is grounded in historical experience and contemporary geopolitical realities.
- It is a pragmatic approach aimed at safeguarding sovereignty in a world shaped by shifting power balances.
- No longer a niche academic concept, strategic autonomy now sits at the heart of India's foreign policy thinking.
- As global volatility increases, this principle acts as the foundation of India's international engagement and national resilience.

Understanding Strategic Autonomy: Between Isolation and Dependence

- Strategic autonomy means the ability to make independent decisions in foreign and defence policy, free from external pressures or binding alliances.
- It is not synonymous with isolationism or neutrality; instead, it embraces flexibility, adaptability, and sovereign agency.
- India's colonial past has instilled a long-standing commitment to protecting decision-making from external domination.

Navigating Great Power Equations

3. Engaging the United States: Cooperation without Compromise

- India's ties with the U.S. have expanded significantly across defence, intelligence, technology, and multilateral cooperation.
- Partnerships in forums like the Quad, I2U2, and new connectivity initiatives underline shared strategic interests.
- However, India has resisted pressure to dilute ties with Russia or accept unequal trade terms, signalling a clear intent to protect its strategic space.
- Engagement with Washington is deep and collaborative but never at the cost of national interest or policy independence.

4. Managing the China Relationship: Containment without Confrontation

- China remains India's most complex foreign policy challenge, marked by both competition and economic interdependence.

- Military tensions, particularly post-2020 border clashes, have pushed India to strengthen regional partnerships and its defence posture.
- Despite growing rivalry, India continues economic and diplomatic engagement through platforms like BRICS and SCO.
- This approach reflects calibrated duality—asserting deterrence while avoiding a full strategic rupture.

5. Balancing the Russia Equation: Legacy Meets Realism

- India has sustained energy and defence ties with Russia despite global criticism following the Ukraine conflict.
- At the same time, it has diversified its defence sources and invested in domestic production capabilities.
- The engagement with Moscow is driven by pragmatism, not nostalgia, ensuring flexibility amid an increasingly polarised global environment.
- India's choices in this regard reinforce the principle that its strategic decisions are not subject to external dictates.

6. Positioning Within the Global South: Leadership Through Sovereignty

- India's recent G20 presidency highlighted its role as a representative of the Global South.
- New Delhi projected itself as a sovereign and pluralistic voice, advocating for equitable global governance.
- Strategic autonomy here takes on a normative dimension—offering middle powers a model of global engagement without forced alignment.
- This reinforces India's image as a credible, independent actor in global politics.

Expanding the Scope of Autonomy in the Modern Era

- Strategic autonomy now extends beyond defence and diplomacy into economic and technological spheres.
- Emerging domains—cyberspace, artificial intelligence, and space—require autonomy in digital infrastructure and innovation.
- India's initiatives in building indigenous digital platforms, securing critical minerals, and participating in global tech rule-making reflect this broadened vision.
- The goal is to secure autonomy not just in foreign policy, but also in supply chains, data governance, and technological ecosystems.

Looking Ahead: Principles for a Resilient Global Posture

- India's strategic autonomy is a tool for navigating global turbulence without sacrificing core interests or identity.
- The approach involves:
 - Partnering with the U.S. without subordination
 - Dissuading Chinese aggression without escalation
 - Retaining relations with Russia without embracing isolation
- Achieving this requires not only diplomatic acumen but also robust domestic capabilities—economic strength, institutional stability, and technological innovation.

Conclusion: Standing Tall, Not Alone

- Strategic autonomy is ultimately about agency—India's ability to shape outcomes, not merely adapt to them.
- As the global order becomes more fragmented and multipolar, India's nuanced balancing act offers a compelling vision for others navigating similar challenges.
- This is not a call for solitary action, but for sovereign engagement—standing tall, clear-eyed, and principled in a contested world.

The Making of an Ecological Disaster in the Nicobar

Context

- Over the last decade, India's development policies have often been criticised for being rushed and poorly planned.
- Among these, the **Great Nicobar mega-infrastructure project**, with a staggering cost estimate of **₹72,000 crore**, stands out as a particularly alarming example.
- The project threatens to **displace indigenous communities** and **destroy one of the world's most unique and sensitive ecosystems**.
- It overlooks **constitutional mandates**, **undermines environmental regulations**, and **subjects the region to extreme ecological and human risk**.
- This is a case where **ambition is placed above justice, legality, and long-term sustainability**.

Concerns Surrounding the Great Nicobar Project

- **Displacement of Indigenous Communities**
- Great Nicobar is inhabited by two vulnerable indigenous groups: the **Nicobarese** and the **Shompen**.
- The **Nicobarese**, whose ancestral settlements are located within the project's boundaries, were already displaced during the **2004 tsunami**. Their hopes of returning have now been permanently extinguished by state intervention.
- The **Shompen**, classified as a **Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group (PVTG)**, face even greater risks:
 - The government has **denotified sections of their reserve**, cleared critical forests, and enabled **outsider migration**, effectively isolating the Shompen from their land.
 - These actions **threaten their cultural integrity, economic survival, and territorial rights**.

Bypassing Constitutional and Legal Protections

- The project disregards vital constitutional and statutory safeguards for tribal communities: **Article 338-A** requires consultation with the **National Commission for Scheduled Tribes**—this consultation was never held. The **Tribal Council's opposition**, including their revoked **Letter of No Objection**, was completely ignored.
- These actions go beyond neglect; they represent a **deliberate subversion of due process and tribal rights**.

Legal and Regulatory Subversions

1. **Social Impact Assessment (SIA)**: Required under the **2013 Land Acquisition Act**, the SIA is meant to evaluate consequences on local populations. Shockingly, the **Nicobarese and Shompen were not even mentioned** in the final assessment report.
2. **Forest Rights Act (2006)**: This law entitles tribal groups like the Shompen to **manage and protect their traditional forest lands**. Yet, the Shompen were **excluded from all consultations**, violating the **letter and spirit of the law**.
3. **Environmental Safeguards**: The project intrudes into **Coastal Regulation Zone (CRZ) 1A**, where construction is **explicitly banned** to protect ecologically sensitive zones like **coral reefs** and **turtle nesting beaches**. A **government-appointed High-Powered Committee** reclassified portions of CRZ to bypass these restrictions. Its findings remain **undisclosed to the public**. These are **not isolated oversights**, but **systematic efforts to evade legal accountability**.

Ecological Devastation and the Myth of Compensatory Afforestation

- The project threatens to **eliminate up to 15% of Great Nicobar's forest cover**: Official estimates suggest **8.5 lakh trees** could be felled. Independent studies estimate the number could be as high as **32–58 lakh trees**.
- The government's plan for **compensatory afforestation** in distant, climatically incompatible regions is **both ecologically irrational and logistically flawed**: Part of the land earmarked for afforestation has already been **auctioned for mining**.
- The **port location overlaps** with vital habitats such as: **Turtle nesting beaches, Coral reef systems**
- Biodiversity assessments conducted for the project are **scientifically flawed**: **Turtle studies were conducted outside nesting season. Drones unsuited for underwater observations** were used to survey **dugong habitats**.
- These methodological lapses raise serious concerns regarding **scientific credibility and possible institutional coercion**.

Seismic Vulnerability and Human Risk

- Great Nicobar lies in a **highly seismically active zone**: The **2004 tsunami** caused **15 feet of permanent land subsidence** on the island. In **July 2025**, a **6.2-magnitude earthquake** again demonstrated the island's seismic fragility.
- Proposing and executing **massive infrastructure projects** in such a region is not only ill-advised but **jeopardises human safety and economic investments**.

The Way Forward: A Call for Conscience

- The Great Nicobar infrastructure plan constitutes a **profound betrayal** of India's most vulnerable communities and its fragile ecological heritage.
- It:
 - **Displaces tribal populations** with no viable alternatives.
 - **Ignores constitutional protections** and subverts legal norms.
 - **Destroys irreplaceable rainforests** and **threatens endemic biodiversity**.
 - **Puts infrastructure and lives in an active disaster-prone zone**.
- Development **must not come at the expense of environmental ethics, tribal rights, and public safety**.
- As a society, we bear the responsibility to **oppose such ill-conceived ventures**.
- The **survival of indigenous cultures, protection of biodiversity, and the safety of future generations** hinge on **vocal and active resistance**.
- To remain silent is to be **complicit in the systematic erasure of both culture and nature**.

Conclusion

The Great Nicobar mega-infrastructure project represents a dangerous paradigm of development that **sacrifices justice, ecological integrity, and human survival** for the sake of short-term ambition. By **disregarding tribal rights, devastating ancient forests, and building in a known seismic hazard zone**, the project **undermines both legal obligations and sustainable development goals**. Real progress lies not in the pursuit of unchecked infrastructure but in the **commitment to equity, legality, and ecological responsibility**.

Iran and India: Ancient Civilisations, Emerging Horizons

Context

- The current phase of global transition is defined by a deepening crisis within the Western-dominated international order. The influence once firmly held by the United States and its allies is now eroding, as their long-standing tools of power lose traction in a rapidly changing world.

- This decline is evident in repeated violations of international law, ongoing trade wars, unilateral military actions, the weakening of global governance institutions, media manipulation, and a disregard for environmental sustainability. These are not isolated incidents but symptoms of a broader systemic breakdown.
- The traditional mechanisms that underpinned Western supremacy—such as control over global financial systems, monopolisation of advanced technologies, conditionalities tied to human rights narratives, and dominance over international media—are no longer as effective. As these tools lose their edge, space is opening up for alternative global leadership models.
- Against this backdrop, the article explores how this moment of change presents new opportunities for ancient civilisations like **India and Iran**. Drawing on their shared values, historical endurance, and civilisational strength, these nations are positioned to contribute meaningfully to a more equitable and multipolar global order.

India and Iran: Civilisational Partners in the Emerging Global South

- As the Global South seeks to assert greater autonomy and reimagine development through indigenous models, both India and Iran are emerging as key contributors. Their civilisational legacies offer a moral and philosophical foundation that differs markedly from the transactional and often coercive approaches of Western geopolitics.
- Historically, India and Iran have shaped global thought through contributions to governance, literature, philosophy, art, and science. Their civilisational outlooks have promoted values such as peace, diversity, and spirituality. Despite enduring centuries of colonial exploitation, foreign interference, and economic sanctions, both nations have preserved their cultural identities and strategic autonomy.
- Today, these two countries exemplify the Global South's growing demand for a more just international system. Their ability to withstand external pressure has imbued them with a shared sense of purpose in navigating current global challenges.
- By enhancing **South-South cooperation**, advancing platforms such as **BRICS**, and contributing to initiatives like the **International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC)**, India and Iran are not just strengthening bilateral ties but also working toward a multipolar world. Their shared commitment to moral principles and civilisational values gives them the legitimacy to advocate for global justice and equity.

Palestine, Iran, and the Struggle for Justice in the Global South

- The enduring struggle of the Palestinian people has become emblematic of the Global South's broader resistance against Western imperialism, double standards, and the politics of occupation. It symbolises a universal demand for dignity, sovereignty, and the right to resist domination.
- Iran's consistent support for Palestine, and its broader stance in defence of peaceful nuclear development, reflect the South's aspiration to claim its right to progress and self-determination. These positions are rooted not only in geopolitical strategy but also in adherence to international law and ethical diplomacy.
- Multilateral platforms such as **BRICS** have emerged as viable alternatives to the Western-centric global order. By promoting policies such as **de-dollarisation** and advocating for more **inclusive economic systems**, these platforms allow countries like India and Iran to reclaim economic and strategic space.
- In this context, the **INSTC** is more than a trade corridor. It functions as a civilisational artery, linking regions from **Eurasia and the Caucasus to Africa and India**, while fostering connectivity, cooperation, and stability—particularly in the volatile West Asian region.

India, Iran, and the Pursuit of a Just International Order

- In West Asia, U.S. policies have consistently disrupted regional stability. Its strategic support for Israel and interventions in countries like **Iraq, Syria, Yemen, Lebanon, and Iran** have not brought peace but have instead fuelled cycles of violence and mistrust.
- Similarly, in South Asia, the United States has alternated between combatting and enabling terrorist groups to serve shifting geopolitical interests, undermining both regional security and long-term peace.
- In contrast, India and Iran offer a civilisational vision rooted in wisdom, sovereignty, and mutual respect. At this historical juncture, they have the opportunity—and arguably the responsibility—to champion a **new international order**. This emerging order must be grounded in principles of **justice, equality, self-determination, and human dignity**.
- Their partnership can offer a compelling counter-narrative to global domination, one where **no nation is forced to serve the interests of the powerful**, and where sovereignty and cooperation are valued above coercion and control.

Conclusion

- India and Iran stand at the confluence of ancient wisdom and contemporary relevance. As the global order continues to shift away from Western hegemony, their civilisational strength, strategic cooperation, and shared commitment to justice place them at the forefront of shaping a **multipolar world**.
- Together, they can guide the Global South towards a future defined not by subjugation, but by **equity, dignity, and mutual respect**. Their alliance offers not only a roadmap for regional stability and development, but also a larger civilisational message for the world: that **true progress lies in collaboration, not domination; in justice, not expedience**.

The Long March Ahead to Technological Independence

Context

On August 15, 2025, India marked its 79th Independence Day, commemorating its historic struggle for political freedom. However, in an increasingly digitised and globally connected era, independence can no longer be confined to political autonomy alone. It must now include *technological sovereignty*—the ability to independently control and trust the digital systems that influence every dimension of national life. Without this, India risks replacing colonial subjugation with digital dependence on foreign powers.

The New Frontline in Global Geopolitics

- The nature of global conflict has undergone a profound transformation. Modern warfare is no longer dominated by conventional weapons but by advanced technologies—software, drones, cyberweapons, and surveillance tools. The most insidious and invisible battleground is cyberspace, where critical infrastructures such as banks, transportation systems, and power grids rely heavily on digital platforms and networks.
- This reliance brings with it a sobering reality: the majority of these vital systems are developed and controlled by a small group of powerful foreign corporations, often concentrated in a single geopolitical region. This technological dependence constitutes a serious national vulnerability. Should these companies, under pressure from their governments or driven by hostile intent, revoke access to cloud platforms or artificial intelligence tools, the impact on India's economy, governance, and security could be devastating.
- These are not abstract fears. Recent incidents, where cloud services were disrupted for companies, have shown the real and immediate dangers of excessive reliance on external technology providers.

Charting a Path to Technological Sovereignty Building Software Autonomy

- To overcome this vulnerability, India must pursue *technological autonomy*. At present, the country lacks indigenous operating systems, databases, or critical foundational software that it can fully trust. This dependency exposes India to external risks. Nevertheless, the journey toward software sovereignty is both achievable and necessary.
- Open-source software presents a viable and powerful foundation for building secure, transparent, and reliable digital infrastructure. By developing customised, India-specific versions of Linux and Android, the nation can avoid the risks posed by proprietary software riddled with opaque vulnerabilities. However, creating such systems is only the beginning—the real challenge lies in long-term maintenance, security updates, and continuous innovation.
- For open-source ecosystems to flourish, they require a broad base of users and a vibrant community of dedicated developers and professionals. This is not a responsibility that a single government body or company can shoulder alone. It must become a national mission—one that unites India's vast talent pool of IT professionals in a shared vision of digital independence.

The Greater Challenge of Hardware Sovereignty

- If achieving software independence is challenging, attaining *hardware sovereignty* is an even steeper climb. Semiconductor manufacturing demands vast capital investment, intricate technical knowledge, and unwavering long-term commitment. Few nations possess full control over their semiconductor production pipelines.
- India must therefore approach this sector with strategic realism. In the short term, outsourcing chip fabrication to global partners may be practical. Yet this must be coupled with a long-term strategy focused on building domestic capabilities in chip design, packaging, testing, and supply chain resilience. Step by step, India must aim to reduce its dependence on foreign manufacturers while developing the foundational expertise and infrastructure necessary to eventually become self-sufficient.
- Just as India achieved political independence through peaceful resistance, it can strive for technological independence through cooperation, collaboration, and the open-source ethos—not by isolating itself, but by building resilience and autonomy in critical areas.

A Technological Movement Rooted in Society and Economy

- In the past, the open-source movement represented a powerful social and political force. Today, although widely used software like Android, Linux, and Hadoop remain open-source at their core, the infrastructure powering them—cloud services and data centers—is often centralised and foreign-controlled.
- India needs a revival of that grassroots spirit. This should not be limited to technocrats or government policy, but must evolve into a nationwide movement that engages ordinary citizens and technology professionals alike. A social awakening is needed—one that recognizes that technological dependence is no longer just a government concern, but a shared risk for businesses, individuals, and civil society.
- Already, many people and organisations contribute to open-source projects, whether through funding or development. Redirecting those efforts toward secure, homegrown software can be a small yet significant step toward autonomy. Such initiatives can create the trust and user base necessary for sustainable domestic technology platforms.

The Roadmap: From Vision to Implementation

- To realise this vision, India must launch a *mission-driven program* focused not on abstract research but on practical, outcome-oriented implementation. This mission should bring together engineering excellence, strategic project management, and a long-term commitment to building and maintaining critical software infrastructure.

- Priority must be given to client-side and server-side applications that form the foundation of everyday digital life—such as databases, email clients, web servers, and cloud platforms. However, this program should not rely perpetually on government subsidies. Instead, it must be structured to become self-sustaining, supported by viable business models that ensure independence from both state and corporate dominance.
- The role of the government should be that of a catalyst: establishing the initial institutional framework, facilitating collaboration, and ensuring the mission's direction aligns with national interest, while ultimately enabling it to stand independently.

Conclusion

- India finds itself at a defining crossroads. The dangers of dependence on foreign digital infrastructure are increasingly evident. At the same time, the tools and talent required to build a sovereign technological future are readily available within the country.
- What is now needed is collective resolve. Technological independence is not a luxury—it is a necessity for securing India's national interests, ensuring economic resilience, and safeguarding democratic freedoms. The journey will be long and arduous, but history has shown that India does not shy away from hard-earned freedom. Just as the nation once fought for its political independence, it must now commit to the long and essential march toward *technological sovereignty*.

India's Trade Strategy Amidst U.S. Uncertainty and EU Engagement

Introduction

India's trade policy stands at a pivotal moment. Tensions with the United States continue, especially with steep 50% tariffs impacting Indian exports. At the same time, India is pushing forward with Free Trade Agreement (FTA) negotiations with the European Union (EU). In an environment of rising global trade disruption — marked by tariff wars, growing protectionism, the introduction of the EU's Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM), and shifting supply chains — India faces the urgent task of recalibrating its external trade strategy.

India-US Trade Relations: Continued Volatility

High tariffs on Indian goods exported to the U.S. continue to undermine India's export competitiveness. Despite multiple diplomatic efforts, no substantial progress has been made toward a comprehensive trade agreement. The suspension of India's Generalized System of Preferences (GSP) benefits in 2019 further harmed key export sectors such as textiles, leather, and engineering. While India and the U.S. have aligned strategically on issues such as defence and advanced technologies, this has not translated into easing trade restrictions. The implications are clear: India must reduce its trade dependence on the U.S. by diversifying its trading partners.

India-EU Trade Relations: Expanding Relevance

Trade and investment flows between India and the EU have grown significantly. In 2023–24, bilateral goods trade reached \$137.41 billion, while services trade amounted to \$51.45 billion in 2023. Between 2000 and 2023, the EU contributed \$107.27 billion in foreign direct investment (FDI) to India, accounting for around 18% of India's total FDI inflows. The EU has now emerged as India's third-largest trading partner, following the U.S. and China. The two sides share strategic complementarities in areas like technology development, sustainable growth, green transitions, and supply chain diversification, making the EU a key player in India's evolving trade strategy.

Progress and Challenges in India-EU FTA Negotiations

FTA negotiations, which resumed in 2022 after a nine-year hiatus, have shown moderate progress. Out of 27 negotiation chapters, 11 have been concluded. However, several issues remain contentious. The EU is seeking greater market access in Indian agriculture and dairy sectors, which raises concerns about

the livelihood of Indian farmers. On intellectual property, the EU is pushing for TRIPS+ standards, while India remains cautious, particularly to safeguard its generics-based pharmaceutical industry. The EU also wants broader access to government procurement markets — a sensitive issue for India, which prioritises domestic industries. Furthermore, the EU's CBAM, set to take effect in January 2026, poses risks to Indian exports of steel, aluminium, and cement. Despite these obstacles, negotiators on both sides are aiming to finalise the agreement by the end of 2025, with India determined to uphold its red lines.

Strategic and Beyond-Trade Dimensions

The evolving India-EU relationship is not limited to trade. The EU plans to unveil a Strategic Agenda Roadmap on September 17, 2025, covering key areas such as defence cooperation, partnerships in advanced technologies like AI and semiconductors, sustainable energy transitions, and critical raw materials supply chains. A high-level India-EU Leaders' Summit is expected in early 2026, intended to formalise these shared goals. The EU's outreach signals that it increasingly views India not just as a trade partner but as a strategic actor in the emerging multipolar global order.

Learning from the India-UK FTA

The recently concluded India-UK FTA serves as a useful precedent. That agreement included phased tariff reductions, sectoral safeguards, and commitments on services and digital trade. India can replicate this model with the EU — liberalising selectively while protecting sensitive sectors like agriculture and small-scale manufacturing, thus ensuring a balanced outcome.

Key Challenges and Structural Concerns

Agricultural sensitivity remains a central issue, with Indian farmers opposed to opening domestic dairy and food markets to European imports. Sustainability clauses such as CBAM, as well as labour and environmental standards, could increase compliance costs for Indian exporters. In digital trade, India's emphasis on data localisation conflicts with the EU's preference for cross-border data flows. Meanwhile, geopolitical dynamics — especially the EU's increasing alignment with U.S. policy on China — could restrict India's space for strategic autonomy.

India's Broader Trade Diversification Agenda

India is proactively building a diversified trade portfolio. Recent agreements include the 2022 Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA) with the UAE, boosting sectors like gems, jewellery, and electronics, and the Economic Cooperation and Trade Agreement (ECTA) with Australia, enhancing cooperation in education, wine, and pharmaceuticals. Ongoing trade talks are underway with Canada, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), Israel, and MERCOSUR. Simultaneously, India's "Act East" policy seeks deeper integration into Asian supply chains through closer ties with ASEAN, Japan, and South Korea. In the long term, India may consider evaluating the benefits of joining the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) to expand market access.

Economic Impact and Implications

A successful EU FTA could significantly boost Indian exports in high-value sectors such as textiles, IT services, pharmaceuticals, and auto components. Moreover, the China+1 strategy adopted by EU companies may lead to increased investments in India as firms seek to diversify manufacturing locations. The EU's insistence on green supply chains may also catalyse India's adoption of renewable energy and sustainability standards. However, Indian small and medium enterprises (SMEs) could face adjustment challenges in meeting stringent European regulatory and technical norms.

The Path Ahead

India must pursue a trade strategy that balances ambition with prudence. It should defend sensitive sectors while securing gains in services, technology, and mobility. On CBAM, India should negotiate transitional exemptions or phase-in periods, similar to those obtained from the U.S. India must also build internal competitiveness through investments in logistics, workforce skilling, and regulatory

compliance. Additionally, leveraging strategic partnerships in defence and technology can help India secure better trade terms. Finally, deepening ties with the Global South and East Asia will help reduce India's vulnerability to policy shifts in Western economies.

Conclusion

India's trade strategy is at an inflection point. As trade tensions with the U.S. continue to cloud the horizon, the India-EU FTA offers a valuable opportunity to deepen trade with a major high-income bloc while broadening India's global economic footprint. The dual challenge for India is to safeguard its domestic priorities while embracing the opportunities offered by a multipolar, sustainability-focused global economy.

Trump's Tariff Regime in Legal Trouble

Introduction

Throughout economic history, trade wars and tariff conflicts have periodically disrupted global commerce. During his presidency from 2017 to 2021, Donald Trump made protectionist tariffs a central aspect of U.S. trade policy, targeting adversaries like China as well as allies in Europe, North America, and beyond. However, on August 29, 2025, the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Federal Circuit (CAFC) ruled by a 7-4 majority that Trump had unlawfully invoked the **International Emergency Economic Powers Act (IEEPA), 1977** to impose sweeping tariffs on imports from nearly 90 countries.

Background: Trump's Tariff Agenda

- Trump's "America First" policy redefined U.S. trade strategy. Sidestepping multilateral bodies such as the World Trade Organization (WTO), his administration unilaterally imposed tariffs on steel, aluminium, and a broad range of imports — often on grounds of national security. While his stated goals included shrinking trade deficits and revitalising American manufacturing, the economic rationale and legal justifications remained controversial.
- Under IEEPA, the U.S. President is granted powers to regulate commerce in response to unusual foreign threats. Originally designed for emergencies involving terrorism or hostile nations, Trump controversially interpreted economic threats — such as trade imbalances and intellectual property theft — as valid grounds for national emergency declarations, thereby applying tariffs far beyond the act's intended scope.

Economic Consequences

- For the U.S. economy, Trump's tariffs led to increased costs for consumers and businesses. Industries reliant on imported inputs — including automotive and electronics sectors — faced rising production expenses. Studies from institutions like the Peterson Institute for International Economics showed that American consumers and firms bore over 90% of the tariff burden, resulting in higher prices and reduced global competitiveness. The court ruling adds another layer of uncertainty: if the tariffs are ultimately struck down, it could lead to financial disruptions, including refund claims and contract renegotiations across supply chains.
- Globally, the tariff regime prompted retaliatory measures from major trade partners, notably China, the EU, Canada, and Mexico. The WTO reported a sharp contraction in global trade volumes during the 2019-20 period, even prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. The lifting of these tariffs might improve trade flows, but unresolved disputes over duty reimbursements and retroactive penalties could create fresh tensions.
- At the macroeconomic level, the protectionist climate dampened investment and slowed global supply chain integration. Should the U.S. Supreme Court confirm the CAFC ruling, it may restore investor confidence but could also provoke domestic political backlash, deepening uncertainty in American trade policy.

Implications for India

- The fallout from Trump's tariff policy and its legal challenges offers India both opportunities and risks. If U.S. tariffs on China are rolled back, trade flows will realign, and India could position itself as an alternative manufacturing base in sectors like electronics, pharmaceuticals, and textiles. Indian exporters — particularly in steel, aluminium, and textile industries — suffered under Trump-era tariffs, and their removal may restore competitiveness in the U.S. market.
- However, any resurgence in U.S.–China tensions, particularly around strategic sectors, could again destabilise supply chains, with ripple effects for India. Moreover, the ongoing legal uncertainties could delay the limited trade deal India has long been negotiating with the U.S. If the Supreme Court curtails presidential authority on trade, Congress may become the dominant actor in U.S. trade decisions, requiring India to adjust its lobbying and negotiation strategies in Washington.
- Strategically, the Trump administration used tariffs not just for economic purposes but to exert pressure in broader geopolitical arenas — especially in relation to China. For India, this raises complex questions: how closely should it align with U.S. coercive economic policies, and to what extent should it prioritise strategic autonomy, particularly in managing relations with China and Russia?

Lessons for India

- The U.S. court case underscores the need for institutional checks and balances in economic policymaking. India must ensure that trade decisions — including tariff hikes, FTAs, and sanctions — are made within a legal and constitutional framework and are subject to parliamentary oversight.
- Additionally, policy stability is essential. Frequent shifts in trade policy damage investor trust. India must commit to a transparent, rules-based trade environment to attract businesses looking to diversify away from China.
- On the multilateral front, India should advocate for reforming the WTO's dispute resolution mechanism to protect smaller economies from unilateral tariff actions. Simultaneously, India can leverage forums like the India–EU FTA and the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF) to expand market access.
- Domestically, the tariff crisis has highlighted the dangers of excessive dependence on a few markets. India needs to strengthen its manufacturing ecosystem — through Production Linked Incentive (PLI) schemes, logistics improvements, and workforce upskilling — to benefit from ongoing global supply chain shifts.

Conclusion

The legal battle over Trump's tariffs is not merely about trade duties — it cuts to the core of executive authority, international trade governance, and constitutional accountability. For the U.S., the ruling could reshape how trade policy is formulated in the future. But the implications are broader: it serves as a reminder that in an increasingly interconnected world, trade stability hinges on rule-based governance and cooperation. Unilateral protectionism not only harms adversaries but also destabilises the initiators, disrupting global commerce and investor confidence alike.

A 'Health Check' on India's New GST Health-Care Reforms

Context:

- India has introduced a significant overhaul of its Goods and Services Tax (GST) framework in the healthcare sector, marking a major stride toward achieving universal health coverage. By restructuring taxation related to healthcare, the government aims to reduce costs and improve accessibility, particularly benefiting those who have struggled with expensive treatments and

essential health products. These reforms are expected to ease the financial burden on millions of citizens and enhance their access to vital medical services.

- This article examines the key features of the newly announced GST reforms, which focus on making medical care more affordable by lowering insurance premiums, cutting taxes on medicines and medical equipment, and supporting preventive health services.

Sectoral Changes in GST for Healthcare and Insurance

- One of the most transformative changes is the complete elimination of GST on individual health and life insurance premiums. Previously, families paying ₹50,000 per year for health insurance had to bear an additional ₹9,000 as GST, increasing the overall cost of coverage. Starting September 22, 2025, this extra financial burden will be removed, effectively reducing insurance costs by 18%.
- This exemption covers all categories of life insurance, including term policies, Unit Linked Insurance Plans (ULIPs), and endowment plans, along with various health insurance products such as family floaters and senior citizen policies. Even reinsurance premiums are included, meaning the entire insurance value chain benefits from this reform.
- This measure aligns with the government's broader policy goal of expanding insurance coverage in India, which currently accounts for only 7% of the country's GDP—a figure significantly below the global average of 6.8%. However, the real impact on consumers will depend on whether insurance companies fully pass these savings onto policyholders. Without effective monitoring and regulation, there is a risk that some of the cost reductions may be retained by insurers, rather than benefiting the insured.

GST Rules for Hospital Rooms

- The treatment of hospital room charges under GST remains mostly unchanged. Hospital rooms priced below ₹5,000 per day continue to be exempt from GST, providing relief to middle- and lower-income families. Non-ICU rooms that cost more than ₹5,000 per day still incur a 5% GST, but crucially, without input tax credit, maintaining some level of taxation on premium accommodations.
- On the other hand, all critical care units—including Intensive Care Units (ICU), Coronary Care Units (CCU), Intensive Cardiac Care Units (ICCU), and Neonatal Intensive Care Units (NICU)—remain fully exempt from GST regardless of their room tariffs. This ensures that lifesaving and emergency medical treatments remain tax-free, while only higher-end inpatient room options attract tax.

Core Medical Services Remain Untouched

Beyond insurance premiums and hospital room charges, core medical services provided by hospitals, doctors, and paramedical staff continue to be exempt from GST. This means that fees for consultations, surgeries, and other treatments are not subjected to taxation, ensuring that essential healthcare services do not become more expensive for patients.

Business Impact of GST Cuts on Healthcare and Wellness

- The recent reforms have also reduced the GST rates applicable to health product manufacturers and service providers, which could have a positive ripple effect on overall healthcare affordability. Most medicines are now taxed at a uniform rate of 5%, with life-saving drugs fully exempt (zero-rated). Medical devices and diagnostic equipment have similarly benefited from tax reductions, now uniformly taxed at 5%, down from previously higher slabs. For example, CT scan machines are now subject to a 5% tax instead of the earlier 18%, reducing hospitals' capital expenditure and potentially lowering charges for patients.
- Diagnostic laboratories remain exempt from GST on their services, but the inputs they use—such as kits, reagents, and equipment—are taxed at lower rates. This should help laboratories

reduce procurement costs, potentially leading to more affordable blood tests, X-rays, MRIs, and other diagnostic procedures if labs choose to pass these savings to consumers. Pharmacies and small clinics also stand to gain from simplified tax structures and increased competitiveness, while hospitals might be able to negotiate better terms with insurers and corporate clients due to overall cost reductions.

Push for Preventive Health

The GST reforms extend beyond treatment to encourage preventive health practices. Taxes on gyms, yoga centers, fitness studios, salons, and wellness services have been reduced from 18% to 5%. This makes healthy lifestyle options more affordable and accessible, promoting better public health outcomes.

Increased Taxation on Harmful Products

While these reforms incentivize healthy living, they simultaneously impose stricter taxes on harmful products. Cigarettes continue to attract a 28% GST plus cess, leading to an effective tax rate between 52% and 88%. Sugary beverages—including aerated, sweetened, and flavored drinks—have been moved to a higher 40% GST slab, up from the previous 28% plus cess. This increase aims to discourage consumption of unhealthy products while raising additional revenue for public health initiatives.

GST Reforms in Perspective

- The newly introduced GST reforms are designed to support India's healthcare vision as articulated in the 2047 Viksit Bharat plan by reducing financial barriers throughout the healthcare sector. By removing GST on insurance premiums, lowering taxes on medicines and medical equipment, and decreasing rates on preventive health services, the reforms create a more affordable and accessible healthcare environment.
- The true measure of success, however, will depend on real-world outcomes: whether more people can access treatment; whether preventive health services become widespread; whether consumer trust in the healthcare system is strengthened; whether antibiotic misuse is curbed; and ultimately, whether these reforms contribute to saving more lives across the country.

Humanities as the Ethical Compass in a Market-Centric World

Introduction

In an era dominated by rapid technological advances and a market-driven focus, the humanities—encompassing disciplines such as literature, history, philosophy, and the arts—are frequently scrutinized for their practical value. Despite this skepticism, these fields remain crucial for fostering ethics, empathy, and thoughtful reflection, all of which are essential to maintaining a balanced and humane society.

Challenges Confronting the Humanities

- Economic and employment pressures pose a major threat to the humanities. The dominance of STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) and business education draws students toward fields perceived to offer higher-paying careers. This preference is intensified by the widespread perception that humanities education primarily prepares individuals for teaching roles, which can discourage student enrollment. Moreover, contemporary market systems tend to undervalue skills such as critical reasoning and empathy because these qualities lack immediate, quantifiable outcomes, reflecting a bias towards short-term economic returns.
- Institutions worldwide also marginalize humanities programs. Many universities have shut down humanities departments—for example, Canterbury Christ Church University in the UK—due to financial constraints. Budgets are increasingly allocated to STEM fields, reinforcing the mistaken belief that the humanities are expendable.

The Lasting Importance of the Humanities

- Humanities education is indispensable for cultivating critical skills. It equips learners with the ability to tackle pressing global issues such as climate change, misinformation, and complex geopolitical dynamics through enhanced critical thinking. Additionally, the humanities provide ethical frameworks necessary for evaluating the morality behind policies, technological advancements, and decision-making processes.
- Through literature and history, the humanities deepen cultural awareness and empathy by offering perspectives on diverse human experiences, thereby fostering inclusivity. The arts and heritage sectors preserve cultural identities and celebrate human creativity expressed through music, visual arts, and architecture.
- Moreover, the humanities play a vital role in guiding science, technology, and economic development. They act as ethical partners alongside STEM disciplines, ensuring that rapid innovation respects human values. As artificial intelligence and automation become more pervasive, the humanities help address questions of fairness, ethics, and the social consequences of technological disruption.
- In the workplace, there is increasing corporate demand for soft skills such as communication, adaptability, and empathy—traits deeply rooted in humanities education. Research studies, including those by companies like Google, show that interpersonal strengths are just as crucial to team success as technical expertise.
- From a societal perspective, the humanities contribute to resilience by enhancing critical discernment amid rising polarization, fake news, and divisive rhetoric. They also provide ethical tools essential for confronting global challenges like inequality, climate change, and social justice.

Global Models Revitalizing the Humanities

Various countries have adopted innovative approaches to reinvigorate the humanities. South Korea's STEAM model integrates humanistic thinking with STEM education. Germany fosters partnerships between industries, cultural institutions, and media, creating collaborative opportunities for the humanities. The United Kingdom's Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) funds interdisciplinary projects that link humanities research with policymaking. In Japan, universities merge humanities with data science to foster new areas of knowledge. Meanwhile, France has developed digital platforms that expand global access to literary and historical resources.

Strategies for Reviving the Humanities

- Reframing the narrative around humanities is critical. They should be presented as foundational to ethical societies, highlighting career paths in journalism, law, public policy, cultural management, and emerging ethical roles in technology.
- Strengthening ties between academia and industry through partnerships, internships, and collaborative projects will demonstrate the practical relevance of humanities disciplines.
- Modernizing curricula is equally important. Incorporating contemporary issues such as climate change, artificial intelligence, and social inequality can make humanities education more relevant and engaging. Promoting interdisciplinary learning alongside STEM subjects will also enhance the appeal and utility of humanities studies.
- Leveraging technology offers new possibilities for broadening the reach and impact of humanities education. Digital storytelling, virtual museum tours, and online courses can help break down the stereotype of humanities as confined to traditional libraries and classrooms.
- Finally, advocating for the intrinsic value of the humanities is essential. This means emphasizing the importance of exploring justice, morality, and human purpose beyond purely economic

metrics, and challenging the notion that every discipline must directly produce marketable outputs.

Conclusion

While STEM disciplines address concrete and measurable needs, the humanities provide the cultural, ethical, and reflective foundation necessary for a well-rounded society. The fundamental question should not be “What’s the use of the humanities?” but rather, “What kind of society do we aspire to build?” One that values not only efficiency and innovation but also ethics, culture, and the essence of our shared humanity.

Property Rights, Tribals, and the Gender Parity Gap

Context

- More than a month after the International Day of the World’s Indigenous Peoples on August 9, the issue of indigenous rights continues to be highly relevant, particularly in light of the Supreme Court’s ruling on July 17, 2025, in *Ram Charan & Ors. vs Sukhram & Ors.* This judgment declared that excluding daughters from inheriting ancestral property is a violation of the fundamental right to equality. When viewed through the lens of gender equality, the ruling highlights a profound injustice: the majority of tribal women are denied statutory inheritance rights, with only a few matrilineal communities in the Northeast being exceptions. This pivotal moment signals a clear need for legal reform to guarantee equal property rights for tribal women.
- Against this backdrop, this article underscores the pressing necessity to confront gender inequality in tribal property rights. It examines recent judicial decisions, the role of customary laws, and advocates for the enactment of a dedicated Tribal Succession Act to safeguard women’s inheritance rights.

Demand for Equal Share in Tribal Property

- In the case of *Ram Charan & Ors. vs Sukhram & Ors.*, the appellant-plaintiffs—who were the legal heirs of Dhaiya, a Scheduled Tribe woman from Sarguja, Chhattisgarh—sought the division of property inherited from their maternal grandfather, Bhajju Gond. Dhaiya, one of six siblings including five brothers, was denied her rightful share because tribal customs traditionally exclude women from ancestral property claims.
- Initially, both the Trial Court and the First Appellate Court dismissed their petition, rejecting the argument that Hindu traditions or the Hindu Succession Act should apply due to insufficient evidence. However, the Chhattisgarh High Court ruled in favor of Dhaiya’s heirs, awarding them an equal share. The Court held that customs denying women inheritance rights are discriminatory and perpetuate gender inequality. It stressed that such customs must be eradicated through legal intervention.
- This decision marked a significant departure from the 1996 Supreme Court case *Madhu Kishwar vs State of Bihar*, in which the Court acknowledged the gender disparities present in tribal inheritance customs but refrained from invalidating them, citing concerns over potential legal disorder.

Customary Laws and Tribal Women’s Land Rights

- In the Scheduled Five Area States—such as Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, and Odisha—tribal communities adhere to customary laws that govern marriage, succession, and adoption. Despite women’s substantial contributions to agricultural labor, these customs frequently deny them rights to inherit ancestral land.
- According to data from the Agriculture Census 2015-16, only about 7% of Scheduled Tribe women own land, compared to 83.3% of men. Arguments opposing women’s inheritance rights

often revolve around the notion that tribal land is communally owned or concerns about land alienation when women marry outside the tribe. However, evidence suggests that revenues generated from land sales seldom benefit the gram sabha, weakening these claims.

- Judicial bodies have emphasized that customs must satisfy stringent criteria—including antiquity, certainty, continuity, reasonableness, and consistency with public policy—to be considered valid. A noteworthy judgment in 2022 by the Jharkhand High Court in *Prabha Minz vs Martha Ekka* upheld inheritance rights for Oraon women after the community failed to prove a continuous custom excluding daughters from property rights.

The Case for a Separate Tribal Succession Act

- In a progressive move, the Supreme Court in *Kamala Neti (Dead) Thr. Lrs. vs Special Land Acquisition Officer* (December 2022) advanced the cause of gender parity concerning tribal women's property rights. Given that Section 2(2) of the Hindu Succession Act, 2005, explicitly excludes tribal communities, there is a compelling need for a specific Tribal Succession Act to fill this legislative void.
- The codification of tribal succession laws, akin to those existing for Hindu and Christian communities, would bring much-needed clarity, curtail gender-based discrimination, and grant tribal women statutory inheritance rights. Such a law would be a decisive step toward enhancing equality and justice for indigenous women.

Conclusion

Achieving equal property rights for tribal women necessitates the codification of succession laws, reform of discriminatory customary practices, and adoption of legal frameworks that uphold justice, equality, and inclusive growth. This multifaceted approach is essential to dismantle entrenched gender biases and empower tribal women to claim their rightful inheritance.

Building Sovereign Capability in Critical Technologies – India's Talent Imperative

Context:

Critical technologies are increasingly shaping the global distribution of power and influence. Although India has made notable advances in science and technology, its research ecosystem displays significant disparities in attracting talent, institutional frameworks, and producing high-impact breakthroughs. The primary challenge is not the sheer number of researchers but the ability to draw and retain world-class experts within mission-focused areas essential for maintaining strategic autonomy.

India's Current Research Landscape:

According to the Stanford–Elsevier report, India contributes merely 2.5% of the world's highly cited scientific papers and accounts for only 2% of the globe's top-cited scientists. While India ranks among the top five nations in 29 specific technologies, it suffers from a fragmented research ecosystem that prevents sustained global breakthroughs. Furthermore, the restrictions imposed by the US and China on the transfer of high-end technologies further widen this gap.

Global Dynamics and Emerging Opportunities:

- China holds a commanding position, dominating 37 of the 44 identified critical technologies (as per ASPI data). It translates this dominance into sovereign strength largely by aggressively recruiting top international talent. Notably, China's Young Thousand Talents Program has attracted 3,500 scientists, fueling exponential growth in research output and institutional prestige.
- In contrast, the United States is witnessing a decline in research funding. The Trump administration, for instance, proposed more than a 50% cut in federal science budgets for agencies such as the National Science Foundation and NASA. Additionally, only about 15% of

STEM PhDs now secure tenure-track positions within five years post-graduation, a steep drop from 25% two decades ago. Stringent visa regulations have also left many Indian-origin doctoral and postdoctoral researchers stranded.

- Meanwhile, Europe is attempting to strengthen its appeal, with France announcing a €100 million fund to attract global research talent.

India's Policy Framework:

- The establishment of the Anusandhan National Research Foundation (ANRF) marks a significant step, backed by a Rs 1 lakh crore Research and Development Innovation Fund. For the first time in decades, the government has committed large-scale, mission-driven investments in science, coupled with initiatives aimed at simplifying scientific research processes under the "Ease of Doing Science" agenda.
- Despite multiple fellowship schemes, India has struggled to attract and retain global academic talent. Compensation packages remain uncompetitive compared to international standards, and world-class laboratories along with sustained research funding are frequently absent. Furthermore, clear career pathways and long-term absorption prospects for researchers are lacking. Importantly, recruitment efforts have not been systematically aligned with mission-driven research in areas critical for building sovereign capabilities.

The Focused Research Organisations (FRO) Model:

- This proposed model envisions the creation of a select number of Focused Research Organisations embedded within Institutes of National Importance known for their expertise—such as IIT Delhi for quantum communication. These FROs will be structured as Section 8 companies with 51% industry participation, thereby fostering a collaborative ecosystem involving the public sector, academia, and industry.
- The goal is to attract 500 top-tier researchers within five years, with a particular emphasis on early-career scientists. The model also emphasizes integrating existing Indian academics through joint appointments, rotational leadership roles, and project-based participation.

Strategic Domains of Focus:

- The FROs will prioritize fields that are expected to define strategic autonomy in the coming decades. These include semiconductors, propulsion and hypersonics, synthetic biology, and quantum communication.
- A notable milestone has been achieved at IIT Delhi in collaboration with DRDO, which successfully demonstrated quantum entanglement-based free-space quantum secure communication over distances exceeding one kilometer. This achievement positions IIT Delhi as a natural hub for a national FRO dedicated to quantum communication.

Four Guiding Principles of the FRO Model:

1. Provide globally competitive compensation by pooling financial resources.
2. Maintain a sharp strategic focus on developing sovereign capabilities in selected critical domains.
3. Establish a hybrid ecosystem that blends global expertise, indigenous knowledge, and industry resources.
4. Ensure institutional permanence through predictable funding mechanisms and clear talent pathways.

Conclusion:

India finds itself at a pivotal moment in its quest for technological sovereignty. Shifts in the global research landscape present a unique opportunity to attract and embed world-class researchers. Creating FROs is essential to build enduring capabilities that secure sovereign autonomy and foster economic competitiveness. Any delay risks losing a generation of scientific talent and increasing

dependence on foreign powers. The choice is unequivocal: invest now in talent-centric critical technologies or accept long-term technological reliance.

India's Economic Ambitions Require Enhanced Gender Data

Context:

- India's economic progress is closely tied to the full inclusion of women in its workforce. Currently, women contribute merely 18% to the nation's GDP, while nearly 196 million employable women remain outside the labor market. Although the overall labor force participation rate has increased to 41.7%, only 18% of women hold formal employment positions. Without making women's economic opportunities visible, measurable, and actionable across all sectors of governance, India risks losing out on trillions of dollars and falling short of its ambitious target of becoming a \$30 trillion economy by 2047.
- This article underscores the critical role women's inclusion plays in achieving India's economic aspirations, focusing on the significance of the Women's Economic Empowerment (WEE) Index and the urgent need to mainstream gender-disaggregated data and gender-sensitive budgeting as drivers of systemic reform and inclusive growth.

Women's Economic Empowerment Index: Applying a Gender Perspective to Policy

- Uttar Pradesh has pioneered the introduction of India's first Women's Economic Empowerment (WEE) Index, a district-level metric designed to monitor women's engagement in five key domains: employment, education and skills development, entrepreneurship, livelihood and mobility, and safety and infrastructure. The true strength of this index lies in its ability to incorporate a gender perspective into governance, revealing disparities that are often obscured in broader datasets related to health, economy, or infrastructure.
- For example, detailed findings from the transportation sector exposed the significantly low number of women employed as bus staff, which led to targeted reforms in recruitment processes as well as improvements in infrastructure, such as the provision of women's restrooms. The index also identifies systemic obstacles; although women constitute over half of those enrolled in skill development programs, only a small fraction successfully transition into entrepreneurship or obtain credit. By bringing these bottlenecks to light, the WEE Index shifts the focus beyond mere participation statistics toward deep-rooted reforms, providing a blueprint for more inclusive policymaking.

Universalizing Gender Data and Gender-Sensitive Budgeting

- To effectively bridge India's gender gaps, it is essential to integrate gender-disaggregated data into all government departments—from Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) to housing—and to equip local authorities with the capacity to leverage this data for formulating targeted action plans. Beyond simple headcounts, data collection must encompass metrics such as women's retention rates, leadership representation, re-entry into the workforce, and the quality of jobs, particularly during critical transition phases following schooling and higher education, where dropout rates among women remain high.
- Equally important is the redefinition of gender budgeting. Rather than confining gender budgeting solely to welfare programs, every expenditure across sectors like education, energy, and infrastructure must be evaluated through a gender-sensitive lens. In essence, effective budgeting cannot be achieved without accurately measuring the extent of women's inclusion.

Expanding the WEE Index to Drive Inclusive Growth

- The WEE Index developed by Uttar Pradesh presents a scalable model that can be replicated in other states aspiring to grow into trillion-dollar economies, such as Andhra Pradesh, Maharashtra, Odisha, and Telangana. By converting gender data into actionable district-level

plans, these states can strategically align their budgets, infrastructure development, and programmatic efforts to systematically close gender gaps. India's approach must evolve from symbolic commitments to concrete systemic changes by embedding a gender perspective into governance at all levels.

- The WEE Index is only the starting point—its real power lies in making the unseen visible, thus paving the way to bring women from the margins to the forefront of India's growth trajectory.

Conclusion:

Achieving India's full economic potential by 2047 hinges on closing gender disparities through enhanced gender data, gender-responsive budgeting, and scalable frameworks like the WEE Index. Without these measures, India's goal of inclusive and sustainable growth remains out of reach.

GST 2.0 and India's Green Development Pathway

Introduction

At the COP26 summit in Glasgow in 2021, India committed to achieving net-zero carbon emissions by the year 2070 and unveiled its ambitious Panchamrit targets, which focus on expanding renewable energy capacity, reducing carbon intensity, and decreasing reliance on fossil fuels. Four years later, during the 56th GST Council Meeting in 2025, India introduced GST 2.0 reforms, aimed at rationalizing tax rates across sectors integral to green development, including renewable energy, green technologies, waste management, and sustainable transportation. This initiative marks a significant milestone as it integrates climate action directly into fiscal policy, signaling that economic growth and environmental sustainability can progress hand in hand. Moreover, GST 2.0 underscores India's emerging leadership in climate governance alongside its developmental priorities.

Core Features of GST 2.0

- The reforms under GST 2.0 have led to a reduction in GST rates for renewable energy technologies such as solar panels, photovoltaic cells, and wind turbines, effectively lowering upfront project costs. Solar pumps, in particular, have become more affordable for farmers, thereby reducing irrigation expenses. The policy also supports green manufacturing by complementing the Production-Linked Incentive (PLI) schemes focused on renewable energy and electric vehicles (EVs), enhancing the global competitiveness of Indian companies in these sectors.
- Additionally, waste management services have benefited from tax reductions—for example, the GST on effluent treatment services has been lowered from 12% to 5%, while biodegradable bags now attract a reduced GST of 5%, down from 18%. In the transportation sector, GST cuts have made buses and minibuses more affordable by reducing rates from 28% to 18%, while trucks and freight vehicles have also become more accessible, facilitating the decarbonization of logistics.

Domestic Economic Implications

Lower tariffs on clean energy have made sustainable options more affordable for both households and industries, driving higher adoption rates. This shift is especially impactful in rural areas, where solar pumps have reduced dependence on diesel, thus cutting costs and emissions. GST reductions also strengthen domestic manufacturing by bolstering supply chains for renewable energy modules, turbines, and green batteries, positioning India as a potential global hub for clean manufacturing. Consumers stand to benefit from lower electricity bills and transport costs, improving access to green alternatives particularly among low- and middle-income groups. Moreover, these reforms are expected to spur job creation in sectors such as waste management, renewable energy projects, and the expanding EV ecosystem, generating new roles in operations, maintenance, and research and development.

Global Context

India's GST 2.0 reforms respond to increasing international pressures such as the European Union's Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM), which imposes tariffs on carbon-intensive imports, and the United States' Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) of 2022, which offers substantial subsidies for clean manufacturing. GST 2.0 provides India with a domestic fiscal strategy that lowers the cost of renewables while protecting exports from carbon tariffs, aligning the country's trade competitiveness with the global transition towards a low-carbon economy. As many developing countries grapple with the high costs of green technologies, India's fiscal innovations hold the potential to serve as a replicable model for climate-friendly taxation, especially within the Global South.

Environmental and Social Impacts

By lowering the cost barriers, GST 2.0 accelerates India's path towards achieving its goal of 500 GW renewable capacity by 2030, a key Panchamrit commitment. The incentives for effluent treatment and biodegradable products contribute to cleaner air and water, supporting the phase-out of plastic through more affordable biodegradable bags in line with the UNEA Global Plastics Treaty. Furthermore, tax cuts on buses encourage greater use of public transportation, reducing urban congestion and emissions. These reforms also promote inclusive growth: farmers benefit from lower irrigation costs, and urban commuters gain access to more affordable and sustainable transport options.

Fiscal Policy and Climate Action

- GST 2.0 marks a pioneering step in incorporating fiscal mechanisms into climate governance. Rather than relying solely on subsidies, the revised tax structure now encourages industries and citizens to make sustainable choices by default. This approach creates a stable framework that promotes long-term investment certainty, attracting international capital into India's clean economy and making green options the standard rather than an aspiration.
- From a strategic standpoint, India can leverage GST 2.0 as a tool of climate diplomacy, showcasing it at COP30 in Brazil later in 2025 as an example of integrating fiscal policy with climate action. Industrially, scaling up renewables ensures that India's exports will meet CBAM requirements, helping the country avoid future carbon tariffs. It also enhances India's position in global supply chains related to electric vehicles, solar energy, and green hydrogen. Geopolitically, these reforms establish India as a thought leader within the Global South, demonstrating how fiscal reforms can harmonize economic growth with environmental sustainability.

Challenges Ahead

Despite these advances, there are challenges that must be addressed. Reduced GST rates could impact short-term government revenue, making it essential to maintain fiscal stability. Implementation requires robust monitoring to guarantee that the benefits reach consumers rather than intermediaries. Technological gaps persist, particularly in domestic research and development for advanced solar cells, battery storage, and hydrogen technologies. Equity concerns remain, as small firms and MSMEs need support to adapt to green supply chains without facing disproportionate burdens. Furthermore, coordination is required to align GST reforms with state-level policies, the National Action Plan on Climate Change (NAPCC), and sector-specific roadmaps.

Way Forward

- Future efforts should deepen fiscal reforms by introducing green GST credits for industries that reduce emissions. Integrating GST 2.0 with India's planned Carbon Credit Trading Scheme (CCTS) would further strengthen its impact. Support measures like low-cost loans and skill development must be extended to MSMEs to ensure their participation in green supply chains.
- Additionally, consumer incentives, such as GST rebates for households adopting rooftop solar panels or electric vehicles, could boost uptake. Institutional capacity should be enhanced by

empowering the GST Council's Green Sub-Committee to conduct regular reviews of GST rates and their effectiveness.

Conclusion

GST 2.0 embodies a historic convergence of fiscal policy and climate action. At a time when countries worldwide experiment with climate-aligned fiscal tools, India has delivered an innovative, homegrown model of green taxation. This reform strengthens India's domestic economic resilience, boosts its global competitiveness, and reinforces its leadership in climate governance—marking a decisive step toward realizing the nation's 2070 net-zero emissions target.

Unlocking Innovation with India's Procurement Reforms

- Procurement is often perceived as a mundane administrative task primarily focused on ensuring transparency and controlling costs. However, when it comes to research and development (R&D), procurement takes on a much more critical role—it can determine whether scientific concepts evolve into tangible breakthroughs. Policies that emphasize rigid controls tend to stifle innovation, while those that strike a balance between accountability and creativity have the potential to accelerate technological advancement. India's recent reforms to its General Financial Rules (GFR), which relax certain restrictions on R&D procurement, present a valuable opportunity to reposition procurement as a facilitator of scientific ambition rather than an impediment to it.
- The tension between cost efficiency and innovation within procurement processes is longstanding. While frameworks designed to prevent fraud are essential for safeguarding public funds, they can inadvertently suffocate research by prioritizing procedural compliance over scientific requirements. This was clearly evident in India's pre-reform procurement system, where researchers were required to purchase equipment exclusively through the Government e-Marketplace (GeM). Unfortunately, GeM often lacked the specialized instruments necessary for cutting-edge research, forcing scientists to endure lengthy exemption procedures and frequently settle for subpar materials that compromised their work. Yet, procurement can be reimagined as a powerful catalyst for innovation. Studies have shown that well-targeted public procurement stimulates private-sector R&D investment and drives patent generation, creating a virtuous cycle of technological progress. However, Brazil's experience serves as a cautionary tale, illustrating that generic procurement rules—unless explicitly designed to foster innovation—rarely deliver transformative outcomes.
- In June 2025, the Government of India introduced reforms addressing many of these longstanding challenges. By empowering institutional heads to bypass the GeM platform when procuring specialized equipment and increasing the direct purchase threshold from ₹1 lakh to ₹2 lakh, the reforms acknowledge that a one-size-fits-all approach to procurement cannot meet the unique demands of research. Additionally, delegating authority to vice-chancellors and directors to approve global tenders up to ₹200 crore reduces bureaucratic delays, a persistent complaint among policymakers and scientists. These reforms embody the concept of catalytic procurement, wherein flexibility allows public institutions to act as early adopters of advanced technologies, spurring further innovation.
- To fully grasp the significance of India's reforms, it is helpful to view them within the broader context of global procurement strategies. Germany's High-Tech Strategy institutionalizes innovation-oriented procurement through KOINNO, an agency that curates supplier databases and encourages cross-sector collaboration. Similarly, the United States' Small Business Innovation Research (SBIR) program utilizes procurement contracts to de-risk early-stage technologies while maintaining competitive vendor participation. South Korea's pre-

commercial procurement model even offers premium payments for prototypes that meet ambitious technological objectives. These international examples illustrate what economist Mariana Mazzucato calls mission-oriented procurement—the deliberate use of government purchasing power to shape and steer technological markets.

- Discussions about procurement reforms often veer toward calls for privatizing national laboratories, under the belief that corporate-style agility could overcome bureaucratic inefficiencies. However, this debate risks presenting a false choice. The U.S. experience with Sandia National Laboratories shows that hybrid models are viable: while management was transferred to a private company, government oversight remained robust, resulting in a surge of patents and partnerships with industry. India's Council of Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR) could similarly benefit from such a hybrid approach, especially in strategic and high-cost fields like quantum computing. However, this would require strong accountability frameworks and clear alignment with national innovation goals. Without performance-linked funding and competitive incentives, privatization alone may lead to inefficiencies rather than solve them.

The Way Forward: Toward a New Procurement Paradigm

While India's current reforms are necessary, they are insufficient on their own. Several systemic interventions are needed to drive more profound change. Firstly, tender evaluations should be outcome-weighted, considering not just cost but also innovation potential and scalability, similar to practices in Finland. Secondly, elite institutions should be granted sandbox exemptions, freeing them from rigid procurement constraints if they meet independently audited innovation benchmarks. Thirdly, India should leverage AI-augmented sourcing tools, utilizing resources from the INDIAai ecosystem to anticipate delays and monitor global markets in real time. Finally, co-procurement alliances—modeled on the European Union's Joint Procurement Agreement—could pool demand across Indian research institutions for expensive equipment, enabling economies of scale.

Conclusion

Procurement should not be regarded as a peripheral bureaucratic task; it is a central variable in the research ecosystem. India's recent reforms to the GeM platform represent an important step toward this recognition, but they remain cautious and incremental rather than transformative. By adopting global best practices in mission-oriented procurement, integrating AI-driven tools, and experimenting with hybrid governance models, India has the potential to transform procurement into a powerful catalyst for scientific discovery and innovation.

GST 2.0 — Short-Term Pain, Possible Long-Term Gain

Context

The Goods and Services Tax (GST) was originally introduced to establish a destination-based tax regime, aimed at enhancing efficiency by placing the tax burden on final consumption and allowing for input tax credits. Despite its transformational goal, the initial GST framework was hindered by multiple tax slabs, inverted duty structures, and high compliance burdens. The revised GST rate structure, effective from September 22, 2025, marks a major overhaul with significant implications for consumption, production, fiscal revenue, and macroeconomic equilibrium.

Evolution of the New GST Structure and Revenue Implications

- The 2025 reforms eliminated the 12% and 28% tax slabs, consolidating most goods and services into 0%, 5%, and 18% brackets, while introducing a 40% rate on luxury and sin goods. Concessional rates below 5% were retained for certain essential items. These revisions are particularly favourable to employment-rich sectors like textiles, automobiles, healthcare, consumer electronics, and food products. On the production front, industries tied to agriculture, fertilisers, machinery, and renewable energy benefit from lower input costs.

- Out of 546 items subjected to rate revision, nearly 80% witnessed reductions—signalling a clear orientation toward boosting consumption and growth. However, the fiscal implications of such reductions are considerable. The basic formula for GST revenue ($R = r \times E$), where r represents the tax rate and E the tax base (dependent on pre-tax prices and quantities), shows that although lower post-tax prices may stimulate demand, the resultant increase in consumption does not proportionally offset the drop in tax rates. Consequently, revenue generally declines. In the case of zero-rated items, revenues are entirely nullified. Even for items moved to the 40% slab, any perceived increase in tax collection largely reflects the consolidation of compensation cess rather than a genuine rate hike.
- Revenue loss projections vary: while the Ministry of Finance estimates an annual shortfall of ₹48,000 crore, independent assessments point to potentially higher figures.

Shortcomings of the GST Reform

- One of the core outcomes of the reform is the redistribution of economic benefits in favour of consumers. Reduced GST translates into increased disposable income, especially for individuals purchasing goods in the 5% bracket—mostly basic necessities. Given the low elasticity of demand for such goods, consumers are likely to reallocate their surplus income toward higher-taxed categories, such as comforts and luxuries in the 18% and 40% brackets. This could, over time, increase tax revenues. However, in the immediate term, the fiscal impact remains adverse due to the disproportionate shortfall.
- In terms of structural efficiency, the revised GST system does not fully eliminate tax cascading. Exempted goods still disallow input tax credit (ITC), embedding upstream taxes into final prices. Even within the 5% bracket, where inputs are taxed at 18%, the process of claiming ITC is cumbersome and prone to delays. These inefficiencies reduce the reform's potential to rationalise resource allocation and enhance overall competitiveness.
- From a macroeconomic standpoint, the reforms intersect with broader fiscal concerns. In the first quarter of FY 2025-26, nominal GDP growth stood at 8.8%, falling short of the 10.1% target set in the Union Budget. With inflation remaining subdued, tax buoyancy has diminished. Compounding the issue, direct tax revenues declined by 4.3% during the early months of the fiscal year—contrasting sharply with prior trends of robust growth. The budget had already accounted for a ₹1 lakh crore shortfall due to changes in personal income tax. Additional revenue losses from GST could push total gross tax receipts significantly below projections.
- Although higher dividends from the Reserve Bank of India might provide partial relief, the government is likely to face a trade-off between reducing expenditure and widening the fiscal deficit. States are similarly constrained and may resort to borrowing or budget cuts—both of which pose risks to growth. On the monetary front, interventions such as repo rate cuts or liquidity infusions could stoke inflation or even lead to deficit monetisation, a risky and unsustainable path.

Growth Prospects and Structural Limits

While reduced GST rates might temporarily uplift demand, this alone cannot secure sustainable long-term economic growth. India's medium-term growth prospects hinge more on its investment and savings rates, along with improvements in capital efficiency, measured by the incremental capital-output ratio. Thus, even though GST reforms may deliver immediate benefits to consumers and production-oriented sectors, they cannot substitute for deeper structural changes that improve investment capacity and productivity.

Conclusion

The 2025 GST reforms constitute a bold attempt to simplify India's complex tax architecture and stimulate economic activity. They promise reduced prices, enhanced purchasing power, and sector-

specific advantages, particularly for labour-intensive industries. However, these gains come at a substantial fiscal cost, with immediate revenue losses threatening the stability of both central and state budgets. In addition, unresolved inefficiencies—such as cascading taxes and ITC challenges—continue to hinder the system's effectiveness. Ultimately, while the revised GST framework may serve as a complementary mechanism for economic stimulus, it cannot replace comprehensive strategies aimed at boosting savings, investment, and long-term productivity.

A Judicial Nudge Following Stuck Legislative Business

Introduction

The constitutional role of the Governor in India, particularly regarding the grant of assent to state legislation under **Article 200**, has long been a subject of legal and political scrutiny. This debate has been reignited by recent Supreme Court decisions in **State of Punjab vs Principal Secretary to the Governor (2023)** and **The State of Tamil Nadu vs The Governor of Tamil Nadu and Anr. (2025)**. In these rulings, the apex court addressed the persistent deadlock surrounding gubernatorial inaction by setting a **three-month deadline** for Governors and the President to act on state Bills. While the decision seeks to restore constitutional balance, it also raises concerns about the separation of powers and potential judicial overreach.

Understanding Article 200 within the Constitutional Framework

- Article 200 of the Constitution lays out four possible courses of action when a Bill is passed by a State Legislature: the Governor may grant assent, withhold assent, return the Bill for reconsideration (if it is not a Money Bill), or reserve it for the President's consideration. On the surface, these options appear to grant the Governor significant discretionary authority.
- However, this apparent power is tempered by **Article 163**, which mandates that the Governor must act on the **aid and advice of the Council of Ministers**, except in situations explicitly provided for in the Constitution. This provision affirms the status of the Governor as a **constitutional head** rather than an autonomous executive, reflecting the broader framework of a **parliamentary democracy**.

Discretionary Powers: Constitutional Intent vs. Judicial Interpretation

- The critical issue at the heart of the debate is whether the Governor possesses discretionary power under Article 200. Historical context is instructive here. The **Government of India Act, 1935**, which inspired many provisions in the Constitution, included a similar clause (Section 75), explicitly using the phrase **"in his discretion."** However, the **absence of this phrase** in Article 200 clearly indicates the **Constituent Assembly's intent to exclude discretion** from the Governor's decision-making in this domain.
- Judicial interpretations over the years have largely upheld this reading. In **Shamsher Singh vs State of Punjab (1974)**, the Supreme Court acknowledged only a narrow space for discretion. This position was reinforced in **Nabam Rebia vs Deputy Speaker (2016)**, where the Court ruled that the Governor is generally **bound by the advice of the elected government**. Most recently, in the **2025 Tamil Nadu judgment**, the Court firmly rejected any suggestion of **independent discretion**, warning that such a stance would elevate the Governor to a **"super-constitutional authority,"** thereby paralyzing the legislative process. While expert bodies like the **Sarkaria and Punchhi Commissions** have admitted the possibility of rare exceptions (such as when a Bill is manifestly unconstitutional), the prevailing constitutional doctrine remains that the Governor is subordinate to the democratic mandate.

The Issue of Delays and the Judiciary's Corrective Action

- A central problem that has plagued state legislatures is the **unjustified and prolonged delay** by Governors in processing Bills. Several states have faced situations where Bills were neither

signed, returned, nor reserved — some pending for **years without action**. Such inaction not only frustrates the legislative process but also amounts to a **de facto veto**, undermining the representative will of the people.

- Notably, the Constitution does **not provide any timeline** for the Governor or the President to act under Articles 200 and 201. Confronted with this **constitutional vacuum**, the Supreme Court stepped in and prescribed a **three-month deadline**. Critics, including some in the media and the Union Government, have decried this move as an instance of **judicial law-making**. Nevertheless, the Court justified its ruling on the grounds that allowing inordinate delays would erode the **foundational principles of federalism and parliamentary democracy**. In its view, intervention was essential to preserve **constitutional morality** and ensure that constitutional posts are not misused for political obstruction.

The Union Government's Role under Article 355

- An emerging question in light of these rulings is whether the **Union Government** can step in when a Governor refuses or delays action on a Bill. **Article 355** of the Constitution places a duty on the Union to ensure that state governments operate in accordance with constitutional norms.
- A **creative interpretation** of this Article could allow the Centre to instruct the Governor to discharge their constitutional duties in a timely manner. However, in practice, the Union has **not invoked this authority**, leaving the field open for judicial intervention as the **only mechanism** to ensure the functioning of state legislatures.

Constitutional and Democratic Significance of Recent Judgements

These recent Supreme Court verdicts mark a **dynamic evolution of constitutional interpretation**. Detractors argue that by **prescribing timelines**, the Court has strayed into the domain of legislative or constitutional amendment. However, the Indian judiciary has long employed **constructive interpretation** to fill constitutional gaps. A prominent example is the **Maneka Gandhi case (1978)**, where the Court expanded the meaning of Article 21 to include substantive due process, even though the Constitution did not explicitly provide for it.

Seen in this light, the three-month timeline does not constitute overreach, but rather a **judicial safeguard** intended to uphold the **democratic functioning of state legislatures**. The greater concern lies in the repeated **failure of political and constitutional actors** to act within the boundaries of their roles, necessitating the Court's corrective role.

Conclusion

- The enduring debate over Article 200 highlights the **friction between constitutional ideals and political realities**. The deliberate omission of discretion from the Governor's powers underlines the framers' vision of a **subordinate, ceremonial role** for the Governor, acting on the advice of an elected executive.
- However, political misuse and willful inaction have often transformed this ceremonial position into an obstructive force. It is within this context that the Supreme Court's interventions must be understood—not as judicial overreach, but as **constitutional course correction**. By clarifying the **absence of discretionary powers** and introducing a **time-bound framework**, the Court has reinforced the principles of **parliamentary democracy, cooperative federalism, and constitutional accountability**.
- Ultimately, the judiciary's action serves as a **necessary nudge** to restore balance among institutions and ensure that no constitutional functionary is allowed to **undermine the democratic process through inertia or abuse of office**.

Welfare at the Mercy of the Machine: The Dystopian Drift of Digital Welfare in India

Kurt Vonnegut's 1952 novel *Player Piano* imagined a bleak future where a society divided by automation left engineers in control of machines, while workers found themselves disempowered and obsolete. More than seven decades later, this dystopian vision finds echoes in India's approach to welfare delivery, where digital technologies are increasingly prioritized over human judgment. The government's recent decision to mandate **Facial Recognition Software (FRS)** in **Anganwadi centres** is a stark illustration of this shift, highlighting how technology, rather than empowering citizens, may end up undermining both dignity and access.

The Role of Anganwadis in India's Welfare Ecosystem

Established in **1975 under the Integrated Child Development Scheme (ICDS)**, Anganwadis are a cornerstone of India's nutrition and early childhood care system. With a vast network of **14.02 lakh centres**, they deliver critical services such as preschool education, health awareness, and most crucially, **Take Home Rations (THR)** for children under three and for **pregnant and lactating women**. These rations are a legal entitlement under the **National Food Security Act, 2013**, and are distributed by Anganwadi Workers (AWWs) and helpers, who are usually women from the local community.

The Facial Recognition Rollout: Techno-Solutionism Over Care

- In 2021, the **Poshan Tracker app** was launched to digitise and monitor nutrition services across Anganwadis. While initially intended to streamline operations, it has now taken a contentious turn. Since **July 1**, it is **mandatory for beneficiaries**—pregnant women and lactating mothers—to **authenticate their identity through Facial Recognition Software** integrated into the app.
- The official rationale is to eliminate fake beneficiaries and prevent diversion of rations by workers. But this move flips the principle of natural justice, treating **genuine recipients and frontline workers as suspects**. Instead of being a tool for transparency, FRS has become an instrument of mistrust.

Implementation Failures and Practical Hurdles

- In practice, FRS implementation has been riddled with obstacles. AWWs face **frequent authentication failures** due to mismatched facial data, incorrect or outdated phone numbers, and **technical glitches** such as poor network connectivity and outdated smartphones. The facial recognition process demands **heavy data processing**, causing delays and requiring photos to be taken repeatedly.
- Even when AWWs **personally know the beneficiaries**, the app provides **no override mechanism**, resulting in the denial of rations to deserving individuals. These technological hurdles have led to frustration among both workers and recipients, severely hampering the delivery of essential nutrition.

Misplaced Priorities and Ignored Realities

- Instead of focusing on systemic inefficiencies in the THR programme—such as **poor quality of food, irregular supply, a stagnant budget of ₹8 per child since 2018**, and **rampant corruption in supply contracts**—the government has chosen to impose a surveillance-oriented solution. Despite **Supreme Court directives** calling for decentralised and community-led procurement, large corporations still dominate the supply chain.
- Moreover, **there is scant evidence** to justify the claim that fake beneficiaries are draining resources. The introduction of FRS was done **without consulting Anganwadi workers**, further alienating the very people who are central to the system's functioning.

Reclaiming Human-Centric Welfare

- If the goal is truly to improve service delivery, the government must begin by **making public any credible evidence of fraud** and **inviting community participation** in monitoring the

distribution of rations. Strengthening **local oversight**, rather than imposing top-down surveillance, would offer a more humane and effective solution.

- The focus should return to addressing the **core issues**—ensuring quality nutrition, streamlining logistics, increasing budgets, and empowering frontline workers with trust and autonomy.

Facial Recognition and the Question of Dignity

- FRS is primarily a tool of **criminal surveillance**. Its application in welfare services raises serious ethical concerns, especially when used on **vulnerable populations** like women and children. By treating beneficiaries as potential fraudsters, the system strips them of their **dignity and agency**. The global irony is striking: **San Francisco**, a symbol of digital innovation, has banned FRS, while India is deploying it in its most basic welfare schemes.
- Children's early care and nutrition should not be contingent on whether a software correctly identifies their mothers. Technology, no matter how advanced, must not come at the cost of compassion and inclusivity.

Conclusion: A Choice Between the Technocratic and the Humane

- Kurt Vonnegut's warning from *Player Piano* remains chillingly relevant. If India's welfare architecture continues down the path of **automated control**, it risks becoming an **engineer's paradise** that sacrifices human dignity at the altar of efficiency. The choice before us is profound: **authentication or authenticity, surveillance or care, dehumanisation or dignity**. As a society, we must ask whether we want welfare delivery that builds **fraternity and trust**, or one that fragments communities in the name of precision.
- In the pursuit of digital governance, we must not forget the essential truth: the purpose of welfare is not just delivery, but **dignified empowerment**.

India Needs Greater Focus to Achieve SDG 3, a Critical Development Goal

- In June 2025, India reached its highest-ever ranking in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) Index, placing 99th out of 167 countries, an improvement from 109th in 2024. This upward trend reflects steady advancement since 2021, particularly in expanding access to basic services and infrastructure across the country. Despite this progress, the latest SDG Report underscores ongoing and significant challenges in health and nutrition, with uneven outcomes especially pronounced in rural and tribal areas.
- This article examines India's progress and persistent obstacles in achieving Sustainable Development Goal 3 (SDG 3), which focuses on health and well-being. It draws attention to critical gaps in maternal mortality, child survival, life expectancy, healthcare access, and the urgent need for systemic reforms alongside enhanced health education.
- India's journey toward fulfilling SDG 3, which aims to guarantee healthy lives and promote well-being for all by 2030, remains off course despite some improvements. The country's Maternal Mortality Ratio stands at 97 deaths per 100,000 live births, significantly above the target of 70. The under-five mortality rate is currently 32 per 1,000 live births, compared to the desired goal of 25. Meanwhile, life expectancy in India is 70 years, still below the target figure of 73.63 years. Out-of-pocket health expenditure poses a substantial burden, accounting for 13% of household consumption—almost twice the targeted rate of 7.83%. Although immunisation coverage is relatively strong at 93.23%, it remains short of the universal coverage goal of 100%.
- Several factors contribute to this slow pace of progress. A major barrier is the inadequate access to quality healthcare, often due to fragile infrastructure and economic limitations. Beyond economic constraints, non-financial issues such as poor nutrition, sanitation, hygiene, and unhealthy lifestyle choices exacerbate health outcomes. Additionally, entrenched cultural

practices, stigma related to health matters, and low awareness prevent many communities from utilizing available healthcare services effectively.

- To accelerate progress towards SDG 3, a multifaceted approach is essential. First, the implementation of universal health insurance can reduce financial hardships and promote equitable access to healthcare, as demonstrated by successful models worldwide. Second, strengthening primary health centres and ensuring seamless coordination between primary, secondary, and tertiary care can facilitate early disease detection, reduce treatment costs, and improve overall health outcomes. The World Health Organization's World Health Statistics 2022 highlights the critical role of robust primary healthcare systems in achieving these benefits.
- In addition, leveraging digital health technologies such as telemedicine and integrated health records can help bridge the access gap in rural and remote areas. Global evidence, including findings from The Lancet Digital Health Commission, shows how digital innovations have positively impacted maternal care and vaccination rates—valuable lessons that India can adapt to its unique context.
- Equally important is the role of health education in schools as a preventive strategy. Prevention is far more cost-effective than treatment, and equipping children with knowledge about nutrition, hygiene, sanitation, reproductive health, road safety, and mental health can foster healthier behaviors early in life. Educated girls, who will become future mothers, are particularly instrumental in advocating for family health, thereby reducing maternal and child mortality, road accidents, and improving life expectancy and immunisation rates. International experiences support this approach: Finland's reforms in the 1970s led to a sharp decline in cardiovascular diseases, while Japan's mandatory health education contributed to better hygiene and longer lifespans. A similarly structured and progressive health curriculum in India could yield transformative health benefits over time.
- Achieving the SDG targets in India demands concerted efforts from multiple stakeholders. Policymakers must prioritize embedding comprehensive health education within school curricula, expand universal health coverage, and enhance primary healthcare services. Meanwhile, parents play a critical role by ensuring that schools provide education on physical, mental, and social health and by advocating for necessary reforms. Although India's improved SDG ranking is a positive sign, only about 17% of the global targets are currently on track to be met by 2030. Educating young people on healthy behaviors, supported by resilient healthcare infrastructure, is essential to laying a sustainable foundation for future progress.
- Looking beyond the 2030 horizon, integrating health education systematically into the educational framework is crucial for realizing the vision of a healthier and stronger *Viksit Bharat 2047*—a goal that envisions a prosperous and well-nourished India by its 100th year of independence.

Right to Housing under Article 21: Constitutional Mandate and Reform Imperatives

Introduction

The Supreme Court of India has once again affirmed that the **right to housing** is intrinsically linked to the **fundamental right to life** enshrined under **Article 21** of the Constitution. While this interpretation is grounded in earlier judicial pronouncements, its reiteration in the present judgment is particularly significant for how it connects the **constitutional guarantee of shelter** with **homebuyers' rights**, the **commercial housing market**, and the **need for regulatory and structural reforms** in the real estate sector.

The Court has consistently underscored that the idea of shelter must go beyond a physical structure — it must be a **safe, livable space** equipped with **basic civic amenities** and suitable for human dignity.

Constitutional Basis of the Right to Housing

Article 21 of the Indian Constitution guarantees the protection of life and personal liberty. Over the decades, this provision has been expansively interpreted by the judiciary to encompass various socio-economic rights, including the **right to live with dignity**, which necessarily includes access to adequate housing. Several landmark judgments have laid the foundation for recognising housing as a fundamental right:

- In **Olga Tellis v. Bombay Municipal Corporation (1985)**, the Supreme Court recognised the linkage between the right to livelihood and shelter, especially in the context of pavement dwellers.
- In **Chameli Singh v. State of Uttar Pradesh (1996)**, the Court explicitly held that the right to shelter is a part of Article 21, vital for the full development of human personality.
- In **Shantistar Builders v. Narayan Khimalal Totame (1990)**, the Court ruled that the right to life includes the right to have a reasonable and safe dwelling.

These cases together reinforce the position that **housing is not a luxury or privilege**, but a **basic human right** essential for the enjoyment of all other rights.

International Framework and India's Commitments

Globally, the **Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948)** under **Article 25** recognises housing as integral to an adequate standard of living. Similarly, **Article 11 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR)**, to which India is a signatory, identifies **adequate housing** as a core socio-economic right. These international instruments, though not directly enforceable in Indian courts, influence judicial interpretation and reinforce India's obligation to uphold housing as a human right.

Current Housing Challenges in India

- India's housing landscape presents stark disparities, especially in urban areas. The country faces an estimated **urban housing shortage of nearly 29 million units**, largely concentrated among the **economically weaker sections (EWS)** and **lower-income groups (LIG)**. Over **35% of the urban population** resides in informal settlements such as slums and unauthorised colonies, where basic amenities and tenure security are lacking.
- In rural India, despite the implementation of schemes like the **Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana – Gramin (PMAY-G)**, millions continue to live in **kutcha houses** or makeshift shelters, reflecting the persistence of rural housing deficits.
- The **real estate sector**, which plays a central role in housing delivery, has seen widespread malpractice. **Delays in project completion, diversion of buyer funds, speculative pricing**, and the **non-transparent use of cash** are common issues that undermine buyer trust. While the **Real Estate (Regulation and Development) Act (RERA)** has introduced a regulatory framework to improve transparency and accountability, its **implementation remains inconsistent across states**, limiting its impact.
- **Urban land scarcity and high land prices** drive up the cost of housing. **Regulatory delays**, including the need for multiple clearances, add to project timelines and costs. Moreover, **state housing boards and urban local bodies** often lack the **technical expertise and capacity** to deliver large-scale housing projects efficiently.
- There also exists a **mismatch between supply and demand**, as most housing schemes focus on **middle-income households**, leaving **poorer segments underserved**.

Significance of the Supreme Court's Judgment

- The current judgment is crucial in that it recognises **homebuyers as vulnerable stakeholders**, often investing their life savings into real estate projects. The Court warned against the risks of a **real estate bubble** driven by **speculative investments** and unaccounted cash transactions, which could lead to broader systemic instability.
- One of the key recommendations in the judgment is the establishment of a **revival fund**, backed by the government, to support **stalled but viable housing projects**. This fund would aim to **protect buyers, revive investor confidence**, and prevent the **collapse of financial institutions** exposed to bad real estate loans.
- In addition, the Court has directed the formation of a **committee headed by a retired High Court judge** to study and recommend **reforms in the real estate sector**, ensuring a more transparent and equitable system for both developers and buyers.
- This judgment is emblematic of the judiciary's increasing engagement with **socio-economic rights**, moving beyond traditional civil liberties. It underscores the **State's constitutional responsibility**, under **Directive Principles of State Policy (Articles 39, 41, and 47)**, to provide adequate standards of living for all citizens.
- Furthermore, it pushes for **systemic reform** in the real estate sector — a domain that is both a **significant contributor to GDP** and a **source of deepening inequality**. Addressing the structural issues in this sector is essential not only for economic stability but also for **inclusive urban development**.

Policy Landscape and Government Interventions

- Government housing schemes have aimed to deliver on the promise of "**Housing for All**". Programmes such as **PMAY (Urban and Gramin)**, **Rajiv Awas Yojana**, and **Indira Awas Yojana** have attempted to provide affordable housing to both rural and urban populations. However, these schemes face several implementation bottlenecks, including **targeting inefficiencies, project delays, corruption**, and **poor integration with transport and public infrastructure**.
- On the financial front, the real estate sector is grappling with **rising non-performing assets (NPAs)** and a continued reliance on the **informal cash economy**, which distorts pricing and limits formal financing opportunities. This also impedes the government's ability to monitor transactions and enforce accountability.
- From a **social justice perspective**, housing is deeply intertwined with **health, education, gender empowerment**, and **social dignity**. The absence of secure and adequate shelter tends to **entrench poverty**, making it harder for vulnerable groups to break out of the cycle of deprivation.

Way Forward

- Strengthening the **implementation of RERA** is essential, particularly by giving regulatory authorities greater enforcement powers and ensuring faster dispute resolution mechanisms. Expanding **affordable housing finance** — including credit-linked subsidies and interest rate reductions for weaker sections — can make housing more accessible.
- There is a pressing need for **urban planning reforms**, including **land pooling models, inclusionary zoning**, and efficient use of public land for social housing. Any proposed **revival fund** must be governed by **transparent eligibility criteria, time-bound fund disbursal**, and **independent audits** to ensure accountability.
- A **public-private partnership (PPP) approach**, guided by principles of social responsibility, could significantly enhance housing outcomes. Additionally, housing initiatives should be aligned with the **Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)**, particularly **SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities)** and **SDG 1 (No Poverty)**, to ensure long-term sustainability and inclusiveness.

Conclusion

- The Supreme Court's reaffirmation of the right to housing as part of the right to life under Article 21 is not merely a judicial clarification but a **constitutional and moral directive** for reform. It calls for the State to treat housing as a **core component of economic governance**, not merely as an electoral promise or a symbolic gesture.
- For India to truly achieve its vision of **"Housing for All"**, the focus must shift from **sporadic welfare schemes** to **structural, accountable, and inclusive housing policies** that secure the dignity of every citizen and uphold the spirit of constitutional justice.

A Climate-Health Vision: Insights and Imperatives from India

Context:

In July 2025, Brazil hosted the Global Conference on Climate and Health, where representatives from 90 countries collectively drafted the Belém Health Action Plan. This plan, scheduled for launch at COP30, will shape the global agenda for addressing the intersection of climate and health. However, India's absence from official representation at the conference marked a significant missed opportunity. It could have showcased its unique developmental model and emerged as a key player in guiding the implementation of the Belém Plan.

This analysis explores how India's welfare schemes provide important lessons for harmonizing climate and health priorities. It also examines the institutional hurdles to intersectoral governance and stresses the need for a unified, society-wide response.

India's Welfare Schemes: A Roadmap for Climate-Health Integration

- India's broad-based welfare programs reveal how policies not originally crafted as climate interventions can generate substantial co-benefits for both public health and the environment. They serve as evidence of how integration, strong leadership, and community involvement can collectively advance climate-health objectives.
- One prominent example is the **PM POSHAN scheme**, which serves 11 crore children across 11 lakh schools. It represents a convergence of health, education, agriculture, and food procurement systems. By encouraging the use of traditional grains like millets, the scheme not only combats malnutrition but also supports climate-resilient food production systems.
- Similarly, **Swachh Bharat Abhiyan** improved sanitation, public health, and human dignity while simultaneously promoting environmental sustainability. The **Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MNREGA)** contributed to ecosystem restoration through rural infrastructure projects. Meanwhile, the **Pradhan Mantri Ujjwala Yojana (PMUY)** played a key role in reducing household air pollution and emissions by facilitating the adoption of clean cooking fuels.

Essential Takeaways for Climate-Health Convergence

- The experience of India's welfare initiatives offers key insights into how health and climate goals can be merged effectively. Political leadership has proven vital—schemes like Swachh Bharat and PMUY received direct backing from the Prime Minister, which enabled smooth inter-ministerial coordination and galvanized public support. Framing climate change as an immediate health crisis could help generate similar political momentum.
- Community engagement was another cornerstone of these initiatives. By leveraging cultural symbols and encouraging grassroots participation, the programs cultivated a sense of ownership and connection. This demonstrates that climate initiatives must also be embedded in the cultural and societal values linked to health and well-being.
- Furthermore, reinforcing existing institutional frameworks—such as the ASHA network, self-help groups, municipal corporations, and panchayats—can greatly enhance the credibility and

sustainability of such efforts. These institutions form the backbone of localized implementation and are essential for long-term success.

Barriers to Effective Climate-Health Governance

- While these welfare programs offer replicable lessons, their execution reveals significant structural and institutional limitations. Departmental silos often impede the effectiveness of cross-cutting policies. For example, PMUY continues to face challenges with LPG refill affordability, partly because the commercial priorities of oil marketing companies outweigh the needs of beneficiaries.
- In addition, persistent social and cultural barriers limit equitable access to resources and services. Without continuous and targeted support mechanisms, even well-designed policies struggle to achieve inclusive outcomes.

Foundational Pillars for a Health-Centric Climate Governance Model

A successful framework for integrated climate-health action must rest on three key pillars:

1. **Strategic Prioritisation:** Political discourse should highlight the immediate health benefits of climate actions rather than focusing solely on long-term environmental risks. PMUY's emphasis on women's empowerment through clean cooking is a case in point.
2. **Procedural Integration:** Health impact assessments should become compulsory across all climate-relevant sectors—ranging from energy and agriculture to transport and urban development. This would mirror the existing environmental clearance processes and embed health considerations in all development planning.
3. **Participatory Implementation:** Communities are more likely to connect with and support policies framed in terms of tangible health outcomes, such as cleaner air or safer drinking water, rather than abstract carbon targets. Local health workers, being deeply embedded within communities, can act as persuasive advocates by linking climate actions to everyday health improvements.

India's Critical Juncture: Choosing an Integrated Path Forward

- India now stands at a crossroads. It can either continue addressing climate change and public health in isolation, which often yields limited results, or it can adopt a bold, intersectoral approach that treats these two challenges as interconnected and mutually reinforcing. By drawing from its extensive welfare policy experience and re-engaging with global platforms, India has the potential to lead the creation of a transformative climate-health governance framework.
- The stakes are extraordinarily high. Inaction will incur significant costs to public health, ecological stability, and social equity. Conversely, a coordinated and inclusive approach holds the promise of delivering sustainable and far-reaching impacts—not just domestically, but on the global stage.

Conclusion

India must move decisively towards an integrated model of climate-health governance. This model should build upon its existing welfare frameworks, mobilize political leadership, and foster active community engagement. The consequences of delay or fragmented action are severe, but a united response offers the chance for transformative progress and meaningful global leadership.

The Saudi-Pakistan Pact: A Dubious Strategic Hedge

Context and Significance

The **Strategic Mutual Defence Agreement (SMDA)**, signed on **September 17, 2025**, in **Riyadh**, marks a notable shift in the geopolitical dynamics of **Southwest Asia**. The presence of **Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman**, **Pakistani Prime Minister Shahbaz Sharif**, and **Field Marshal Asim Munir**

at the signing underscored the symbolism of a deepening bilateral alliance aimed at reshaping regional security narratives. While the agreement is being portrayed as a forward-looking strategic milestone, there remain significant concerns about its long-term viability and actual substance. To understand its implications, it is crucial to consider the **historical underpinnings** of Saudi-Pakistani defence cooperation, the **present motivations** of both nations, and the **wider geopolitical impact**, especially in relation to **India**.

A History of Uneven Saudi-Pakistani Defence Ties

- **Defence cooperation** between Pakistan and Saudi Arabia has its roots in **1951**, though it reached its zenith between **1979 and 1989**, when approximately **20,000 Pakistani troops** were deployed in Saudi Arabia. Their mission was dual: to symbolically safeguard **Islam's holiest sites** and to strategically counter perceived threats from **Iran and Yemen**.
- However, even during this so-called "golden decade," tensions simmered beneath the surface. Saudi authorities often viewed the Pakistani soldiers as little more than **mercenaries**, while Pakistani military commanders resented their **subordinate status** under a foreign command. Further straining the relationship was **Riyadh's insistence** on excluding **Shia soldiers** from Pakistan's contingents, aggravating sectarian sensitivities.
- These underlying frictions led to a **gradual withdrawal** of Pakistani forces by **1990**. In later crises—most notably the **1990 Iraqi invasion of Kuwait** and the **2015 Yemeni civil war**—Pakistan **refused direct military involvement**, opting instead for limited roles focused solely on the **defence of holy sites**, avoiding entanglement in broader regional conflicts.

The U.S. as the Silent Architect

- The trajectory of Saudi-Pakistani defence relations has historically been influenced, if not dictated, by the **United States**. American involvement has often shaped the boundaries and momentum of the partnership behind the scenes. Recent diplomatic developments—high-level meetings in Riyadh followed by **Field Marshal Munir's meeting with U.S. President Donald Trump**—indicate that the SMDA is part of a **triangular framework** involving **Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, and the U.S.**
- Thus, the agreement cannot be analysed in isolation. Rather, it reflects Washington's continued role in **engineering regional alliances**, likely aimed at **balancing Iran, securing Gulf interests**, and **preserving influence** amid shifting power equations.

Riyadh's Rationale: Between Necessity and Compromise

From Saudi Arabia's perspective, the SMDA emerges as a **pragmatic compromise**. Riyadh's aspirations for a **formal U.S. defence pact**, along with **access to nuclear technology** and **cutting-edge weaponry**, have been thwarted by the **instability following the 2023 Hamas-Israel conflict** and the **subsequent Gaza war**. In this context, the defence agreement with Pakistan serves as a **second-best alternative**—a partner it can work with without provoking domestic religious factions or becoming embroiled in intra-Arab rivalries.

Several key considerations inform **Riyadh's strategic calculus**:

- **Self-Reliance in Defence**: Since **1991**, Saudi Arabia has managed to weather multiple security threats—including **al-Qaeda terrorism, Gulf wars**, and the **Yemen crisis**—without relying heavily on foreign troops. Its recent **\$100 billion arms deal with the U.S.** has further strengthened domestic military capabilities.
- **Nuclear Backup**: Pakistan's **nuclear status** adds strategic heft to the alliance, especially if **Iran** moves closer to developing similar capabilities. Nonetheless, any overt nuclear technology transfer from Islamabad to Riyadh remains **highly improbable** due to **Israeli opposition** and **international non-proliferation norms**.

- **Geopolitical Constraints:** Pakistan's **strategic ties with China** introduce complications. For Saudi Arabia, this restricts the possibility of building an unencumbered military alliance with Islamabad, especially if those ties conflict with **U.S. or regional priorities**.

Islamabad's Approach: Tactical Opportunism Over Strategic Alignment

For **Pakistan**, the agreement is driven less by ideological or defence convergence and more by a calculated attempt to **extract short-term gains**. Islamabad has no intention of fighting Riyadh's battles—whether against **Iran, Yemen, or Israel**—just as it is fully aware that **Saudi Arabia would not intervene** in potential conflicts involving **India or Afghanistan**.

Pakistan's objectives in entering this pact are largely opportunistic:

- To **monetise Saudi Arabia's security anxieties** by securing **economic aid, oil subsidies, and military equipment**.
- To **bolster favour with the United States** through its role in the **trilateral arrangement**, using it as leverage to reduce strategic vulnerabilities vis-à-vis **India**.
- To **boost the domestic stature of its military leadership**, gaining prestige through increased **training, weapons access, and geopolitical visibility**.

This reveals a deep **asymmetry of intent**. While **Riyadh** is seeking **strategic reassurance**, **Islamabad** is focused on **tangible benefits**—monetary, political, and military.

Regional Consequences: India's Calculated Caution

- The agreement inevitably prompts a strategic reassessment in **India**, particularly given its **energy security** and growing **defence ties** with Saudi Arabia. As the **world's third-largest oil importer** and **second-largest trading partner** of Saudi Arabia, India holds a critical position in Riyadh's external relationships. The **Indian diaspora** in the Gulf, known for its **professionalism** and **political neutrality**, further reinforces this bond.
- Since **2014**, India has **deepened cooperation** with Saudi Arabia across sectors, including **intelligence-sharing, counterterrorism, and defence**. In fact, Saudi officials have made conscious efforts to **balance ties with both Pakistan and India**, with Riyadh recognising India's **nuclear status** and **regional influence**.
- Notably, reports suggest that **New Delhi was kept informed** of the SMDA developments, indicating Riyadh's sensitivity to India's strategic concerns and its desire to maintain equilibrium. For India, the agreement serves as a **strategic reminder**—to remain **vigilant, strengthen maritime outreach across the Arabian Sea, and consolidate its position in West Asia**.

Conclusion: Symbolism Over Substance

The **Saudi-Pakistani Strategic Mutual Defence Agreement** is, in essence, less a robust alliance and more a **cautious insurance policy**. Historical precedent shows that their defence relationship has often been shaped by **mistrust, sectarian sensitivities, and mismatched threat perceptions**. In its current form, the SMDA appears largely **symbolic**, providing **Riyadh with minimal strategic comfort** while giving **Islamabad access to economic and political capital**. It reflects a hedging strategy on both sides—**Saudi Arabia** seeking backup in a volatile neighbourhood, and **Pakistan** aiming to monetise its military value without making binding commitments. Whether this pact translates into real strategic depth or merely serves short-term purposes remains to be seen. For the time being, it remains a **dodgy insurance policy**—not a game-changing alliance.

Supreme Court on POSH Act and Political Parties: A Legal and Ethical Analysis

Introduction

The Supreme Court of India recently dismissed a petition that sought to bring political parties under

the purview of the Protection of Women from Sexual Harassment (POSH) Act, 2013. The Court adopted a literal interpretation of the statute, concluding that political parties do not qualify as "workplaces" because party members are not bound by a formal employer–employee relationship. However, this interpretation has been criticized for ignoring the broader intent of the law, which is grounded in the *Vishakha Guidelines* (1997) that emphasize a woman's right to safety and dignity, regardless of contractual employment. The case has brought to light significant gaps in India's gender justice framework and underscores persistent barriers to women's equal participation in politics.

Background of the POSH Act

The POSH Act was enacted in response to the *Vishakha* judgment of 1997, which drew upon international norms such as CEDAW (Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women).

- The Act aims to prevent and address sexual harassment at workplaces by ensuring a safe and dignified environment for all women.
- It applies universally to women across formal and informal sectors, whether employed or not.
- It mandates the establishment of Internal Complaints Committees (ICCs) in every workplace, with external members to ensure impartiality and credibility in handling complaints.

Supreme Court's Reasoning

In rejecting the petition, the Supreme Court offered the following rationale:

- Political parties are considered voluntary associations and not formal workplaces.
- Party members do not operate within a conventional employer–employee dynamic.
- Broadening the law to include political parties could lead to unintended consequences and potential misuse, such as blackmail.
- Any such inclusion should be decided by Parliament through legislative amendment, not judicial intervention.

Issues with the Judgment

The ruling has been widely criticized for its reliance on literal rather than purposive interpretation:

- **Purpose of the Law:** The POSH Act was intended to offer protection in any work-like setting, not just within legally defined employment contracts.
- **Nature of Political Parties:** Parties function in a workplace-like manner, with established hierarchies, assigned duties, and behavioural expectations.
- **Misuse Argument:** The claim that expanding the Act may lead to blackmail is flawed, as all laws carry misuse risks, yet they are safeguarded by provisions such as penalties for false complaints.
- **Spirit of Vishakha:** The *Vishakha* guidelines that inspired the POSH Act never confined protection solely to employees, but rather emphasized broader safety norms for women.
- **Patriarchy in Politics:** Women in politics face entrenched power imbalances, harassment, and exclusion. Without formal redressal mechanisms, such complaints are often suppressed or ignored.

Why Political Parties Should Be Covered Under the POSH Act

There are compelling legal, practical, and ethical reasons to bring political parties within the scope of the POSH Act:

- Political parties mirror workplaces in their organizational structures, roles, and responsibilities.
- Power imbalances—similar to those in offices or legislatures—create conditions conducive to harassment.
- Many democracies, including the UK and Canada, require political parties to implement anti-harassment codes.
- As primary democratic institutions, political parties have a symbolic and moral obligation to lead by example in promoting gender justice.

Current Situation in India

- Among all major political parties, only the CPI(M) has established an ICC with external members.
- Most other parties lack formal institutional mechanisms to address sexual harassment; complaints are often handled internally or brushed aside.
- The low representation of women in Indian politics—only 15% in the Lok Sabha as of 2024—reflects structural and cultural barriers, including the absence of safe working environments within parties.

Implications of the Ruling

1. **For Women in Politics:** The ruling may discourage women from entering or remaining in political spaces perceived as unsafe. It weakens India's commitments to SDG 5, which promotes gender equality.
2. **For Indian Democracy:** Excluding women from political participation undermines democratic representation and pluralism. The judgment perpetuates patriarchal norms within political institutions.
3. **For Legal and Policy Frameworks:** The judgment introduces inconsistency—other voluntary bodies like NGOs and cooperatives are covered under the Act, but not political parties. It sets a concerning precedent that may restrict the progressive expansion of women-centric laws through judicial interpretation.
4. **Ethical Dimensions:** The ruling raises concerns about the constitutional right to life with dignity under Article 21. By denying safeguards in political settings, women are effectively denied equal participation in the public sphere. The Court's position seems to prioritize institutional convenience over the fundamental rights and dignity of women.

Way Forward

1. **Legislative Action:** Parliament should amend the POSH Act to explicitly include political parties within its ambit. It should mandate the formation of ICCs with external representation in all parties.
2. **Voluntary Reforms by Political Parties:** Parties should adopt internal gender codes of conduct and establish transparent grievance redressal systems.
3. **Role of the Election Commission of India:** The ECI can make it mandatory for parties to have functioning ICCs as a condition for registration or recognition. Gender safety compliance should be incorporated into party audit processes.
4. **Cultural and Social Change:** Regular gender sensitisation programs should be organized for party workers. Women must be promoted into leadership positions to reshape organizational culture.
5. **Civil Society and Media:** Advocacy by women's groups and media pressure can compel parties to take gender justice seriously. Amplifying the voices of complainants can help shift political culture toward accountability and inclusiveness.

Conclusion

While the Supreme Court's judgment may be legally valid on a narrow textual interpretation, it falls short of upholding the transformative spirit of the POSH Act. Political parties, as foundational institutions of democracy, must be held accountable for ensuring safe, inclusive, and dignified environments for women. Extending workplace safety norms to political spaces is not merely a legal necessity but a moral and democratic imperative—one that India must embrace to build a truly participatory and gender-just society.

India-US Relations and the H-1B Visa Fee Hike

Introduction

India-US relations have recently witnessed renewed diplomatic and trade engagement, indicating a potential thaw in bilateral ties. However, this progress has been complicated by the Trump administration's decision to raise H-1B visa fees—a move that disproportionately affects Indian nationals, who make up the majority of recipients under the programme. This development underscores the underlying tension between strategic alignment and economic protectionism within the relationship, highlighting how short-term domestic politics in the US can disrupt long-standing partnerships.

Understanding the H-1B Visa and Its Significance

What is the H-1B Visa?

The H-1B is a non-immigrant visa that allows U.S. employers to hire foreign workers in specialty occupations that require technical expertise, such as in IT, engineering, medicine, and finance.

Why is it crucial for India?

- Approximately 70% of all H-1B visas are issued to Indian nationals.
- Indian IT firms such as Infosys, TCS, HCL, and Wipro rely heavily on these visas to deploy skilled professionals on projects in the US.
- Remittance flows are significantly impacted—according to RBI data, the US accounted for 27.7% of India's total remittances in 2023–24.

The US Perspective

The Trump administration has argued that Indian IT firms have “manipulated” the system to displace American workers, thus justifying a hike in visa fees as a protectionist measure aimed at preserving domestic jobs.

From Trade Tariffs to Skilled Labour Protectionism

The move to raise H-1B visa fees is part of a broader protectionist shift in US policy.

- **Earlier measures** focused on tariffs targeting Indian exports in manufacturing sectors such as textiles, metals, and engineering goods.
- **The current step** represents an extension of this approach into services and high-skilled employment—areas where India holds a comparative advantage.

This dual pressure—on both low-skilled manufacturing and high-skilled IT services—places Indian businesses in a vulnerable position, limiting both export opportunities and labour mobility.

Implications for the US Economy

Although framed as a pro-American-worker policy, the H-1B fee hike could have negative repercussions for the US itself:

- **Increased operational costs:** US firms may struggle to fill skill gaps domestically, making talent acquisition more expensive.
- **Harm to innovation:** Immigrants have historically driven US innovation. Economist Giovanni Peri noted that 26% of US Nobel laureates (1990–2000) were immigrants. Research by Anderson & Platzer found that 25% of founders of venture-backed companies (1990–2005) were foreign-born.
- **Talent redirection:** With visa-related costs soaring up to \$100,000, highly skilled professionals may prefer relocating to more welcoming regions like Canada, Europe, or parts of Asia.

Impact on India's IT Sector

The Indian IT industry, which has long relied on the H-1B route to serve US clients, now faces multiple challenges:

- **Short-term disruptions:** Project costs for major firms like Infosys, TCS, HCL, and Wipro are set to rise. On-site deployments in the US may be delayed, impacting client timelines.

- **Structural weaknesses:** Indian IT companies are already grappling with automation, the adoption of AI, and a global demand slowdown. Their traditional labour-arbitrage model—offering low-cost programming and tech support—is under increasing strain.
- **Remittance vulnerabilities:** Any significant drop in Indian professionals working in the US will likely lead to reduced remittance inflows, affecting India's foreign exchange reserves and consumption economy.

Potential Opportunities and Strategic Reorientation

Despite the immediate setbacks, India can potentially turn the situation to its advantage:

- **Rise of Global Capability Centres (GCCs):** Visa restrictions may incentivise companies to expand offshore operations in India. According to Wharton researcher Britta Glennon, previous H-1B curbs led to a notable increase in offshore hiring in India, Canada, and China. India can position itself as a hub for global R&D, analytics, and backend services.
- **Domestic Ecosystem Development:** There is a strong case for building Silicon Valley-style innovation clusters within India. This requires comprehensive reforms in education, research funding, and academia-industry partnerships.
- **Policy Support:** Initiatives such as *Digital India*, *Startup India*, and the PLI scheme for IT and electronics can be leveraged. Skill development programmes must be expanded to align with emerging global demands in AI, cybersecurity, and advanced engineering.

Geopolitical Dynamics and Strategic Convergence

Despite economic frictions, the strategic aspect of the India-US partnership remains robust:

- **Indo-Pacific cooperation** continues under the Quad framework.
- **Defence partnerships** remain strong, with India signing foundational agreements like COMCASA, BECA, and LEMOA.
- **Climate and clean energy collaboration** also form an important pillar.

Yet, the recurring nature of trade and visa-related disputes exposes the weakness of the economic leg of the bilateral relationship, which lacks the institutional stability seen in strategic or defence ties.

Challenges for Indian Policymakers

India faces multiple challenges in responding to US policy shifts:

- **Limited leverage:** Immigration is a sovereign matter, and India has minimal direct influence over US visa decisions.
- **Overdependence on a single market:** The reliance on the US for both IT services and remittances makes India vulnerable to abrupt policy changes.
- **Need for structural transformation:** India must raise the quality of its higher education system. Investment in innovation ecosystems and encouraging product-based business models (beyond cost-effective services) is essential.

Way Forward

1. **Bilateral Engagement:** India must engage with US policymakers to seek a rollback or moderation of the visa fee hike. Discussions must move beyond trade tariffs and include *mobility of professionals* as a permanent agenda item in bilateral talks.
2. **Strengthening Domestic Capabilities:** Investment should be channelled into future-ready sectors such as AI, quantum computing, and semiconductor design. Global Capability Centres should be scaled up to retain talent that would otherwise migrate. The startup ecosystem must be incentivised to move from service provision to genuine innovation.
3. **Diversification Strategy:** Indian IT firms should actively expand into European, Japanese, and ASEAN markets. India should push for more **Social Security Agreements** to ensure the welfare of Indian professionals working abroad.

4. **Long-Term Vision:** India must aim to become a global innovation powerhouse, not just a back-office for Western firms. By strengthening domestic income sources, India can reduce its dependence on remittance inflows and build a more resilient economy.

Conclusion

The H-1B visa fee hike represents more than just a bureaucratic barrier—it strikes at the core of India's IT-driven engagement with the United States. While the strategic dimension of the bilateral relationship continues to strengthen, the economic and human capital linkages face growing stress due to protectionist shifts in US policy. India must approach this moment with a dual strategy: sustained diplomatic engagement with Washington and a bold domestic transformation agenda. In an increasingly uncertain global environment, India's success will depend on its ability to be adaptive, self-reliant, and forward-looking.

Breaking the Academic Paywall

Context

India is now the fourth-largest producer of PhD graduates worldwide, a notable achievement according to data from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. Yet this progress is undermined by a glaring contradiction: many scholars in the country are based at universities that cannot afford subscriptions to essential academic journals. Doctoral research demands access to hundreds of scholarly papers, but students—already operating on modest stipends between ₹20,000 and ₹35,000—often face prohibitive costs ranging from \$20 to \$3,000 (approximately ₹17,000 to ₹2.64 lakh) just to access a single article. This creates an insurmountable barrier to knowledge for those who need it most.

The High Cost of Knowledge

- The gravity of this issue became even more apparent when the Delhi High Court, in August, ordered the blocking of Sci-Hub and LibGen—two of the most widely used free-access academic platforms. The legal challenge was initiated by three of the world's largest academic publishers, who collectively control 40% of the global publishing market and cited copyright infringement. This sparked widespread debate, particularly in academic circles across the Global South, about the ethics of limiting access to research that is often funded by public money.
- Academic publishing relies on a model that extracts significant profits from the unpaid labour of researchers. These scholars produce content and often participate in peer reviews without compensation, yet publishers claim ownership and charge steep fees for access. They neither generate the original research nor are involved in quality verification, yet benefit disproportionately. A 2021 study published in the *Journal of Scientometric Research* found that India made up 8.7% of all downloads from Sci-Hub in 2017, with more than 13 million access requests—about 20% of which were for medical and health science materials. This data underscores the degree to which students and professionals depend on these platforms to conduct meaningful research and address local challenges.

Health, Innovation, and the Cost of Exclusion

- The most critical consequences of these knowledge barriers are felt in healthcare. According to organisations like Doctors Without Borders (MSF), the field of medicine is dynamic, constantly evolving in response to emerging diseases, climate impacts, and changing social contexts. In the Global South—where two-thirds of global tuberculosis cases occur and where antimicrobial-resistant HIV poses an acute threat—doctors and healthcare workers are increasingly cut off from the latest research they need to develop effective treatments.
- Health interventions must be tailored to local conditions—considering factors such as geography, malnutrition, age, and coexisting illnesses. These require up-to-date research and

continuous innovation, yet the paywall model denies access to precisely those who are tasked with addressing such urgent public health needs. This is not merely an academic or logistical problem; it is a question of morality, fairness, and global justice.

Knowledge as a Commodity

- The crisis extends far beyond the health sector. Today, knowledge has increasingly been transformed into a luxury commodity, accessible only to those who can afford it. Universities, especially in developing nations, are under pressure to privilege publications in high-impact, globally recognised journals—often at the expense of research that directly engages with urgent local or social concerns.
- Corporate interests now shape research priorities, reinforced by a framework of patents and intellectual property rights that serve to privatise publicly funded research. In this environment, grassroots knowledge and indigenous expertise are marginalised. Communities in the Global South are frequently treated as mere data sources for researchers from the Global North, with local scholars relegated to secondary roles in research projects. Authorship and intellectual framing often remain with Northern institutions, resulting in a one-sided narrative that misrepresents Southern realities.
- This imbalance is not only inequitable but distorts the way challenges in the Global South are understood and addressed, perpetuating a knowledge system that fails to represent or serve the majority of the world's population.

Towards Collective Action and Open Science

- In an era marked by converging global crises—climate disasters, forced migration, growing antimicrobial resistance, and entrenched inequality—the need for shared, open, and collaborative knowledge systems is more urgent than ever. Recognising this, all 193 UNESCO member states, including India, endorsed the first global framework on open science in 2021. This framework aimed to make scientific knowledge more transparent, accessible, and inclusive.
- However, despite this commitment, dominant publishing houses continue to enforce restrictive paywalls, creating an artificial scarcity around knowledge that is, by nature, abundant and collectively produced. Science is inherently a collaborative endeavour—built on centuries of cumulative contributions across cultures, borders, and generations. Yet paradoxically, even the very communities that contribute to data collection, fieldwork, or case studies often lack access to the final published research.
- This exclusion undermines not just the principles of equity and justice, but the collaborative spirit that underpins scientific progress. The practice of locking away knowledge behind high-cost barriers contradicts the idea of science as a global public good.

Conclusion

If the world is to tackle the complex and interconnected challenges of the 21st century—from global health emergencies and climate change to economic and social inequities—knowledge must be treated not as a commodity but as a shared resource. The ongoing dominance of corporate publishers, who continue to restrict access to knowledge for profit, denies millions the opportunity to learn, innovate, and contribute to solving the problems that affect them most.

Governments, educational institutions, and civil society must act collectively to pressure these publishers to dismantle paywalls and embrace a more democratic, open-access approach to knowledge dissemination. Only when access to knowledge is universal and equitable can we truly empower individuals and communities to build healthier, more just, and more resilient societies across the globe.

India's Foreign Policy Dilemma: Strategic and Multi-Dependence

Context

India's Prime Minister recently raised concern over the country's excessive dependence on foreign powers, identifying it as a major strategic vulnerability. Although India aspires to maintain strategic autonomy and pursue a policy of multi-alignment, the reality reveals a significant *strategic and multi-dependence* on global powers—particularly China, Russia, and the United States. This dependence, spread across key sectors like manufacturing, energy, defence, and trade, constrains India's foreign policy choices and limits its manoeuvrability in a complex geopolitical environment.

India's Dependence on Major Powers

1. Dependence on China: India's economic interlinkage with China extends deeply into manufacturing, infrastructure, and technology supply chains.

- **Manufacturing and Consumer Goods:** India is heavily reliant on China for essential components such as mobile phone parts, white goods, and computers.
- **Pharmaceutical Sector:** A critical dependence exists on China for Active Pharmaceutical Ingredients (APIs) and precursor chemicals vital to India's drug production.
- **Energy and Green Technologies:** Imports include rare earth elements, polysilicon, wafers, and solar cells, which are indispensable for India's renewable energy goals.
- **Infrastructure Inputs:** Key materials like fertilisers and specialised machinery (e.g., tunnel-boring machines) are sourced from China.
- **Semiconductor Imports:** India relies on China for a significant share of its semiconductor needs, further exposing technological vulnerabilities.

2. Dependence on Russia: Russia continues to be a strategic partner, especially in defence and energy, but this relationship now presents serious limitations.

- **Defence Sector:** Approximately 60–70% of India's military hardware across all three services originates from Russia. This includes critical platforms such as fighter jets, tanks, submarines, and missile systems.
- **Energy Ties:** Crude oil imports from Russia have surged dramatically, increasing from 4% in 2022 to nearly 40% currently.
- **Legacy Factor:** India's longstanding dependence on Soviet and Russian equipment since the 1970s makes a full transition away from Russian defence imports a complex and gradual process.

2. Dependence on the United States: India's ties with the United States are robust, spanning trade, human capital, and defence cooperation.

- **Economic and Talent Linkages:** The US is India's largest export destination. Moreover, Indian professionals dominate the H1-B visa category, comprising nearly 70% of all recipients. The US is also the most popular destination for Indian students abroad, rivaling the number of Chinese students.
- **Defence and Technology:** American military equipment and technology play a crucial role in India's modernisation efforts. Examples include GE engines for the indigenous Tejas aircraft, as well as key imports like helicopters, assault rifles, missiles, and unmanned systems.
- **Geopolitical Importance:** The US is a critical partner in India's strategy to balance China's growing influence in the Indo-Pacific region.

Foreign Policy Tightrope

India's simultaneous reliance on three rival global powers severely constrains its diplomatic options:

- **China:** Hostile border tensions limit political space for confrontation, as economic fallout from disrupting trade ties could be severe.
- **Russia:** Oil and defence dependencies make it difficult for India to criticise Russia over the Ukraine conflict or its deepening ties with China and Pakistan.

- **United States:** Trade and technology reliance imposes limitations on how far India can assert its independent stance on issues such as US tariffs or ties with nations like Iran and Russia.

As a result, India finds its foreign policy increasingly constrained by economic and strategic entanglements that leave little room for autonomous action.

Historical Parallel

India's present situation echoes the post-Cold War vulnerability of 1989–91, when the Soviet Union's collapse exposed India's overdependence on a single power bloc. That crisis became the impetus for sweeping economic reforms in 1991. Today, disruptions like Trump-era tariffs, the Ukraine war, and intensifying US-China rivalry reveal a similar fragility in India's external dependencies.

Challenges Ahead for India

Several structural issues aggravate India's external vulnerabilities:

- **Manufacturing Stagnation:** Despite averaging 7% GDP growth since the 1990s, the manufacturing sector has failed to become globally competitive.
- **Commodity Deficit:** India remains import-dependent for essential commodities like oil, rare earths, and pharmaceutical inputs.
- **Limited Export Diversification:** A large share of India's exports is concentrated in the US market, exposing the country to demand shocks and policy shifts.
- **Weak Industrial Response:** Both public and private sectors have displayed limited dynamism in boosting innovation, investment, and global competitiveness.

Way Forward

To restore strategic autonomy and reduce external vulnerability, India must undertake a multi-pronged approach:

- **Manufacturing Revolution:** Revitalise domestic industry through a stronger push for *Make in India* and *Atmanirbhar Bharat*. High-tech sectors like electronics, defence, and semiconductors must receive special focus.
- **Import and Commodity Diversification:** India must reduce its reliance on China and Russia by sourcing APIs, rare earths, energy, and critical components from a broader pool of countries, including Vietnam, Australia, and African nations.
- **Export Diversification:** Efforts should be made to lessen dependence on the US market by expanding trade with ASEAN, Africa, Latin America, and the Middle East.
- **Defence Indigenisation:** Accelerate the development of indigenous platforms through R&D, public-private partnerships, and technology transfers, thereby reducing overreliance on Russian and American defence imports.
- **Policy Push for Innovation:** Government must create a more enabling environment for private sector-led innovation, investment, and competitiveness to enhance India's economic resilience.

Conclusion

India's ambition of strategic autonomy is currently undermined by its multi-dimensional dependencies on China, Russia, and the US. The current landscape offers an important opportunity—just as the 1991 crisis catalyzed economic liberalisation, today's challenges should drive a transformative push toward industrial self-reliance and policy independence. True *Atmanirbharta* across critical sectors—manufacturing, defence, energy, and trade—is no longer just a developmental goal; it is a prerequisite for securing India's foreign policy independence and long-term national security.

India's Muted Voice and Its Growing Detachment from Palestine

Context

- Recent recognitions of Palestinian statehood by countries such as France, the United Kingdom, Canada, Portugal, and Australia represent more than mere diplomatic statements—they reflect

an evolving global consensus affirming the Palestinian people's right to freedom, dignity, and sovereign statehood. These developments have revitalised international momentum for Palestinian recognition, even as humanitarian conditions in Gaza worsen.

- India, which was once at the forefront of this cause, had recognised Palestinian statehood as early as 1988—a decision rooted in its moral convictions and shaped by its own post-colonial identity. However, India's conspicuous silence during the ongoing humanitarian catastrophe in Gaza raises serious concerns about its shifting posture. The question now confronting the world—and India itself—is whether the country has relinquished its traditional role as a principled voice for global justice.

India's Legacy of Moral Leadership

- India's foreign policy has historically blended strategic interests with moral conviction. Even before independence, Indian leaders condemned apartheid in South Africa, halted trade relations with the regime, and highlighted its injustices at the United Nations. During the Algerian struggle for liberation, India maintained unwavering support for anti-colonial forces. In 1971, India intervened in East Pakistan to halt atrocities, leading to the formation of Bangladesh. Similarly, when Vietnam was under foreign aggression, India chose to stand firmly for peace, sovereignty, and justice.
- This moral outlook was not ad hoc but constitutionally grounded. The Indian Constitution explicitly lists the promotion of international peace and security as a directive principle of state policy, embedding ethical considerations into the nation's external affairs.

A Balanced and Principled Stand on the Israel-Palestine Conflict

- India's approach to the Israel-Palestine conflict has historically been nuanced, consistent, and principled. It was among the first countries to recognise the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) in 1974 and has repeatedly reaffirmed support for a two-state solution that ensures Palestinian self-determination and peaceful coexistence with Israel.
- India has backed multiple United Nations resolutions upholding Palestinian rights and condemning the expansion of Israeli settlements. It has also extended tangible support to Palestinian development through scholarships, healthcare aid, and capacity-building initiatives, underscoring its commitment to justice beyond rhetoric. All the while, India maintained diplomatic relations with Israel, balancing pragmatism with principle.

India's Silence Amidst a Deepening Crisis

- The renewed conflict that erupted in October 2023 has placed the Israel-Palestine issue back into global focus. Hamas's attacks on Israeli civilians triggered an Israeli military response of unprecedented scale. The aftermath has been devastating: over 55,000 Palestinians, including approximately 17,000 children, have lost their lives. Gaza's infrastructure lies in ruins, famine looms large, and desperate civilians are being targeted even as they search for food.
- This unfolding humanitarian crisis has been met with global inertia, allowing Israel's actions to proceed with limited international restraint. In contrast, the recent recognitions of Palestinian statehood by several countries mark a moral resurgence in international diplomacy—a move toward justice and accountability.
- However, India's silence during this moment of acute crisis is deafening. Once a firm supporter of oppressed populations, India's muted stance signals a retreat from its legacy. The current administration's foreign policy appears less anchored in constitutional values and more influenced by personal diplomacy, particularly the strong rapport between the Indian Prime Minister and his Israeli counterpart. Such personalisation of international relations reduces historically grounded policies to the fluctuating dynamics of individual relationships—a framework ill-suited for a nation with India's global responsibilities.

The Path Ahead: Reclaiming Ethical Foreign Policy

- The question of Palestine is not merely a diplomatic concern—it is a moral and civilisational challenge, intimately tied to India's own historical experience with colonial rule. The Palestinian quest for statehood and dignity echoes India's own anti-imperialist struggle, marked by decades of dispossession, exploitation, and systemic denial of basic rights.
- To remain silent now is not an act of neutrality—it is a form of complicity. India is not expected to take sides blindly but is called upon to display principled leadership, anchored in its long-standing commitment to human rights, dignity, and justice, irrespective of political convenience or strategic calculations.

Conclusion

India's foreign policy tradition has been shaped by moral clarity, ethical courage, and a commitment to justice in global affairs. At a time when several nations are reasserting support for Palestinian statehood and confronting the ethical dimensions of the crisis in Gaza, India's continued silence threatens to erode its standing as a moral force in international diplomacy. The real challenge is not just geopolitical; it is ethical and historical—whether India will honour its legacy as a voice for the oppressed or allow transient political relationships to dilute its foundational values.

Just a Pinch Can Reduce an Indian's Salt Overload

Context

In India's evolving discourse on nutrition and public health, sugar and excessive oil consumption have taken centre stage. This focus is understandable, given the increasing prevalence of non-communicable diseases (NCDs), particularly obesity, among individuals of all age groups. However, amid this heightened awareness, a critical dietary risk factor continues to be overlooked: the excessive intake of salt. Deeply rooted in Indian culinary traditions, salt is often considered indispensable, yet its overconsumption poses severe health risks. As such, it is essential that salt consumption receives the same policy attention and public awareness as the dangers of sugar and fat.

The Extent of the Problem

- Scientific studies indicate that Indian adults consume between eight to eleven grams of salt per day—almost twice the World Health Organization's (WHO) recommended limit of five to six grams. While concerns over sugar and fat typically focus on processed foods, the majority of India's salt consumption—nearly three-fourths—originates from meals prepared at home. Traditional foods such as pickles, papads, and various condiments are major contributors. Cultural practices like placing salt shakers on dining tables and the increasing frequency of dining out, where restaurants liberally use salt, butter, and oil to enhance taste, further aggravate the issue.
- What makes salt particularly insidious is its hidden presence in everyday items like bread, biscuits, sauces, and even sweet foods like cakes. The surge in packaged and ultra-processed foods—classified as high in fat, salt, and sugar (HFSS)—has saturated Indian markets. Although public health campaigns often highlight the dangers of sugar and oil, salt remains under-discussed, despite being equally detrimental. This neglect persists even as hypertension—strongly linked to high salt intake—affects 28.1% of Indian adults and significantly elevates the risk of cardiovascular disease, a leading cause of mortality in the country.

Myths and Misconceptions

Public perception around salt is also clouded by several misconceptions. Many people believe that rock salt, black salt, or Himalayan pink salt are healthier alternatives to regular table salt. However, these variants still contain sodium, the harmful component in salt. In fact, their milder taste often results in larger quantities being consumed, thereby intensifying the health risks. Another overlooked issue is the

lack of iodine in many of these alternative salts, which can lead to iodine deficiency—a condition India has historically battled through widespread iodisation initiatives.

A Multi-Pronged Approach

- To meaningfully address India's salt crisis, a comprehensive and multi-layered strategy is essential.
- One important step is expanding the mandate of current nutrition-focused bodies. Instead of having separate boards for sugar and oil, integrated HFSS boards should be established to include salt. These would raise awareness of the combined risks associated with ultra-processed foods that are high in sugar, fat, and salt.
- Public education campaigns should aim to foster behavioural changes around salt use. These campaigns must promote a gradual reduction in the quantity of salt used in cooking, encourage the use of herbs and spices to enhance flavour, and introduce low-sodium substitutes where medically appropriate. However, caution must be exercised with such substitutes, particularly those high in potassium, as they may be unsuitable for individuals with kidney-related conditions and should only be used under medical supervision.
- Instilling healthy eating habits must begin in early childhood. Since salt preference is an acquired taste, children should be introduced to low-salt diets from infancy. Infants and toddlers should not be given added salt, while older children should consume food that is only minimally salted, similar to that consumed by health-conscious adults. Establishing such taste preferences early can substantially reduce long-term dependence on high salt intake.
- Reforms are also needed in large-scale public food programmes. Millions of Indians, including schoolchildren, pregnant women in Anganwadi centres, and patients in government hospitals, rely on meals provided by state-run schemes. These programmes must integrate salt regulations, train cooks in healthy preparation methods, and enforce procurement standards that prioritise nutritional safety.
- Mandatory front-of-pack labelling should be introduced to clearly indicate high-salt foods. Countries like Chile have already demonstrated the success of such measures in curbing unhealthy consumption patterns. Alongside labelling, implementing salt content ceilings for processed foods and limiting the marketing of HFSS products to children are critical regulatory steps.
- At the household and community level, several practical interventions can make a difference. Removing salt shakers from restaurant tables, encouraging families to monitor and reduce their weekly purchases of HFSS foods, and discouraging repeat consumption are effective starting points. Local innovations tailored to community needs can also play a vital role in shifting dietary habits.
- While salt reduction is already included in India's National Multisectoral Action Plan (2017–22) for NCD prevention, current efforts remain fragmented. Stronger cross-sectoral collaboration and integration with broader health initiatives are urgently required. As the government drafts its next multisectoral strategy, salt reduction must be recognised not as an optional add-on but as a core objective.

The Case for Stronger Regulation

According to the WHO, salt reduction is one of the most cost-effective public health interventions available, offering a return of twelve dollars for every dollar invested. Yet, despite this compelling evidence, awareness efforts alone will not suffice. A successful strategy must combine regulatory frameworks—such as mandatory labelling, procurement guidelines, and marketing controls—with grassroots-level action to produce sustainable outcomes.

Conclusion

- Salt is a largely invisible but equally harmful component of both modern and traditional diets. Its excessive intake is silently fuelling the growth of hypertension and cardiovascular diseases, which place immense pressure on both families and the national healthcare system. By dismantling misconceptions, reforming food systems, and encouraging behavioural shifts at every level—from policymaking to household kitchens—India has the opportunity to lead a transformative public health movement.
- Ultimately, reducing salt consumption will require an integrated, multi-pronged approach that balances regulation, awareness, and community engagement. Only through such coordinated efforts can the country hope to safeguard public health and reduce the burden of NCDs for future generations.

Digital Payments and the Formalisation of the Indian Economy

Context and Overview

Over the past decade, the Indian economy has made notable strides in formalisation. While the integration of firms and workers into the formal sector has progressed incrementally, the most profound shift has occurred at the household level, primarily driven by the widespread adoption of digital payment platforms such as the Unified Payments Interface (UPI). This transformation in household financial behaviour marks a significant structural change in how the Indian economy operates, particularly in terms of transactions and consumption patterns.

Dimensions of Economic Formalisation

Formalisation in India can be observed across three key domains—firms, workers, and household transactions. Firms entering the Goods and Services Tax (GST) regime have increased, signaling a greater incorporation into the formal tax system. Similarly, worker formalisation is evident through the rise in Employees' Provident Fund Organisation (EPFO) enrolments, suggesting growth in formal sector employment. However, the most rapid and impactful formalisation has taken place in household transactions, where cash-based spending is increasingly being replaced by digital payments, especially through UPI.

Rise and Scale of Digital Payments

- The scale of UPI-led transactions underscores this transformation. Between April and June 2025, nearly **9 billion person-to-merchant transactions** were conducted via UPI, amounting to **₹20.4 lakh crore**. This figure represents nearly **40% of India's Private Final Consumption Expenditure (PFCE)** for the quarter, a sharp increase from 24% just two years prior.
- In the **food and beverages sector**, households spent approximately **₹3.4 lakh crore** using UPI, which constituted around **17% of all person-to-merchant UPI transactions** and roughly **21% of total household expenditure** on these items during the April–June 2025 quarter. Beyond food, digital payments have expanded across a wide array of sectors, including utility bill payments, petrol purchases, clothing, pharmaceuticals, consumer electronics, personal grooming, and transport services. In fact, non-food related spending now accounts for around **two-thirds of all UPI person-to-merchant transfers**, reflecting a broad-based digitalisation of consumption.

Beyond Day-to-Day Spending

Digital payments are not limited to everyday consumption. In **July 2025**, households transferred **₹93,857 crore** to debt collection agencies, indicating significant use of digital platforms for **loan repayments**, many of which are likely tied to consumer credit. In the same month, **₹61,080 crore** was transferred to **security brokers and dealers**, reflecting growing household participation in **financial investments** via digital means. These trends point to a broader shift in financial behaviour, where households increasingly use digital payments for both consumption and asset allocation.

The Cash vs Digital Paradox

- Despite the explosive growth in digital transactions, **cash usage in India remains relatively high**, comparable to economies like Germany. Certain sectors continue to rely heavily on cash, particularly **land and gold purchases, election financing, and precautionary household savings**. These areas represent significant barriers to complete formalisation.
- However, recent trends suggest a **declining reliance on cash**. Events such as **demonetisation in 2016** and the **COVID-19 pandemic** in 2020–21 initially triggered a spike in household cash holdings. Yet, the post-pandemic period has seen a notable drop in cash's role. The share of currency in household financial savings fell from **12.5% in 2020–21 to 3.4% in 2023–24**. **ATM withdrawals** also declined, from **81 crore transactions worth ₹2.8 lakh crore in July 2019 to 44 crore transactions worth ₹2.3 lakh crore in July 2025**, even as the broader economy nearly **doubled in size**. Furthermore, the **currency-to-GDP ratio** decreased from **12.9% in March 2022 to 10.9% in March 2025**, suggesting improved monetary efficiency and lower dependence on physical cash.

Key Takeaways and Economic Implications

- The rise of UPI and other digital platforms signifies more than just a change in how people pay—it represents a major step forward in **financial inclusion and economic formalisation**. There is a visible shift in consumption behaviour, with households increasingly using digital methods for both routine expenses like food and utilities and non-routine financial activities such as loan servicing and investing.
- This transition is contributing to a **decline in the use of cash**, with implications for macroeconomic policy. A lower currency-to-GDP ratio improves **monetary policy transmission**, reduces leakages associated with the **black economy**, and enhances the transparency and traceability of transactions. Nevertheless, challenges remain. Cash continues to dominate in specific sectors like **real estate, gold transactions, and political funding**, which are often opaque and resistant to formalisation.
- **The Road Ahead**
- India appears to be approaching a critical **inflection point in its journey towards a less-cash economy**. The penetration of digital payments into both urban and rural markets, combined with ongoing efforts to formalise firms and workers, indicates that cash's role in the economy may decline even further.
- To support this transition, policy efforts must focus on **strengthening digital infrastructure**, particularly in **semi-urban and rural areas**, where connectivity and digital literacy may still be lacking. Additionally, robust **cybersecurity measures** are essential to build public trust in digital systems. Persistent challenges related to cash usage in **land purchases, gold trade, and political funding** also need targeted reforms, including better enforcement and policy transparency.

Conclusion

The expansion of digital payments, especially via platforms like UPI, is catalysing a deeper and more rapid **formalisation of the Indian economy**, particularly at the household level. As this transformation continues, it has the potential to reshape the economic landscape by reducing cash dependency, increasing financial inclusion, improving fiscal transparency, and enhancing the efficiency of India's monetary system. This shift marks a pivotal moment in India's evolution towards a digitally driven, formalised economic future.

Eight Border States, Just 0.13% of Exports: What India's Northeast Tells Us About Economic Geography

Context

- When the United States implemented a 25% tariff hike on Indian imports in August 2025, India's reaction followed a now-familiar pattern: quiet diplomacy, subdued language, and a conspicuous absence of reciprocal action. This restrained response was framed as yet another turbulent moment in the longstanding, complex relationship between Washington and New Delhi.
- However, beneath this diplomatic choreography lies something far more revealing. The episode did not merely highlight bilateral tensions; it exposed the underlying structural imbalances in India's own economic landscape, particularly its export geography.

Export Geography and Regional Disparities

- India's export economy is heavily skewed toward a handful of states. Gujarat, Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu, and Karnataka together account for over 70% of the country's merchandise exports, with Gujarat alone contributing more than 33%. This concentration is not incidental. It reflects decades of deliberate infrastructure investments, policy prioritisation, and political stability—factors that have entrenched these regions as industrial and trade powerhouses.
- In stark contrast, densely populated heartland states like Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, and Madhya Pradesh collectively contribute less than 5% of outbound trade. The unevenness in India's export economy is pronounced—and persistent.

The Systemic Exclusion of the Northeast

- Nowhere is this regional imbalance more stark than in the northeast. Despite comprising eight states and sharing over 5,400 kilometres of international borders, the region contributes a mere 0.13% to India's national exports. This is not the result of oversight—it is the outcome of systemic neglect.
- There are no operational trade corridors connecting the northeast to global markets. The region lacks the logistical infrastructure necessary to support trade volumes and is effectively absent from national trade policymaking processes. Key export-promotion initiatives—such as the Remission of Duties and Taxes on Exported Products (RoDTEP) and the Production-Linked Incentive (PLI) schemes—are largely implemented in western and southern industrial corridors, leaving the northeast untouched.
- Even the Directorate General of Foreign Trade's strategic export plan for 2024 omitted the region entirely. The absence sparked no national debate, as though such exclusion were routine, if not expected.
- The consequences are both symbolic and material. Assam, for example, which produces over half of India's total tea output, suffers from low value addition and an over-reliance on bulk CTC-grade auctioning, making it economically vulnerable despite its production volumes.

Borders That Block Instead of Bridge

- The northeast's position along international borders has become more of a hindrance than an advantage. What were once viewed as gateways—Zokhawthar in Mizoram and Moreh in Manipur—have deteriorated into militarised checkpoints rather than trade conduits. Following Myanmar's 2021 military coup, cross-border trade dwindled, and infrastructure investment stalled. The 2024 decision to scrap the Free Movement Regime further severed not just commerce, but long-standing social and economic ties among cross-border communities.
- These borders have failed to function as links to the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). Instead, they have become containment zones, more active with security personnel than with traders. Promised roads remain unrealised; customs offices are understaffed; and essential logistics facilities are nowhere to be found.

- In contrast, China continues to solidify its influence in northern Myanmar through hard infrastructure investments and political partnerships. While India speaks of its "Act East" policy, Beijing is already building its next supply chain node.

The Broader Picture: India Hesitates While Asia Moves

- This inertia is all the more glaring when viewed against the broader Asian context. Across Southeast Asia and China, governments are swiftly adapting to shifting global trade patterns by building new corridors, attracting capital, and restructuring supply chains. India, by comparison, focuses on negotiating trade agreements with Western economies while failing to connect its eastern frontier to the wider world.
- The continued reliance on colonial-era ports and legacy industrial clusters ignores the strategic necessity of geographic diversification. In neglecting to integrate the northeast into both national and regional trade ecosystems, India weakens its claim to leadership in the Indo-Pacific.

Reimagining the Path Forward: Building a Cohesive National Economy

- Though Trump-era-style tariffs are unlikely to singlehandedly derail India's economic trajectory, they do highlight a deeper fragility—namely, the overdependence on a few export-centric enclaves and the persistent sidelining of vast regions.
- True economic resilience demands a broader, more inclusive vision. A cohesive economy must distribute capacity, not concentrate it. It requires infrastructure that connects interior and peripheral regions—not just coastlines. Most critically, it demands a governance approach that understands geography as a strategic asset, rather than reducing it to electoral arithmetic.
- The northeast does not require more rhetorical gestures. It needs the basic tools of statecraft: well-maintained roads that lead to viable markets, trade policies that reflect its geographies, and institutional representation in bodies that shape the national economic agenda.
- For decades, the region has been asked to wait—through insurgencies, truces, and bureaucratic acronyms—while global trade networks transform around it. At this point, delay appears less like neglect and more like a deliberate design.

Conclusion

- India cannot credibly aspire to regional leadership while leaving its eastern flank economically fragile and politically marginalised. Tariffs may be temporary measures, but the structural exclusion of the northeast has long-term consequences. It undermines national cohesion and compromises the resilience of India's trade architecture.
- The very notion of economic strength must be redefined—not as the concentrated performance of a few coastal hubs, but as the collective ability of the entire nation to weather disruptions and engage with global markets. Until India brings the northeast into the economic fold, its strategic ambitions—particularly in the Indo-Pacific—will rest on unstable ground.

Stubble Burning, Air Pollution, and the Supreme Court's Suggestion

Introduction

In light of worsening air pollution across northern India, particularly during the winter months, the Supreme Court has recently proposed prosecuting farmers engaged in stubble burning, including the possibility of imprisonment. This suggestion aims to deter the practice, especially in pollution-prone regions such as Delhi-NCR, Punjab, Haryana, and Uttar Pradesh. However, such punitive measures have drawn criticism for being potentially unrealistic and lacking empathy for the socio-economic challenges farmers face. Stubble burning, while a key environmental concern, is deeply embedded in broader issues of agricultural practice, technological access, economic structures, legal frameworks, and social justice.

Understanding the Practice of Stubble Burning

Stubble burning refers to the deliberate setting of fire to leftover crop residue—mainly from paddy—after the harvest, in order to quickly clear fields for sowing the next crop, typically wheat. This practice is most prevalent in Punjab, Haryana, and western Uttar Pradesh, and peaks during October and November. Farmers resort to burning due to a narrow 15–20 day sowing window between kharif and rabi crops, compounded by the high cost and limited availability of alternative disposal methods. Technological options like the Happy Seeder are often prohibitively expensive and fuel-intensive. Moreover, crop diversification has remained limited, largely because state water policies and assured procurement through Minimum Support Prices (MSP) continue to incentivise paddy cultivation.

Judicial Perspective and Concerns

The Supreme Court observed that repeated directives and current institutional measures have failed to curb the problem. It suggested that prosecution and potential imprisonment of offenders could serve as a strong deterrent. However, past attempts at penalisation, including fines and arrests, have resulted in resentment and alienation among farmers. There is growing concern that criminalising a practice rooted in structural limitations might set a troubling precedent, effectively punishing individuals for actions tied to their livelihood and lack of viable alternatives.

Legal and Institutional Frameworks in Place

The current legal and institutional setup for tackling air pollution includes several components. The Commission for Air Quality Management (CAQM), established in 2020, holds the authority to issue directives for pollution control but has explicitly exempted farmers from criminal prosecution. The Air (Prevention and Control of Pollution) Act, 1981 provides for penalties against polluting activities, and the National Green Tribunal (NGT) has previously imposed fines for incidents of stubble burning. States like Punjab and Haryana have also enacted laws to restrict burning, but enforcement remains weak due to the scale of the issue and socio-political considerations.

Environmental Impact and Broader Pollution Landscape

Stubble burning significantly contributes to seasonal air pollution. According to estimates by SAFAR under the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change (MoEFCC), it accounts for 15–20% of PM_{2.5} levels in Delhi during the peak winter period. However, other sources—including vehicular emissions (approximately 40%), industrial activity, construction dust, and waste burning—constitute more persistent and year-round contributors. Many farmers have criticised the singular focus on their practices, pointing to a perceived “urban bias” in pollution discourse that overlooks the city-based sources responsible for a larger pollution footprint.

Technological Alternatives and Their Limitations

- Several technologies have been developed to provide alternatives to stubble burning. Machines such as the Happy Seeder and Super Seeder allow direct sowing of wheat into standing stubble, but their high costs and energy demands limit adoption. The Pusa Bio-Decomposer, developed by the Indian Agricultural Research Institute (IARI), offers a microbial solution that converts stubble into manure within 15–20 days, though uptake remains constrained due to logistical challenges.
- Ex-situ solutions—such as using crop residue in biomass power generation, bio-CNG production, paper and pulp industries, or packaging—have been slow to scale due to inadequate infrastructure and weak market linkages. In-situ management, which involves retaining stubble in the field to improve soil quality, also requires better dissemination, policy support, and sustained subsidies to become viable for small and marginal farmers.

Administrative and Policy Hurdles

Implementation gaps hinder progress. Subsidised machinery often remains idle or concentrated in the hands of large landholders, leading to inefficiencies and inequity. Coordination failures between central, state, and local governments also complicate enforcement and funding mechanisms. Additionally,

repeated advisories for crop diversification have failed to shift the agricultural landscape away from paddy, as MSP-backed procurement continues to reinforce its dominance.

Political and Governance Challenges

Recent farmer protests and agitations reflect the political sensitivity surrounding agricultural reforms and environmental regulations. Any attempt to criminalise stubble burning risks exacerbating the trust deficit between state institutions and the farming community. A punitive, top-down approach may also undermine the principles of cooperative federalism—especially given that agriculture is a state subject while pollution is a national concern. Policy responses must balance environmental urgency with socio-political realities.

Global Experiences and Lessons for India

International models offer relevant insights. In China, the government actively promotes the use of crop residue in biomass and biogas production, with extensive state support for collection and processing. In the European Union, policy encourages ploughing back residue into the soil, backed by subsidies under the Common Agricultural Policy. These examples highlight that punitive strategies alone are insufficient. Without affordable technologies, accessible finance, and strong market incentives, behavioural change at scale is unlikely.

A Constructive Path Forward

- A criminal justice approach to stubble burning risks deepening farmer alienation and should be avoided. Instead, the issue demands farmer-centric solutions rooted in long-term planning and cooperative implementation. Scaling up affordable technologies like the Pusa Decomposer, promoting mechanisation through Farmer Producer Organisations (FPOs) and cooperatives, and investing in bio-energy infrastructure can create sustainable alternatives. Direct economic incentives to farmers for managing residue effectively, along with expansion of schemes like the Crop Residue Management Fund, would provide immediate relief.
- Encouraging crop diversification—moving away from water-intensive paddy towards maize, millets, or pulses—requires aligning MSPs and procurement systems to support alternate crops. Urban areas, too, must be held accountable for year-round pollution through stricter enforcement and technological upgrades. Active community engagement through panchayats, FPOs, and NGOs is vital to building awareness and ensuring the success of grassroots initiatives. Integrating stubble management strategies into India's larger net-zero and circular economy goals will ensure a more sustainable and inclusive response.

Conclusion

While the Supreme Court's proposal to prosecute farmers engaging in stubble burning may appear as a strong deterrent, it risks alienating a vital stakeholder group whose actions are shaped by structural constraints, not intent to harm. Stubble burning is not merely a legal or environmental issue—it is a deeply intertwined socio-economic and policy challenge. Addressing it effectively requires a holistic, cooperative, and empathetic approach that prioritises technological innovation, economic support, institutional coordination, and above all, the inclusion of farmers as partners in the solution rather than subjects of punishment.

Strengthening Transparency through RTI

Introduction

The Right to Information (RTI) Act stands as one of India's most transformative democratic tools, aimed at ensuring transparency, accountability, and active citizen participation. Recently, the Supreme Court of India has underscored the urgent necessity to revitalise and reinforce the RTI framework, which has progressively weakened, diminishing its role as a watchdog mechanism in governance.

Background of the RTI Act

- **Purpose and Vision:** Enacted in 2005, the RTI Act was introduced to usher in an era of open governance. It envisioned an empowered citizenry capable of holding the government accountable by accessing information about public functions and decisions. At its core, the legislation aimed to deepen democratic engagement by ensuring transparency in administrative processes.
- **Key Features:** The RTI Act mandates public authorities to provide prompt and timely responses to queries filed by citizens. It also institutionalised oversight through the creation of Information Commissions at both central and state levels. Importantly, the Act prescribes penalties for unjustified delays or failures in providing requested information, thereby fostering compliance.
- **Impact:** Since its implementation, the RTI framework has become a powerful weapon in the fight against corruption and administrative arbitrariness. By exposing irregularities and empowering citizens to demand accountability, it has played a vital role in promoting responsible governance across sectors.

Supreme Court's Observations

- **Vacancies and Backlogs:** The Supreme Court recently highlighted critical deficiencies plaguing the Central Information Commission (CIC), noting that eight positions of Information Commissioners remain unfilled. Simultaneously, the backlog of unresolved appeals has surged beyond 23,000. Several state-level commissions are similarly paralysed, either dysfunctional or refusing to entertain new appeals.
- **Directives to the Government:** The Court directed the central government to submit an affidavit detailing a specific timeline for filling all existing vacancies. It stressed the need for swift and transparent appointments, asserting that delay in constituting functional commissions severely undermines the efficacy of the RTI framework.
- **Criticism of Government Apathy:** The Supreme Court strongly criticised the prevailing inaction, warning that the continued neglect of institutional vacancies renders the entire RTI mechanism ineffective. Without fully functioning oversight bodies, the statutory rights guaranteed under the Act become practically meaningless.

Issues Undermining the RTI Framework

- **Institutional Gaps:** A major concern is the persistent delay in filling key vacancies in Information Commissions, leading to mounting case backlogs. This erodes the credibility of the RTI mechanism and discourages public engagement.
- **Non-Compliance and Threats to Activists:** Government departments frequently delay or ignore RTI requests. Moreover, many RTI activists face harassment, threats, and even physical violence, which serves as a deterrent to information-seeking and undermines the spirit of the law.
- **Loss of Institutional Independence:** Recent amendments have significantly diluted the autonomy of the CIC and its counterparts, weakening their ability to function independently. Appointments are increasingly dominated by retired bureaucrats, sidelining candidates from civil society, academia, and legal backgrounds who could bring diverse perspectives and greater independence.

Role of RTI in a Democratic Society

The RTI Act embodies the principles of transparency and citizen oversight in a democracy. It enables individuals to monitor government functioning, making it a powerful tool to combat corruption and misuse of authority. By promoting open access to information, the Act reinforces the participatory nature of governance and helps bridge the gap between the state and its citizens.

Global Best Practices and Lessons for India

Countries across the world offer successful models of information laws and institutional frameworks that India can learn from.

- The **United States' Freedom of Information Act (1966)** enforces a strict 20-day response period and allows for judicial review of denials.
- **Brazil's Access to Information Law (2011)** mandates fixed timelines for response (5–20 days) and penalises non-compliant officials.
- **Norway** ensures diversity in its oversight bodies by including civil society members and academics.
- **Sweden** promotes awareness of transparency laws through public campaigns and educational programs in schools.
- In the **United States**, annual FOIA reports ensure that data on requests and responses are publicly available, enhancing institutional accountability.

From these models, India can adopt a number of improvements:

- Establish more autonomous and representative information commissions, as seen in the **UK and Mexico**.
- Promote proactive disclosure of essential data, following the examples of **Chile and New Zealand**.
- Enforce strict deadlines and apply meaningful penalties for delays, similar to **Brazil and the US**.
- Launch public awareness drives, as practiced effectively in **Sweden and South Africa**, to encourage wider use of RTI.
- **Way Forward**

To revitalise the RTI framework, a comprehensive reform agenda is essential:

- **Filling Vacancies:** The government must expedite transparent and merit-based appointments to Information Commissions, ensuring representation from legal, journalistic, academic, and civil society backgrounds.
- **Improving Efficiency:** There should be full digitisation of the RTI filing and tracking process. Strong technological tools must be adopted to monitor processing times and prevent delays.
- **Protecting Activists:** Activists require legal safeguards. The enactment and enforcement of comprehensive **Whistleblower Protection** laws is necessary to shield them from intimidation and violence.
- **Restoring Autonomy:** Amendments that have compromised the independence of Information Commissions should be revisited and reversed to re-establish their credibility and functional integrity.
- **Expanding Awareness:** Citizens must be made aware of their RTI rights through sustained public outreach and education. Grassroots campaigns can enhance local engagement and participation.

Conclusion

The recent intervention by the Supreme Court presents an opportunity to breathe new life into India's RTI regime. However, long-term progress hinges on committed political will and robust institutional reform. Transparency is not merely a statutory entitlement; it is a cornerstone of democracy. Revitalising the RTI framework is essential for preserving India's participatory character and ensuring that governance remains accountable to the people it serves.

The Turmoil in Kathmandu and the Road Ahead for Nepal

Contextual Overview

- The political upheaval in Nepal following the Gen Z-led protests of September 2025 marks a significant inflection point in the region's democratic trajectory. Unlike earlier movements in

Nepal, which were primarily orchestrated by political parties, this wave of dissent was driven by the country's younger generation. Frustrated by systemic corruption, entrenched elite control, and a stagnating economy that offers limited opportunities, this generation mobilised independently of traditional power structures.

- The resignation of Prime Minister K.P. Sharma Oli, the swearing-in of former Chief Justice Sushila Karki as interim Prime Minister, and the dissolution of parliament have exposed both the fragility and resilience of Nepal's democratic framework. When viewed against the broader canvas of regional unrest in South Asia throughout the 2020s, Nepal's transition reflects deeper trends: a generational shift, institutional fragility, and a widening crisis of political legitimacy.

A Region in Flux: Turbulence Across South Asia

Nepal's political turmoil is part of a wider pattern of instability that has affected much of South Asia over the past decade. In 2021, Myanmar witnessed a return to military rule; the same year, Afghanistan fell once more under Taliban control. Sri Lanka's 2022 Aragalaya protests led to the ousting of President Gotabaya Rajapaksa, while in 2023, mass unrest erupted in Pakistan following the arrest of Imran Khan. In Bangladesh, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina was forced to step down in 2024 under intense public pressure. Though the precise causes of these crises differ, they are bound by shared threads: rising youth dissatisfaction, chronic unemployment among the younger demographic, and entrenched political elites resistant to reform. Myanmar and Pakistan remain largely under military dominance, Afghanistan continues to struggle with the legacy of failed foreign interventions, and Sri Lanka and Bangladesh have long been governed by dynastic politics. In every case, however, youth movements have emerged as powerful agents of change, challenging authoritarian structures, systemic corruption, and political stagnation.

Nepal's Distinctive Trajectory

- Despite sharing regional parallels, Nepal's political evolution is marked by unique characteristics. The 1990 Jan Aandolan curtailed royal power and ushered in a multi-party democratic system, laying the foundation for political pluralism. However, since the adoption of the 2015 constitution, Nepal has experienced seven different governments—an apparent instability that has nonetheless featured a recurring cast of political actors.
- Figures such as Oli, Prachanda, and Sher Bahadur Deuba have cycled through positions of power, embedding a culture of political inertia and corruption that has obstructed economic progress. The Maoist insurgency (1996–2006) and its eventual resolution transformed Nepal into a federal republic in 2008, yet the aspirations for inclusive, accountable governance remain largely unfulfilled. The protests of 2025 do not merely signal opposition to a particular administration; they reflect a profound rejection of an entire political establishment perceived as unresponsive, unaccountable, and self-serving.

Interim Government: Cautious Optimism Amid Challenges

- The military's role in facilitating negotiations and ensuring public order, along with President Ramchandra Paudel's dependence on army mediation, underscores the tenuous grip of civilian authority in this transitional moment. The appointment of Sushila Karki as interim Prime Minister represents a cautious step toward stabilisation. Her administration has outlined three principal objectives: conducting general elections scheduled for March 5, 2026; initiating inquiries into police brutality and protest-related violence; and launching investigations into systemic corruption.
- However, these goals are laden with complexity. Nepal's judicial infrastructure is ill-equipped to support expedited legal proceedings, while the infiltration of protests by politically affiliated gangs further clouds the path to accountability. More broadly, proposals for constitutional amendments—including the potential elimination of federalism or alterations to proportional

representation—threaten to unravel the delicate post-2006 consensus. Such changes risk marginalising ethnic and regional groups like the Madhesis, Janjatis, and Tharus, potentially reigniting long-dormant ethnic tensions.

Youth, Democracy, and the Legitimacy Crisis

- At the core of Nepal's democratic crisis lies a stark generational divide. With youth unemployment exceeding 20%, frustration is mounting against a political elite widely seen as benefiting from patronage networks while neglecting substantive reform. The Gen Z-led protests are not merely expressions of discontent but also indicators of a collective desire for new political paradigms. The central challenge now lies in whether this emerging movement can evolve into structured political formations capable of navigating governance.
- The forthcoming elections present both an opening and a risk. Established parties require time—and willingness—to undergo internal reform, something that veteran leaders may actively resist. Simultaneously, new youth-led movements may find themselves hampered by inexperience and organisational limitations. There is also the possibility that pro-monarchy factions might exploit the prevailing disillusionment for their own agenda. Thus, the March 2026 elections will serve as a pivotal test of whether Nepal can transition from protest-driven activism to meaningful democratic renewal.

India's Stance and Broader Regional Consequences

India, historically accused of exerting undue influence in Nepal's internal affairs, has adopted a measured approach in the wake of recent events. Prime Minister Narendra Modi's congratulatory message to interim leader Sushila Karki has been interpreted as a gesture of support devoid of overt interference. Given the growing turbulence across the region, a stable Nepal is very much in India's strategic interest. Should the electoral process proceed peacefully and transparently, Nepal could emerge as a rare example of democratic resilience at a time when much of South Asia appears to be drifting toward authoritarianism or political dysfunction.

Conclusion: Between Promise and Peril

Nepal's current transitional moment captures both the risks and potential of generational change in South Asia. The Gen Z protests have succeeded in disrupting the entrenched monopoly of established elites, but the harder task lies ahead—translating popular discontent into structural reform without destabilising the fragile democratic consensus forged since the end of the monarchy. The general elections scheduled for March 2026 are of critical importance. If conducted with integrity and broad participation, they could herald a new era of accountable and inclusive governance. However, if they are marred by political opportunism, institutional decay, or ill-conceived constitutional experimentation, Nepal risks falling back into the cyclical instability that has plagued its modern political history.

Shaping the Next Chapter of the Indian Story

Context

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's leadership is frequently admired for its charisma and organizational acumen. However, beyond the surface spectacle lies a less visible yet more profound attribute—an ethic rooted in discipline, thorough preparation, and systemic thinking. This sense of professionalism, cultivated over years of public service both as the Chief Minister of Gujarat and as the Prime Minister of India, forms the backbone of his governance philosophy. Modi's leadership is marked not by rhetorical flair but by a persistent commitment to action, inclusivity, and institution-building. His policy choices and personal habits alike reflect this emphasis on execution over symbolism.

Modi's Approach to Governance

Vision Anchored in Duty

- What distinguishes Modi is not only his capacity to galvanize public imagination but his ability to translate vision into functional systems. His work ethic is underscored by meticulous preparation—anecdotes of meetings often reveal hours of study and research preceding even routine discussions. This discipline signals a broader governing principle: that governance should be judged not by grand gestures but by outcomes that materially improve citizens' lives.
- His Independence Day address exemplified this ethic, serving less as a ceremonial speech and more as a strategic charter. It called upon citizens, scientists, states, and start-ups to contribute to the realization of *Viksit Bharat*—a vision of a developed India. The focus was sharply defined, targeting areas such as deep technology, clean energy, and resilient supply chains, with *Jan Bhagidari* (people's participation) highlighted as the core method of implementation.

Policy as a Living Instrument

- A hallmark of Modi's governance model is the treatment of policy as dynamic and responsive rather than rigid or static. The reform of the Goods and Services Tax (GST) is illustrative of this philosophy. Through rationalization of tax slabs and reduction of procedural bottlenecks, the GST was streamlined to ease compliance for small businesses and deliver quicker benefits to consumers.
- This reform was not driven by abstract fiscal theorizing but by a practical focus on the lived experiences of traders and ordinary citizens. The implementation process reflects the spirit of cooperative federalism, particularly through the GST Council's continuous dialogue between the Centre and the states. In this vision, policy becomes a living mechanism—attuned to economic shifts, responsive to real-world feedback, and structured for practical effectiveness rather than static uniformity.

Citizen-Centric Systems

- Arguably, one of the most transformative aspects of Modi's governance has been the establishment of citizen-empowering systems at scale. The integrated framework of digital identity (Aadhaar), universal bank accounts, and real-time payment infrastructure has redefined inclusion by embedding it directly into the nation's core systems. This triad ensures that welfare benefits reach verified recipients efficiently, minimizing leakages and enhancing reliability—especially for small businesses and economically vulnerable groups.
- Decision-making is increasingly data-driven, replacing anecdotal governance with evidence-based strategies. The philosophy of *Antyodaya*—the upliftment of the last person—functions as more than a rhetorical device; it operates as a litmus test for every initiative that crosses the Prime Minister's desk. A poignant example of this citizen-first approach was evident during the inauguration of India's first bamboo-based 2G ethanol plant in Assam, a project that symbolized inclusive growth rooted in local opportunity.

Clarity in Economic and Strategic Statecraft

This ethic of clarity and focus is equally evident in India's external engagements. In the realm of energy diplomacy, India has pursued a strategy of supplier diversification, ensuring both affordability and stability amid global market volatility. International negotiations have been guided by a singular and unambiguous brief: secure supplies, safeguard consumer interests, and uphold national priorities. A similar clarity underpins India's national security posture. Whether through counter-terror operations or broader strategic decisions, the government has favored precision, operational autonomy for security forces, and a commitment to civilian safety—eschewing performative dramatics in favor of quiet, resolute action. The governing principle remains unchanged: results outweigh rhetoric.

A Distinctive Work Culture

- At the heart of these decisions is a unique work culture that emphasizes rigor, accountability, and respect. Modi fosters an environment where thorough preparation is expected, and

discussions are adjudicated not by volume but by the strength of argument. Responsibility is clearly delineated, and follow-through is unrelenting. There is no tolerance for drift or indecision; performance is tracked against well-defined metrics.

- This culture supports a deeper institutional philosophy—one where nation-building is about enduring platforms and standards, not fleeting spectacles or symbolic monuments. It is no coincidence that Modi's birthday falls on *Vishwakarma Jayanti*, a symbolic alignment that reinforces the message: the true legacy of leadership lies in the construction of robust institutions, not statues. For the average citizen, this work ethic translates into accessible and efficient public services. For businesses, it provides clarity and policy stability. For the state, it ensures the resilience and adaptability of its systems under pressure.

Conclusion

Prime Minister Modi's leadership stands as a testament to the power of disciplined governance, rooted in meticulous preparation and a deep-seated commitment to citizen-centric development. His administration has consistently prioritized inclusion through infrastructure, treated policy as a flexible tool, and fostered a culture of diligence and accountability. By focusing on institution-building rather than ephemeral symbols, Modi is not merely governing the present moment but laying the groundwork for India's next chapter—a future defined by resilience, participation, and systemic strength.

China's WTO Concession and Its Implications for India

- In a significant development for global trade, China announced at the United Nations General Assembly that it will no longer seek Special and Differential Treatment (SDT) in future negotiations at the World Trade Organization (WTO). This declaration marks a strategic shift in global trade dynamics and occurs amid escalating pressure from the United States, including new tariff impositions and persistent accusations that China has been exploiting the SDT framework to maintain competitive advantages.
- This move holds particular significance for India, a country that continues to rely extensively on SDT provisions to protect its agricultural interests and ensure social welfare outcomes. India's continued dependence on these flexibilities underscores the complexities of global trade reform, especially for developing economies navigating structural inequalities.

Understanding SDT and China's Calculated Move:

- Special and Differential Treatment (SDT) within WTO agreements refers to a set of provisions that afford developing countries and Least-Developed Countries (LDCs) preferential treatment. These measures include extended implementation timelines, preferential market access, and capacity-building support designed to integrate these nations more equitably into the global trading system. The rationale behind SDT lies in acknowledging the disparate economic capacities between developed and developing countries, thereby aiming to create a more balanced trading framework.
- China's recent move, while seemingly progressive, is better viewed as a tactical retreat. Although Beijing has renounced future SDT claims, it retains its self-designation as a developing country and continues to benefit from all existing advantages, such as relaxed subsidy limits. The WTO welcomed the decision as a breakthrough in institutional reform. However, critics argue that the gesture is largely symbolic, serving more to appease geopolitical adversaries than to effect meaningful change in China's economic posture. By preserving its core benefits while reducing external scrutiny, China may have effectively sidestepped substantive reform.

Implications for India:

- India now faces intensified external pressures. Under the Trump administration, the United States imposed a fresh round of 100% tariffs on a range of Indian exports, including branded

and patented pharmaceuticals, and expanded duties on furniture, kitchen cabinets, and trucks. Simultaneously, there are growing international demands for India to forgo its developing country status, reflecting perceptions that its expanding economy no longer justifies its current SDT entitlements.

- Yet India's reliance on SDT is deep-rooted and critical. Originating from the legacy of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), SDT provisions enable India to maintain higher tariffs and longer compliance timelines, vital for protecting its vulnerable population. With a global ranking of 136th in per capita income, India still faces significant developmental hurdles that SDT helps to address.

Agriculture at the Heart of the Debate:

- Agriculture remains central to India's economy and social stability, employing approximately half of the nation's workforce and forming the bedrock of food security for 1.4 billion citizens. Under the WTO's Agreement on Agriculture (AoA), developing nations face a cap of 10% of production value for trade-distorting subsidies—compared to a 5% limit for developed countries. India leverages Article 6.2 exemptions to provide input subsidies to small and marginal farmers, disbursing more than \$40 billion annually through instruments such as Minimum Support Prices (MSP) for rice and wheat.
- This subsidy regime underpins the Public Distribution System (PDS), which delivers subsidised food grains to approximately 800 million beneficiaries. However, India's use of outdated 1986–88 reference prices inflates its Aggregate Measurement of Support (AMS), often pushing it above the permitted threshold and inviting criticism from the US and Cairns Group members for allegedly distorting markets.
- This critique, however, reveals a stark double standard. Developed countries, according to OECD estimates, collectively dispensed \$850 billion in farm subsidies in 2023 alone, often cloaked under Green Box provisions for research and environmental protection. These practices allow them to shield their own programmes from scrutiny while targeting developing nations for similar actions.

Risks Associated with Forced Graduation from SDT:

If India is compelled to relinquish SDT benefits, the repercussions could be severe. A phased reduction in AMS could result in subsidy cuts of 20–30% over a decade, potentially triggering a 10–15% decline in rural incomes and increasing volatility in food prices. Such developments could worsen malnutrition, which already affects 35% of Indian children under five, and undermine legislative guarantees under the National Food Security Act. Recent WTO rulings, such as the 2023 panel on Indian sugar subsidies, have exposed India's vulnerability in this evolving trade landscape.

Strategic Options Available to India:

India must craft a multi-pronged strategy to navigate this complex scenario.

- In agriculture, India should take a leadership role within the G33 coalition to push for an extension of the 2013 Bali Ministerial's "peace clause" on public stockholding, aiming to secure protections for MSP and PDS mechanisms through 2030. Simultaneously, it can gradually shift certain input subsidies into Green Box categories, such as investments in agricultural research or climate-resilient crop development. Updating the AoA reference prices to align with present market realities should also be a priority.
- In the digital sphere, India should engage in plurilateral e-commerce negotiations, making strategic offers on consumer protection and cross-border data flow in exchange for tariff-free access to developed markets. Expansion of the Open Network for Digital Commerce (ONDC) can empower Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) to access global platforms, reducing dependency on traditional SDT tariff protections. Furthermore, India could propose a system of

tiered data regulation at the WTO level, advocating for longer compliance timelines for developing nations. This would help protect India's Personal Data Protection Act while encouraging global integration.

- On the broader SDT front, India should consider a selective phase-out of concessions in non-core sectors to enhance global market access, while preserving critical exemptions for agriculture and other vulnerable domains. Green Box funding could be deployed to expand cold storage infrastructure and food processing capabilities, thereby bolstering export potential.
- In the area of intellectual property rights, India must retain crucial flexibilities under the TRIPS Agreement—especially compulsory licensing and opposition to excessive patents—citing the healthcare needs of its 1.4 billion citizens, a position supported by the Doha Declaration of 2001. For non-essential sectors, India can offer phased alignment with stricter IP regimes to extract concessions in strategically important areas. At the same time, India should enhance public funding for biotechnology innovation, reducing its over-reliance on generic drug exports while preserving affordable access for low-income populations.
- India should also spearhead efforts to reform the global SDT framework itself. Proposals for a tiered system based on per capita GDP or sectoral competitiveness could allow India to retain critical protections in agriculture while participating more fully in other areas of trade liberalisation.

Conclusion:

- As international pressure mounts for India to reduce its dependence on SDT, the country must carefully balance external expectations with its internal developmental realities. An abrupt withdrawal from SDT benefits would be economically and socially destabilising. Despite its growing economic stature, India's structural challenges—agrarian dependence, widespread poverty, and nutritional insecurity—necessitate a calibrated transition.
- India's dominance in services, which contributes 55% of GDP, offers it strategic leverage in trade negotiations. Domestic policy innovations such as Direct Benefit Transfers (DBT), which now cover 90% of fertiliser subsidies, signal a willingness to reform without compromising core priorities.
- Ultimately, India must not merely resist the changing global trade architecture but work to shape it. By positioning itself as a responsible middle power that champions both growth and equity, India can help craft a WTO reform agenda that is inclusive, fair, and sustainable.

What an Empty Plate of Food Should Represent

- Each year on September 29, the world observes the International Day of Awareness of Food Loss and Waste (IDAFWL). Far from being a symbolic gesture, this day highlights an ongoing crisis that silently threatens both global food security and climate resilience.
- An estimated one-third of all food produced globally is either lost or wasted. This not only reflects a failure to feed millions but also represents a massive squandering of essential natural resources such as water, energy, and land. For a country like India, one of the world's leading food producers, the challenge is especially acute. Post-harvest losses inflict substantial economic, social, and environmental damage, underscoring the urgency for targeted interventions.

Magnitude of the Challenge:

- India's agricultural landscape is plagued by considerable post-harvest losses spanning a wide range of crops and livestock products. According to a 2022 report by NABCONS, these losses remain unacceptably high across categories, including fruits, vegetables, cereals, and animal products. The cumulative economic impact is staggering—estimated at nearly ₹1.5 trillion annually, which corresponds to 3.7% of the country's agricultural GDP.
- Perishables such as fruits and vegetables suffer spoilage rates of 10–15%, while staple grains like wheat and paddy are also significantly affected, with loss rates of 4.2% and 4.8% respectively. These statistics go beyond simple numbers—they represent lost nutrition and wasted effort. Each tonne of discarded food embodies misused water, labour, energy, and capital. When extrapolated across India's enormous production volumes, the national implications are profound, directly affecting farmer earnings, food availability, and the broader environmental equilibrium.

Linking Food Loss to Climate Disruption:

- Recent joint research conducted by the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and the National Institute of Food Technology Entrepreneurship and Management (NIFTEM), supported by the Green Climate Fund, has quantified the environmental impact of food loss in India. By analysing 30 key crop and livestock categories, the study revealed that even relatively minor losses in cereals—particularly methane-emitting paddy—generate more than 10 million tonnes of carbon dioxide-equivalent emissions each year.
- The environmental cost is even higher for animal products, given their intense resource requirements. Altogether, food losses in India are responsible for over 33 million tonnes of CO₂-equivalent emissions annually. Unlike in high-income nations, where food waste tends to occur at the consumer level, India's losses predominantly take place earlier in the supply chain—during harvesting, handling, processing, and distribution. This points to a systemic failure driven by inadequate infrastructure, inefficient logistics, and limited use of modern technologies.

Strategies for Mitigation:

Strengthening Physical Infrastructure:

- Although the scale of the problem is vast, the solutions are attainable. Enhancing infrastructure is fundamental to addressing food loss. Developing robust cold chains—which include pre-cooling systems, refrigerated transport, and modern storage facilities—is crucial for preserving perishable items such as dairy, meat, fruits, and vegetables.
- Efforts like the Pradhan Mantri Kisan SAMPADA Yojana (PMKSY) are already playing a role in modernising food logistics across India. However, scaling these initiatives further is imperative for reducing losses at key stages of the supply chain.

Leveraging Low-Cost, Localised Technologies:

- Beyond high-end infrastructure, practical, decentralised technologies offer promising solutions for India's smallholder farmers. Solar-powered cold storage units, cost-effective cooling chambers, durable crates, and moisture-resistant silos are essential tools that can significantly cut down spoilage.
- Equally important are digital tools. Internet of Things (IoT) devices, AI-driven demand forecasting systems, and mobile platforms like the FAO's Food Loss App (FLAPP)—launched in 2023 and already in use across more than 30 countries—enable better monitoring and mitigation of food losses throughout the supply chain.

Redistribution and Circular Solutions:

- At the consumer and retail levels, excess food can be channelled to food banks and community kitchens, ensuring that surplus food serves a nutritional purpose. Even food that cannot be consumed need not go to waste. It can be repurposed as compost, animal feed, or even converted into bioenergy.
- Implementing these circular economy solutions, however, demands supportive policy frameworks, including subsidies, credit access, and incentives to encourage private sector participation. Policy alignment and institutional coordination are essential to make these models sustainable and scalable.

A Shared Responsibility Across Sectors:

Addressing food loss requires collective action. Governments must integrate food loss reduction into national climate strategies and invest in resilient supply chains and storage systems. Businesses need to adopt circular economy principles and drive innovation in food preservation and distribution. Civil society, academia, and non-profits play a crucial role in research, public education, and grassroots mobilisation. At the same time, individual consumers must cultivate responsible habits—such as reducing plate waste and supporting food recovery initiatives—to complement systemic change.

Conclusion:

- The annual observance of IDAFLW serves not just as a commemorative date but as a powerful call for coordinated, sustained action. For India, mitigating food loss is not just a moral or nutritional imperative; it is also central to achieving climate goals and conserving overstretched natural resources.
- Each plate of food saved contributes not only to human sustenance but also to ecological balance and rural livelihoods. In this context, an empty plate should never be a symbol of waste—it should represent food that has been effectively used, shared for nourishment, and preserved through responsible action. The challenge ahead is formidable, but with the right policies, technologies, and public will, it is one that India is well-positioned to overcome.

An Anti-Terror Role That Defies Logic

Contextual Overview

The global campaign against terrorism is often depicted as a coordinated and principled effort, led by international institutions such as the United Nations (UN). However, recent developments have revealed a jarring contradiction that threatens the very credibility of this framework. Pakistan—a nation long accused of fostering and sheltering terrorist organisations—has been granted leadership roles within UN committees specifically mandated to counter terrorism. This appointment not only calls into question the integrity of the UN but also carries significant implications for regional stability and global security.

Pakistan's Deep-Rooted Terror Infrastructure

- For decades, Pakistan has been repeatedly accused of using terrorism as an instrument of state policy. Its role in harbouring and supporting extremist groups is extensively documented. Perhaps the most symbolic example remains the discovery of Osama bin Laden in Abbottabad, located just a short distance from Pakistan's military academy. Beyond this, Pakistan has provided direct support to groups such as Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) and Jaish-e-Mohammad (JeM), both of which are involved in repeated cross-border attacks.
- Notable incidents underscore this pattern. The 2008 Mumbai attacks, the Pulwama bombing in 2019, and the Pahalgam attack in April 2025 all point to a sustained campaign of terrorism emanating from Pakistani soil. India's response to the latest attack—Operation Sindoor—highlighted the depth of this entrenched infrastructure. Evidence of state complicity is reinforced by the attendance of Pakistani officials at the funerals of militants and the continued public influence of UN-designated terrorists like Hafiz Saeed, who remains politically active despite formal claims of imprisonment. These developments solidify Pakistan's reputation as a persistent enabler of terrorism rather than a state committed to its eradication.

The UN's Paradoxical Appointments

- In stark contradiction to its own mandates, the United Nations has elevated Pakistan to prominent positions within its counter-terrorism apparatus. In June 2025, Pakistan was appointed chair of the Taliban Sanctions Committee and vice-chair of the Counter-Terrorism Committee. The following month, it assumed the rotating presidency of the UN Security Council. These decisions are reminiscent of previous controversies, such as Libya chairing the Human Rights Commission and Saudi Arabia leading the Women's Rights Commission—instances where political appointments undermined institutional integrity.
- Four core issues arise from this dissonance. First, Pakistan's actions directly contradict the objectives of the committees it now leads, thereby eroding the very purpose of these institutions. Second, the weak standards of vetting are evident in Pakistan's removal from the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) grey list in 2022, despite ongoing concerns about its role in terror financing. Third, geopolitical self-interest—especially among powerful states—continues to eclipse moral imperatives, enabling such appointments in the name of strategic convenience. Fourth, these actions set a dangerous precedent by rewarding duplicity and conveying that diplomatic branding can outweigh actual conduct on the ground.
- These contradictions were further magnified when, in May 2025, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) approved a \$1 billion loan to Pakistan. This move raised concerns that international financial assistance could inadvertently be diverted to sustain the very terror networks the UN is tasked with dismantling.

Implications for India and Global Security

- The elevation of Pakistan within UN counter-terror bodies severely undermines India's longstanding efforts to expose Pakistan as a state sponsor of terrorism. With new institutional clout, Pakistan is now in a position to reshape global narratives, deflect accusations, and potentially block or weaken sanctions aimed at its proxy networks. It also gains a strategic advantage in influencing international engagement with the Taliban regime, while simultaneously projecting itself as a responsible and cooperative global actor.
- For India, the challenge is both strategic and diplomatic. It must navigate Pakistan's institutional leverage within the UN while maintaining pressure through bilateral and multilateral channels. This requires actively engaging with key members of the UN Security Council to counterbalance Pakistan's influence and continually spotlighting Pakistan's links to terrorism in international forums. Strengthening diplomatic ties with Afghanistan, particularly through humanitarian and developmental initiatives, may help reduce Pakistan's leverage over the Taliban. Additionally, India must lead a global information campaign involving media outlets, academic institutions, and diaspora communities to expose Pakistan's duplicity and demand accountability. On the security front, enhancing intelligence, cyber-defence, and surveillance capabilities is critical to counter asymmetric threats exacerbated by this geopolitical shift.

The UN's Eroding Credibility

- The UN's decision to entrust Pakistan with leadership roles in counter-terrorism efforts reflects a deeper institutional crisis. By overlooking Pakistan's well-documented ties to terrorism, the UN risks not only damaging its credibility but also alienating nations and individuals who have been victims of extremist violence. More fundamentally, it undermines the moral foundation upon which international governance is supposed to stand.
- This situation is emblematic of a broader malaise within global institutions: a selective morality where political expediency often trumps ethical coherence. When strategic alignments dictate appointments, irrespective of conduct, the legitimacy of those institutions begins to erode. Victims of terrorism are left disillusioned, while state sponsors of terror are effectively legitimised and emboldened.

Conclusion: The Global Stakes of UN Complicity

- Pakistan's ascent to leadership within the UN's counter-terrorism framework exemplifies the growing chasm between rhetoric and reality in international governance. For India, the immediate task is to resist this diplomatic manoeuvre and continue pressing the global community to acknowledge the security threat such decisions represent. However, the stakes extend well beyond the India-Pakistan equation.
- This is ultimately a test of the UN's ability to serve as a credible, impartial institution in the global fight against terrorism. If state sponsors of extremism are permitted to shape the very mechanisms designed to combat terror, then the world risks normalising what it should be trying to eliminate. In such a scenario, extremism is not merely tolerated—it is tacitly legitimised, with potentially catastrophic consequences for global peace and security.

The High Seas Treaty under UNCLOS: A Milestone in Ocean Governance

Introduction

Covering approximately 70% of the Earth's surface, the oceans play a vital role in planetary health and human survival. Yet, governance mechanisms for areas beyond national jurisdictions have historically remained inadequate and fragmented. Addressing this longstanding gap, the High Seas Treaty—officially titled *The Agreement under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) on the Conservation and Sustainable Use of Marine Biological Diversity of Areas Beyond National Jurisdiction (BBNJ)*—was finalised in March 2023. It is set to enter into force in January 2026, following its ratification by Morocco, the 60th country to do so. Environmental advocates have hailed this development as a “once-in-a-generation conservation event,” as it establishes a legal framework for safeguarding biodiversity in international waters, which comprise nearly two-thirds of the world's oceans.

Historical Background

The foundational legal structure for global ocean governance was laid by UNCLOS in 1982, which outlined principles for maritime use but left key areas, particularly biodiversity in regions beyond national jurisdiction, insufficiently addressed. Beginning in 2004, international negotiations on ocean conservation, benefit-sharing, and governance frameworks stretched over two decades. After intense deliberations, UN member states reached a consensus on the treaty in 2023. The treaty will become binding international law in 2026, having reached the ratification threshold of 60 nations by 2025.

Key Features of the Treaty

- A central element of the treaty is the formal establishment of **Marine Protected Areas (MPAs)** in the high seas, contributing directly to the global 30×30 conservation target—protecting 30% of the world's oceans by 2030. The treaty also mandates **Environmental Impact Assessments (EIAs)** for activities under national jurisdiction that may impact high seas biodiversity, ensuring accountability even beyond borders.
- It provides a comprehensive structure for the **sustainable use of marine genetic resources**, which hold immense value for biotechnology, pharmaceuticals, and scientific innovation. Crucially, the treaty supports **technology transfer and funding** mechanisms, encouraging developed nations to assist developing countries through financial resources, capacity-building, and scientific knowledge.
- The treaty also addresses **deep-sea mining and geo-engineering**, placing restrictions until robust regulatory systems are developed by the International Seabed Authority (ISA). All decision-making under the treaty will be multilateral, facilitated by **Conferences of Parties (CoPs)**, emphasizing global consensus over unilateral actions. Notably, the treaty lacks a punitive enforcement framework, instead relying on the cooperative goodwill and domestic regulation of individual states.

Significance of the Treaty

- The treaty is vital for **environmental conservation**, offering protection to fragile deep-sea ecosystems such as hydrothermal vents, coral reefs, and migratory species corridors. It seeks to combat escalating threats like plastic pollution, overfishing, unregulated deep-sea mining, and geo-engineering experiments.
- Its importance is underscored by its connection to **climate change**, as oceans absorb approximately 25% of anthropogenic CO₂ and 90% of excess heat from global warming. Protecting high seas biodiversity thus becomes integral to broader climate mitigation efforts.

- The treaty also promotes **scientific collaboration**, enabling joint research, data sharing, and equitable access to marine knowledge, particularly aiding developing nations with limited marine research infrastructure.
- From a justice perspective, it addresses the **global commons and equity challenge**, aiming to prevent the “tragedy of the commons” where a few nations disproportionately exploit shared resources. The treaty emphasizes **equitable benefit-sharing** from marine genetic resources, echoing principles from the Nagoya Protocol on biodiversity.

Challenges and Limitations

- Despite its promise, the treaty faces significant implementation hurdles. One major obstacle is the **ratification gap**, with key nations such as India (which has signed but not yet ratified) and the United States (which remains inconsistent in its policy approach) yet to fully commit. Among G7 nations, only France has ratified the treaty thus far.
- The **enforcement weakness** is another concern. In the absence of punitive mechanisms, the treaty depends entirely on the willingness of national governments to ensure compliance. Moreover, **conflicts of interest** arise as conservation goals often clash with economic pursuits like industrial fishing, deep-sea mineral extraction, and experimental geo-engineering.
- The treaty also reveals a persistent **North-South divide**. Developing countries continue to demand greater financial and technological support to meet treaty obligations, while developed nations show reluctance in sharing proprietary resources or offering financial aid. Furthermore, **institutional overlap** with existing bodies such as the International Maritime Organization (IMO), FAO, and ISA risks creating regulatory confusion and duplication.

India's Position

India has signed the treaty but has not yet ratified it, citing the need for enabling domestic legislation to be passed in Parliament. With over 7,500 kilometers of coastline and an ambitious “Blue Economy” agenda, India has a significant stake in the treaty's success. However, it must carefully navigate between its economic interests—such as deep-sea mining, fishing, and ocean exploration—and its obligations toward marine biodiversity conservation. The treaty presents India with an opportunity to lead globally in ocean governance, provided it harmonises its development aspirations with environmental responsibility.

Global Geopolitical Context

- Globally, positions on the treaty reflect diverse national interests. The **United States** signed the treaty under President Joe Biden but faces complications due to its historic refusal to ratify UNCLOS itself. This undermines its ability to engage fully with the High Seas Treaty framework. In contrast, the **European Union** has emerged as a strong supporter, aligning the treaty with its Green Deal and broader ocean governance initiatives.
- **China** has approached the treaty with caution, prioritizing its deep-sea mining ambitions while resisting firm commitments on resource-sharing. **Small Island Developing States (SIDS)**, which are most vulnerable to ocean degradation and climate change, have emerged as some of the treaty's most vocal advocates, seeing healthy oceans as crucial to their very survival.

Linkages with Other Global Agendas

The treaty closely aligns with multiple international frameworks. It directly supports **Sustainable Development Goal 14 (Life Below Water)** and contributes to **SDG 13 (Climate Action)** by safeguarding the ocean's role in climate regulation. Additionally, it reinforces commitments under the **Paris Agreement**, as oceanic health is integral to carbon mitigation strategies. It complements the **Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework**, particularly the 30×30 target, by providing legal mechanisms for high seas protection.

Way Forward

- For the treaty to be effective, **broader ratification** is essential. Major economies such as India, the United States, China, and Japan must ratify it to ensure global legitimacy and impact. Ratification must be accompanied by **national legislation** that translates treaty obligations into enforceable domestic laws.
- **Dedicated financing mechanisms** are required to help developing nations undertake marine research, monitoring, and conservation. There is also a pressing need to **strengthen enforcement** through transparent reporting systems, peer reviews, and compliance assessments.
- The treaty's goals should be integrated into the **Blue Economy**, aligning conservation with sustainable economic pursuits like eco-tourism, marine renewable energy, and sustainable fisheries. By doing so, it is possible to turn the high seas into a zone of opportunity as well as preservation.

Conclusion

The High Seas Treaty marks a historic breakthrough in international environmental law and the governance of global commons. Slated to come into force in 2026, it offers a new blueprint for cooperative stewardship of the world's oceans. Yet, its transformative potential hinges on universal ratification, effective national implementation, and efforts to close the persistent gap between the Global North and South. For India, ratifying the treaty represents a chance to demonstrate leadership in marine conservation while advancing its own developmental priorities through a sustainable Blue Economy. As climate change accelerates and ocean degradation intensifies, protecting the high seas is no longer a peripheral concern—it is central to the survival and prosperity of all humanity.