



CURRENT AFFAIRS FOR UPSC

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INTERNATIONAL

DANGEROUS PHASE

The Iran war is plunging the region into an economic and security abyss

The crisis in West Asia is escalating on two fronts. On Tuesday, the U.S. said that its forces had struck five Iranian oil tankers in the Gulf waters after what it claimed were Tehran's attacks on U.S. warships in the region. Iran retaliated with a massive ballistic missile attack on the Muwaffaq Salti U.S. air base in Jordan and vowed to respond with greater force to every U.S. attack from now on. It has also announced a new restricted zone in the Strait of Hormuz, warning commercial ships against crossing it under American naval escort. Separately, Yemen's Houthis, who are closely aligned with Tehran, launched an attack on Saudi Arabia, wounding dozens. Riyadh has vowed a response. The Houthis, who control northern Yemen and parts of its Red Sea coast, have already enforced a naval blockade of Saudi Arabia's western ports and launched an offensive against the forces of Yemen's Saudi-backed government in Taiz and Mocha. With both the Strait of Hormuz, which connects the Persian Gulf with the Gulf of Oman, and the Red Sea, a critical trade channel between Europe and Asia, remaining flashpoints, a horizontally escalating conflict from Tehran to Jordan and Riyadh to Bab-el Mandeb threatens to plunge the entire region into an economic and security abyss.

The current phase of the conflict could prove to be deadlier for several reasons. The U.S., which in the recent past has used intense military strikes and economic strangulation as separate policy tools in an attempt to force Iran to surrender, is now using both simultaneously to exert maximum pressure on Tehran. The U.S. naval blockade has largely prevented Iran from exporting its oil, while the American naval escort to a limited number of ships out of the Strait of Hormuz has helped Washington blunt the impact of Iran's chokehold on the waterway on global energy prices. But President Donald Trump was wrong if he thought his maximum economic and military pressure would force Iran to make concessions. Iran, instead, decided to escalate the conflict by attacking American warships outside the Persian Gulf, fully aware that this would invite a stronger U.S. military response. Iran appears to believe that it has a window of opportunity with the U.S. heading into its midterm elections within weeks and Mr. Trump remaining politically weak at home. If Iran's strikes on U.S. military vessels signal a clear decision at the top to escalate the conflict, its missile attack on U.S. bases in Jordan suggests that Tehran has been rebuilding its strike capabilities — capabilities that Mr. Trump had claimed were destroyed. As neither Washington nor Iran seems ready to step back from the precipice, the war is set to enter a more dangerous phase with global economic implications.

AS TRUMP SQUEEZES THE INTERNATIONAL CRIMINAL COURT, MORE COUNTRIES LEAVE

As the United States (U.S.) ratchets up the pressure on the International Criminal Court (ICC), sanctioning two more high-ranking staff members in recent weeks, a small but growing number of the global tribunal's member states have announced they will quit the institution.

The recent departure of Venezuela and Chad brings the number of countries to pull out of the court in the past year to five, joining Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger. The surge in withdrawals comes as the ICC faces hostility from Washington and a leadership crisis after ousting its own chief prosecutor.



“Five countries so far have announced plans to withdraw from the Rome Statute, and we welcome more announcements in the future,” a spokesperson for the U.S. State Department told AP.

The Rome Statute established the ICC in 2002 as the court of last resort to prosecute individuals responsible for the world’s most heinous atrocities: war crimes, crimes against humanity, genocide and the crime of aggression. Based in The Hague, it takes on cases when nations are unable or unwilling to prosecute crimes on their own territory.

“The ICC regrets any decision to depart from the collective effort to end impunity for the most serious international crimes,” the court’s spokesperson Oriane Maillet told the AP.

In July, Secretary of State Marco Rubio announced that the U.S. was launching a “sweeping campaign to dismantle the threat posed by the International Criminal Court to U.S. sovereignty.”

Mr. Rubio said he will pressure the court’s 125 member states to withdraw from the institution, sanction organisations that work with the court and ban staff from travelling to the U.S. Mr. Trump’s administration already has sanctioned a dozen ICC staff in retaliation for warrants the court has issued for top Israeli officials over the war in Gaza and investigations into U.S. personnel in Afghanistan.

The Central African country of Chad specifically cited the U.S. in its decision to withdraw. Its Foreign Minister Abdoulaye Sabre Fadoul said in a statement that in a phone call with a U.S. official on July 23, “the American side expressed its concerns regarding the functioning of this institution and requested that Chad reconsider” its membership.

Four days later, Chad said it would leave the ICC.

Iva Vukušić, a researcher at Utrecht University, told the AP that the U.S. campaign will lay bare just how committed countries are to the court. “Are they willing to defend it if it costs them something real?” she said.

Not just the U.S. push

The State Department told AP the U.S. would call upon nations that “enjoy the benefits of the U.S. security umbrella” to reject the ICC. It’s not just pressure from Mr. Trump that is sending ICC members toward the exit door.

The ruling military juntas in Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger blamed selective justice. The ICC has become an “instrument of neocolonial repression in the hands of imperialism,” the trio said when they announced their departures last year.

A coup ousted Niger’s democratically elected government in 2023. Since then, a military junta has abandoned long-time partners and has formed new alliances instead, including with Russia, where President Vladimir Putin faces an ICC arrest warrant linked to the war in Ukraine. Mali and Burkina Faso have undergone similar transformations.

“These countries are ruled by authoritarian leaders who want to avoid accountability for the harms they are inflicting on their own people,” Mel O’Brien, an associate professor of international law at the University of Western Australia, told the AP.



Burundi similarly accused the court of focusing too much on conflicts in Africa when, in 2017, it became the first country to leave the ICC. The court had opened an investigation into the East African nation earlier that year.

Most of the court's initial investigations were into African countries, though most requested the involvement of the ICC.

South Africa and Gambia also announced in 2017 that they would leave but later changed course.

A change of government can also bring a country back into the fold. Hungary announced it would quit the court in 2025 but following the election of a new government, the country's Parliament voted to stay.

The court also had an active investigation in the Philippines when then-President Rodrigo Duterte said his country would leave the ICC. In 2019 the Southeast Asian country became the second country to leave but as withdrawal from the court is not retroactive, the investigation continued.

Mr. Duterte is now in ICC detention in the Netherlands awaiting trial on charges of crimes against humanity for deadly anti-drug crackdowns he allegedly oversaw while in office. Opening statements are set for November.

An investigation into possible crimes committed by Venezuelan security forces under former Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro will continue despite the country's announcement last month that it will also leave the ICC.

In a statement, the country's Foreign Minister Félix Plasencia said the court had been "instrumentalised to deepen inequalities among people and disregard their right to self-determination and sovereignty."

Venezuela is currently in the middle of U.S.-backed talks between the ruling party and the Opposition following Mr. Maduro's capture in January by U.S. forces.

Ukraine is the court's most recent addition. The country joined in 2025 and previously had signed an agreement to give the court jurisdiction over crimes on its territory, following the outbreak of hostilities with Russia in 2014.

Joining the court was "Ukraine's way of saying that accountability for the gravest crimes cannot be optional, and that we intend to help build that system of justice," the country's ambassador to the Netherlands, Andriy Kostin, told AP.

U.K. GOVT. BANS TRADE WITH ILLEGAL ISRAELI SETTLEMENTS IN WEST BANK

In a coordinated diplomatic push to preserve the viability of a two-state solution, a coalition of 12 nations—led by the United Kingdom, France, and Canada—has pledged to enforce sweeping new trade restrictions targeting illegal Israeli settlements in the occupied West Bank.

Alongside Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Ireland, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Spain, and Sweden, the group issued a joint statement condemning unprecedented settlement expansion and escalating settler violence. While several signatory nations already enforce trade bans or have sanctions underway, the move marks a key foreign policy initiative for U.K. Prime Minister Andy Burnham's government.



Addressing the House of Commons, British Foreign Secretary Ed Miliband affirmed that France and Canada had formally joined Britain in barring settlement commerce. Declaring the settlements unlawful under international law, Miliband accused West Bank settlers of carrying out acts of “ethnic cleansing” under the watch of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s administration. He outlined a new sanctions framework expected to take effect within six to nine months, targeting not only goods but also construction, infrastructure financing, and real estate firms enabling settlement operations. Miliband stressed that Britain maintains standard trade with “Green Line Israel” and reaffirmed vigilance against domestic anti-Semitism.

The diplomatic backlash from Israel and its key ally was immediate. The Israeli President asserted that Britain’s decision would fall “on the wrong side of history” and accused London of meddling in forthcoming Knesset elections. Israeli Foreign Minister Gideon Sa’ar announced plans to close the British consulate in Jerusalem, while U.S. Ambassador to Israel Mike Huckabee condemned the restrictions as an “irrational action” during a BBC Radio 4 interview.

The immediate trigger for the multilateral response was Israel’s issuance of tenders for more than 1,200 housing units in the strategic E1 corridor east of Jerusalem. Developing E1 would link occupied East Jerusalem with Ma’ale Adumim, bisecting the West Bank and severing contiguity between northern and southern Palestinian communities.

The crisis reflects broader escalation across the occupied territories since October 7, 2023. Israeli operations and settler violence have resulted in over a thousand Palestinian casualties, thousands of injuries, and the displacement of more than 41,000 residents, according to UNRWA figures. Between January 2025 and July 2026 alone, the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) tracked more than 3,000 violent settler attacks involving casualties or property destruction. Concurrently, Israeli authorities have razed nearly 5,000 Palestinian structures—an average of roughly five demolitions per day. Data from the Israeli monitoring group Peace Now reveals that settlers have established at least 200 unauthorized outposts and advanced tenders for over 12,000 housing units since 2023.

Despite the political weight of the joint announcement, analysts widely view the economic impact as symbolic and unlikely to deter settlement activity on the ground.

Direct trade originating from the settlements represents a negligible share of overall commerce. In the U.K., settlement goods account for a tiny fraction of its \$8.12 billion bilateral trade volume with Israel. Furthermore, eight of the twelve signatory nations belong to the European Union, which accounts for over 40% of Israel’s trade in goods (surpassing \$21 billion). Because mainstream commercial ties with Green Line Israel remain fully intact, the target perimeter remains economically marginal.

Critical enforcement loopholes also threaten the policy’s effectiveness. Under a 2004 technical arrangement, the EU denies preferential trade tariffs to settlement goods by requiring postal codes and origin verification on customs declarations. Nevertheless, settlement populations have doubled over the past two decades while settlement exports have continuously penetrated European markets.

A 2026 report titled *Importing Occupation* by legal advocacy group Global Echo exposed systematic evasion tactics used to bypass origin checks:

- **Hiding in Plain Sight:** Stating the real West Bank postal code while falsely listing the country of origin as Israel.



- **The Sham Address Method:** Using proxy or fabricated corporate addresses within Israel's recognized pre-1967 borders.
- **The Mingling Method:** Blending settlement produce with domestic Israeli goods prior to export.

Global Echo's analysis of over 30,000 export certificates covering 6,800 agricultural shipments revealed that more than 17% of Europe-bound cargo—and 20% of shipments directly entering the EU—originated from illegal settlements. Without rigorous customs closing mechanisms and broader economic leverage, trade restrictions risk remaining largely declarative gestures against a rapidly consolidating reality on the ground.

HOUTHIS SEIZE KEY RED SEA ISLAND, TIGHTEN GRIP ON KEY SHIPPING ROUTE

Iran-aligned Houthi forces have reached and taken control of Perim Island, also known as Mayun, in the Bab el-Mandeb Strait, in a major territorial advance that could put further pressure on one of the world's most important shipping routes and Saudi Arabia's alternative oil-export corridor, news agency Reuters reported.

Key Takeaways:

- Houthis have also reached the Yemeni town of Dhubab, which sits directly on the Bab el-Mandeb Strait across from the island of Perim, two Yemeni government sources told Reuters on Friday.
- Reuters also cited four Yemeni government sources on Friday confirming that the Houthis had reached the strategically located island after government forces withdrew.
- Two Saudi-backed Yemeni government sources had earlier said Houthi forces also captured the mainland coastal town of Dhubab, which faces Perim across the Bab el-Mandeb. The Mayun island is a small volcanic outcrop which lies about 3.5 km off Yemen's western coast.
- Perim's location gives the Houthis a potentially significant position overlooking the Bab el-Mandeb Strait, which **connects the Red Sea with the Gulf of Aden**. The waterway has become particularly important as the conflict around the Strait of Hormuz has disrupted another major route for global energy shipments.

Do You Know:

- Bab el-Mandeb, which translates to "Gate of Tears" in Arabic, is a narrow waterway and a major global chokepoint that connects the Red Sea to the Gulf of Aden. It sits between Yemen on one side and Djibouti and Eritrea, in the Horn of Africa, on the other.
- At its narrowest point, the Strait is just 29 km wide, with just two channels for inbound and outbound traffic. The strait is located at the mouth of the Red Sea, which leads to the Suez Canal — the gateway to Europe.
- The Strait is one of the world's most important shipping and energy passages. Around 12% of global trade usually passes through it. In 2024 alone, about 4.1 billion barrels of oil and petroleum products passed through the Strait, roughly 5% of the global total, Al Jazeera reported.



AFD'S POLL WIN MARKS EAST GERMANY'S DRIFT TO THE RIGHT

The far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) party won a major victory in the regional election in the eastern state of Saxony-Anhalt. It won 39 seats of the 83-member state parliament, falling just three seats short of an absolute majority.

Foundation of AfD

The AfD was established in 2013 as a direct rejoinder to then-German Chancellor Angela Merkel's policies on the Euro, which advocated for fiscal austerity and structural reforms in order to keep the Eurozone intact. To criticisms of such policies, she would often say that these reforms were 'without alternative' (alternativlos), leading to the emergence of the Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) party.

While the party was initially mobilised along the lines of being anti-Euro (against the single currency regime), Ms. Merkel's open-door refugee policy in 2015 led the party to be increasingly consolidated around anti-immigration lines. One of its most popular and controversial policy demands has been the concept of 'remigration', which advocates for the return of non-ethnic German citizens, particularly those from Muslim countries, to their country of origin.

These views and policies have led to the party being branded as extremist — with it often being compared to Hitler's Nazi party (a branding that the AfD systematically rejects). The Verfassungsschutz, or the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution, has branded the party as a 'right-wing extremist' organisation. The agency stated that the party did not consider citizens of a "migration background from predominantly Muslim countries" as equal members of the German nation. Other political parties have also adopted a similar view by invoking a 'political firewall' or Brandmauer against the AfD, wherein they refuse to co-operate or ally with the party in any way whatsoever.

In Saxony-Anhalt, the party had been campaigning on multiple demands. With respect to migration policy, it has propounded remigration as well as an overhaul of the refugee policy. It has said that it will start deporting irregular migrants from day one and that mass detention facilities would be expanded. Ulrich Siegmund, who was the lead candidate for the AfD in the State election and won 49% of the votes, has listed among his top priorities "a deportation offensive" and dropping incentives for people to come to Germany to "exploit our social system".

With respect to education, the party has said that it will make homeschooling, which is currently banned, legal; that the school curriculum would be reformed as it overtly focused on political 'indoctrination'; and that instead of rainbow flags, only the German national flag would be hoisted in schools. It has also floated the idea of separate classes/schools for children of asylum seekers.

It has said that it will change the state's slogan of 'Think Modern' to 'Think German'. Some critics have drawn parallels between AfD's political playbook and U.S. President Donald Trump's MAGA (Make America Great Again) model, where the party reiterates German identity in purely ethnic terms, drawing on earlier imaginings or nostalgia of a brighter and stronger nation, by promoting policies which isolate the country from regional and larger world groupings, mainly the European Union, using ethno-nationalist tropes.

The party has also repeatedly downplayed the effect of climate change; in Saxony-Anhalt, it has vowed to halt wind farms, even as the region is one of the leading states in Germany's transition to renewable energy.



Underrepresented East

Germany has 16 federal states, with each state conducting its own election every five years. Saxony-Anhalt is one of the smallest states, which lies towards the eastern side. The state used to be under communist rule as the German Democratic Republic (GDR), till the 1990s, when the country was finally reunified after the fall of the Berlin Wall. However, eastern states have often felt left out and ignored by the ruling 'western' establishment. Most former GDR citizens allege that they remain underrepresented at higher levels of government and in media and have less economic benefits than the western region.

The 2020 Annual Report on the Status of German Unity, released in 2021, stated that while the eastern region has tremendously improved its economic fortunes since reunification, it still has not caught up to western Germany's urban living standards. Eastern full-time employees earned about 86% of the western average. More importantly, the report talked about how there was still a notion of dissatisfaction among former GDR citizens, often shaped by the impact of the previous communist rule, the intense economic restructuring following reunification, as well as cultural changes.

The AfD has been quick to capture and exacerbate this sentiment; the party has been making steady gains in the eastern region for quite some time now. In 2017, it became the second-largest party in the region, winning 21.9% of the vote, while across Germany as a whole, it only had a vote share of 12.6%.

While Saxony-Anhalt is relatively small, with just 1.7 million voters out of 59 million voters nationwide, the result holds immense significance.

Significance of AfD win

Domestically, if the AfD is to form a government in the state, it will have overarching powers regarding education and security issues. It will also get four seats in the upper house of the German Parliament, the Bundesrat, which represents all 16 states of the country. However, since the party falls short of an absolute majority, it is yet unclear how it expects to govern. While Mr. Siegmund had earlier remarked that the party would not engage in "games" such as a minority government, he has now said that he will be waiting with an "outstretched hand". Moreover, the 'firewall' in German Parliament against allying with the AfD further complicates coalition talks.

The AfD's rise in the elections is also an indictment of the government of Chancellor Friedrich Merz. The cost of living crisis, stoked by inflation due to rising energy prices because of the war in West Asia and sanctions on Russia, has hit the state of Saxony-Anhalt quite hard. The people in the country generally feel that the Chancellor has not held up his promise to ensure fiscal discipline and revive the stagnating German economy. Mr. Merz has said that he was "deeply shocked" by the election results.

Internationally, the rise of the AfD spells trouble for the EU, as the party has been quite Euro-sceptic. It has often remarked that leaving the EU is necessary for its reforms to be implemented. At the same time, it has also said that a hard break would be counterproductive and that it would be better to ease into a looser organisation of European states. It has also advocated leaving the single currency system.



The party has also been severely critical of the support for Ukraine in the ongoing Russia-Ukraine war and has said that it will push back against sanctions on Russia, and revive energy deals and economic ties with Moscow.

Germany has two more state elections coming up, with the state of Mecklenburg-Vorpommern, also a former GDR state, and the capital city of Berlin both going to the polls on September 20. The AfD is leading the opinion polls in the former, with its current win bound to give local leadership in Mecklenburg-Vorpommern a major boost.

SRI LANKA TOP COURT REVOKES MONK'S PRESIDENTIAL PARDON

In a significant case of the judiciary reversing an executive decision, Sri Lanka's Supreme Court on Thursday overturned a presidential pardon granted to a reactionary Buddhist monk.

In May 2019, then-President Maithripala Sirisena pardoned controversial monk Galagoda Aththe Gnanasara 'Thero' (as Buddhist priests in Sri Lanka are respectfully referred to), leader of the hardline Bodu Bala Sena, who was serving prison term at the time, following conviction for contempt of court and criminal intimidation.

Colombo-based non-governmental organisation Centre for Policy Alternatives (CPA) and Sandya Eknaligoda, wife of dissident political cartoonist Prageeth Eknaligoda, forcibly disappeared since 2010, had challenged the pardon. Seven years later, the Supreme Court has ruled that President Sirisena's action was "arbitrary", and declared it "null and void". The ruling assumes significance in the Sinhala Buddhist-majority island nation, where the Buddhist clergy wields considerable religious influence and political power.

Gnanasara Thero rose to prominence in 2012, when he founded the BBS. Widely known for his provocative anti-Muslim remarks and mobilisations, the firebrand monk, now 51, and his organisation became a prominent symbol for a surging anti-Muslim rhetoric in Sri Lanka after the country's civil war ended in 2009.

In January 2016, Gnanasara Thero stormed the courtroom and openly threatened Ms. Eknaligoda, when a magistrate court was hearing a case of her disappeared husband.

Two years after Mr. Sirisena pardoned the monk, his successor Gotabaya Rajapaksa appointed Gnanasara Thero to a Presidential Task Force to draft proposals on legal reforms, a move widely criticised by rights defenders.

'MR. SINGH' ADVERTISEMENT BY U.S. HOMELAND SECURITY KICKS OFF ROW

An advertisement posted by the Department of Homeland Security asking "Mr. Singh" to self-deport sparked off a controversy with advocacy groups terming it racist and anti-American.

The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) used AI-generated imagery on X to push its campaign against unlicensed commercial drivers, featuring a brown-bearded man with a tagline: "Get off our roads, you don't know how to drive Mr Singh." A video in a related post shows Megatron, the antagonist character in the Transformers franchise, negotiating the release of "aliens" — a term used for foreigners by the U.S. administration.

Megatron is shown seeking the release of truck drivers Harjinder Singh, Rajinder Kumar, Bekzhan Beishekeev, Akhorr Bozorov, and Jasveer Singh, who were involved in road accidents and other



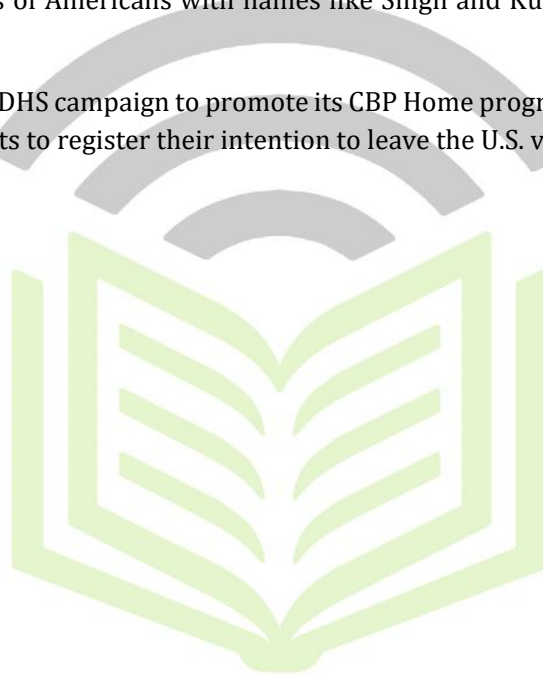
crimes. "If you approach this nation with hostile intent, know this. We will defend ourselves. We will defend Americanism. We will defend our home," the DHS said on X.

Another post features Optimus Prime, the main protagonist in the Transformers franchise, with a DHS arm patch confronting the brown-bearded man with the message: "Self-deport or find out."

The reference to "Mr Singh" in the advertisement was criticised by advocacy groups, including the Hindu American Foundation (HAF) and Sikh Coalition. "Singhs are Hindu, they are Sikhs, they are American and they drive. Racist, un-American, anti-Indian profiling/trolling by @DHSgov should shock our nation's collective conscience," HAF said on X.

"Singling out SOME last names does nothing for safe streets, but it does endanger the safety of hundreds of thousands of Americans with names like Singh and Kumar," Coalition of Hindus of North America said.

The row comes amid a DHS campaign to promote its CBP Home programme, which allows eligible undocumented migrants to register their intention to leave the U.S. voluntarily.



DreamIAS



NATIONAL

AN ICON OF MODERN WARFARE

“BIG news! India plans to buy the battle-tested Javelin anti-tank system”, U.S. Ambassador to India Sergio Gor posted on X on August 28. This is “a great step forward in the U.S.-India defense relationship, opening the door to co-production possibilities”, he wrote. The significance of the announcement lies not merely in the planned purchase, but in what the Javelin brings to India’s defence arsenal.

Developed and made by the Javelin Joint Venture (JJV) between Raytheon and Lockheed Martin, the Javelin has been described as a versatile, portable and multi-purpose weapon system that can handle a spectrum of threats. More precisely, it is a ‘fire-and-forget’ anti-tank guided missile (ATGM) system that comprises a Command Launch Unit (CLU) and the missile. The CLU has the day/night sighting system, the electronics and the controls while the missile’s imaging infrared seeker guides it after the launch. Locking onto its target before launch, it allows the operator to move away after firing.

A peek into the company’s production literature uncovers the following list: with over 20 years of performance, the Javelin has been in action in operations across a range of theatres. After classroom training of only 72 hours, a soldier can take advantage of the missile’s ‘low-signature’ launch (or minimal detectability) to carry out a variety of attack modes; these range from top-attack targets such as tanks to direct-attack capability for caves, bunkers or soft targets.

Operational readiness

And, with an operational readiness rate of 99% and an engagement success rate of 94%, the armament has established itself as a mainstay brigade combat team weapon for the U.S. Army and U.S. Marine Corps. It is expected to be in the U.S. military’s operational inventory until 2050. The company has also highlighted its economic impact, covering 63 domestic suppliers in 18 states and 22 international suppliers. But it is one point that stands out: the detail of “5,000 combat firings (Prior to Ukraine)”.

In service since 1996, the Javelin has been used in the invasion of Iraq in 2003 and also in Afghanistan. Yet, it is in Ukraine that the Javelin acquired its reputation as a weapon that could take on Russian might. The Javelin also has an interesting imagery. In a 2022 article, journalist Matthew Gault, who writes on conflict and culture, highlighted the popularity of “St. Javelin, a symbol of the conflict in Ukraine”. Surrounded by a bright red halo and the golden trident coat-of-arms of Ukraine, this creation of ‘meme-mythology’, clad in green robes, carries an FGM-148 Javelin anti-tank missile launcher in her arms, portraying a defiant symbol of resistance.

For India, the nitty-gritty of the August 2026 announcement lies in the proposed assembly of the ATGMs; in the memorandum of understanding between JJV and Tata Advanced Systems Ltd (TASL), Javelin All Up Rounds (AURs) are to be co-produced domestically. Much of the component production would be in the U.S. where the Lockheed Martin plant in Alabama will produce the Javelin’s “sub-assembly kits”, while Raytheon’s facility in Arizona will manufacture its “guidance electronics units”. Both systems will then be shipped to TASL for final assembly and incorporation into the ATGM. In essence, the U.S. will hold the reins.



The development also marks the difficulty that India has faced in overcoming a hurdle: it has taken it over 15 years to resolve differences with the U.S. over technology transfer and local production. During this time, India has maintained a diverse anti-tank inventory, including limited supplies of the Israeli Spike, while pursuing the Defence Research and Development Organisation's 'Third Generation' Fire and Forget Man Portable Anti-Tank Guided Missile.

However, to a few established defence commentators, such as Rahul Bedi, the subtext of Mr. Gor's "big news" is the path that India has chosen for its anti-tank missile programme — either as a looming shadow over its indigenous missile efforts or a pragmatic response to a pressing military requirement.

MORE HEFT

The BRICS Summit allows India to advance its global ambitions

Forging a joint statement at a major multilateral conference, in the midst of global conflicts where members are involved is never easy — for India, hosting the BRICS Summit in Delhi is the second time in recent years, since the G-20 Summit in 2023, that it has had to shoulder such a responsibility. That, however, is not the only reason India's BRICS presidency comes at a difficult time. The past few occasions India has hosted the coalition of emerging economies — in 2012, 2016 and virtually in 2021 — it was a smaller grouping of just five major powers, where managing consensus was easier. Since the expansion in 2024 — adding Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE — and Indonesia's induction in 2025, BRICS' identity has evolved, but a common focus remains elusive. In addition, global conflicts involving BRICS members have grown. The war involving Iran has heightened this impact, as Iran, a victim of the U.S.-Israel strikes, as well as the UAE that was attacked by Iran in retaliation, are members that have been unwilling to agree to a common narrative on the problem. India's position on Israel also came into conflict with other members earlier this year, as the grouping has traditionally taken a much more critical line on Israel's actions. The largest share of New Delhi's problems as host comes however from the United States, where President Donald Trump has accused it of plotting to overthrow the U.S. dollar's domination of the global economy, and has been threatening tariffs on all members for planning to increase intra-BRICS payments and trade. As the Modi government seeks to restore ties with the Trump administration, on trade and its Indo-Pacific strategy, hosting BRICS also risks invoking America's ire, however irrational.

As a result, a success in reconciling all these different strands at this time would indeed be a shot across the bow for the grouping and a big win for Indian diplomacy. Since it was first conceptualised 25 years ago, and a summit convened in 2009, the BRICS countries have risen in global stature and economic heft, benefitting intra-BRICS trade. Today, BRICS accounts for half the world's population, two fifths of the global economy and a fourth of global trade; it also includes many of the world's top energy producers and biggest consumers. While the grouping prefers not to be called anti-western it is certainly a powerful counter to the G-7, and western-led thinking. Being part of BRICS gives India more heft in advancing its ambitions on the global high table, and its presidency has ensured it prominence on the world stage, as leaders and representatives of 11 BRICS countries including Xi Jinping, Vladimir Putin and Masoud Pezeshkian begin deliberations on Saturday at the Bharat Mandapam to discuss the future of global governance.



INDIA'S BRICS BALANCING ACT

The leaders of 11 BRICS countries have arrived in India for the 18th edition of the summit to discuss ways to boost the growth prospects of the Global South. But the most consequential engagement at the summit from India's perspective could be the bilateral talks between Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Chinese President Xi Jinping.

Key Takeaways:

- There have been signs of a thaw in ties — resumption of direct flights, reopening of border trade via Nathu La Pass after six years and, most importantly, easing of restrictions on foreign direct investments (FDI) from land-bordering countries.
- But unpredictable American trade policies and two ongoing wars that have rattled the oil and bond markets seem to have nudged India and China to ease tensions.
- As negotiations between India and the US for a deal remain on, India has been seeking an edge in Section 301 rates over its competitors, including China.
- The demand for differential tariffs may have begun taking shape as the US in July this year imposed a 10% forced labour tariff on India, which was better than the 12.5% tariffs imposed on China, Russia and Brazil among others. China had earlier warned countries of consequences if they struck deals at its expense.
- Over the weekend (September 12 and 13), India will host the 18th BRICS Summit in New Delhi. BRICS is an informal grouping of 11 major emerging markets and developing countries: Brazil, China, Egypt, Ethiopia, India, Indonesia, Iran, Russia, Saudi Arabia, South Africa and the United Arab Emirates.
- However, it started out as BRIC — referring to the four countries that initially came together, namely Brazil, Russia, India, and China — on the sidelines of the United Nations General Assembly in New York in 2006. In 2010, South Africa joined the grouping, and it was renamed BRICS.
- The idea was to provide a platform for the concerns of emerging economies of the time and counter the overwhelming domination of the industrialised and developed economies (read: the G7) in international institutions.
- This is the 20th year since the grouping began, but curiously enough, there is now a dragon in the room: China. Key economic data shows just how much China dwarfs the rest of the BRICS members.

Do You Know:

- Even in 2006, China was the largest economy among the five countries after which the grouping is named but China's overall GDP was less than the GDP of the other four members.
- However, such was the pace of increase in China's economic growth that by the time the inaugural summit meeting happened in 2009, China had overtaken the combined economic size of BRIS (BRICS minus China). Since then, the gap has continued to increase each year. As of 2026, China's GDP alone is more than double that of the other four combined.



— Between 2006 and 2015, India did better than the others and overtook them to become the second-biggest economy within BRICS. However, China's rise dwarfs all the rest.

ARUNACHAL AND AKSAI CHIN BETWEEN 'UNSPECIFIED' CLAIM LINES ON UN-ENDORSED MAP

A new world map that was endorsed at the UN during the India-backed "Correct the map" resolution of September 4 in the UN General Assembly has projected India's Arunachal Pradesh and Aksai Chin, which India has maintained is a part of Ladakh, as distinct regions caught between Indian and Chinese "claim lines".

The map which came up on July 1 during the months-long discussion for the UNGA resolution shows Arunachal's southern State border with Assam, indicating the "Chinese line" while eliminating the State's border with Nagaland.

It shows the State's northern border, indicating the "Indian line". Similarly, the map shows Aksai Chin's eastern borders, indicating the "Indian Line" while presenting the western borders of Aksai Chin in what appears to be the "Chinese line". These "claim lines" appear to be a continuation of previous similar maps of the UN. But unlike in the 2011 map of the UN, these lines are not specified as "claim lines" in the July 1 map.

The map depicts Jammu and Kashmir with a dotted line indicating the Line of Control (LoC) between India and Pakistan. However, the issue of the LoC is clearly mentioned in a brief note on the map, explaining the "dotted line represents approximately the Line of Control in Jammu and Kashmir agreed upon by India and Pakistan. The final status of J&K has not yet been agreed upon by the parties."

But, there is no note on why the "Map of the World" issued by the UN during the consultation process and endorsed by the "Correct the Map" resolution sponsored by Togo and supported by the African Union depicted Arunachal and Aksai Chin as territories caught between Indian and Chinese claim lines. The map is non-binding, but it will be used by multilateral institutions worldwide.

'Cognitive justice'

Discussions on the map began in March 2026 when the African Union supported the "Equal Earth cartographic projection to more accurately represent Africa". The African Union called this approach "cognitive justice". Subsequently, Togo prompted UNGA consultations on the map in April 2026, and the UNGA started informal consultations in July, when the draft map authored by the UN Geospatial on July 1 was taken up.

The External Affairs Ministry had reiterated India's support for the "Correct the Map" resolution on Sunday but declared that "India voted in favour of the resolution" and explained its position as a vote on the "underlying principle of promoting equal-area cartographic representation". "We also highlighted that the resolution does not constitute endorsement of any specific map, projection or depiction of national boundaries," the Ministry had said.

"India's sovereign territory, including Jammu and Kashmir and Ladakh, must be depicted in accordance with India's official map. Any inaccurate or misleading depiction is unacceptable," said the official spokesperson Randhir Jaiswal.



MEA is yet to respond to The Hindu's query on the separate demarcation of Arunachal and Aksai Chin with contesting claim lines from India and China.

The traditional map of India depicts both Arunachal and the entire Jammu and Kashmir and Ladakh (including Aksai Chin) as parts of the sovereign territory of India.

In relation to India's ongoing Kalapani border controversy with Nepal, the map seems to have gone in favour of India, as it reflects India's control over the Kalapani-Lipulekh-Limpiyadhura region, which is claimed by Nepal.

NATURAL PARTNERS

India and Belgium are building ties across sectors despite differences

In terms of size and engagement, Belgium is not one of India's most important partners. However, the visit of the Belgian Prime Minister to Delhi is part of a larger puzzle of India's ties with European countries. These have now gained salience with focus areas for India: in economic relations, defence relations and strategic ties. At the top of the agenda in talks between Prime Ministers Bart De Wever and Narendra Modi was bilateral trade opportunities once the India-European Union Free Trade Agreement (FTA) is signed — which is expected in December. India-Belgium trade is about \$13 billion, a third of which is from over a century of collaboration in the diamond industry. Antwerp is a global hub for diamond trading, while Mumbai and Surat provide the biggest cutting and polishing services. However, once the EU FTA is signed, they hope to benefit from collaboration in other areas including renewable energy and food processing; the Prime Ministers agreed to set a target of doubling bilateral trade in the next five years. Despite being surrounded by friendly European allies, Belgium has a robust high-tech defence industry — small arms, drone and counter-drone technology, ammunition and naval defence — and is keen to make inroads in the Indian market, with India seeking to diversify its procurement beyond global powers. The two sides agreed on an MoU for co-development of military hardware, and signed a letter of intent on defence cooperation. India will appoint a resident defence attaché to Brussels, complementing Belgium's move.

Statements by the two leaders, however, indicated that the visit went beyond the bilateral to a more geopolitical framing of strategic ties, both bilateral as well as between India and Europe. At a business event, Mr. De Wever said that Europe is now realising the truth of India's "warnings" on strategic autonomy from global powers and over dependence in trade and industrial production, in particular referring to China. After the talks, Mr. Modi said that democratic values, a market economy, and people-to-people ties make India and Belgium "natural partners", a theme he has promoted this past year, as he has stepped up visits to Europe and received a number of European leaders in Delhi, in the run-up to his Brussels visit later this year for the FTA. It is also significant that Mr. De Wever's visit comes in the same week that New Delhi is preparing to welcome Russian President Vladimir Putin for the BRICS summit in Delhi. The engagement with Belgium demonstrates a new maturity for both European countries and India. This shows sensitivity to their respective positions on the Russia-Ukraine conflict, indicating that ties outweigh Europe's enmity and India's deep friendship with Moscow.

CENTRE STEPS AWAY FROM ROW OVER HINDU GROUP'S VISIT TO EIFFEL TOWER

The government on Tuesday faced questions over its links to a religious group whose allegedly "anti-women" demands caused the iconic Eiffel Tower in Paris to shut down for a day, leading to

4TH FLOOR SHATABDI TOWER, SAKCHI, JAMSHEDPUR

Telegram: http://t.me/DreamIAS_Jamshedpur



a major political row in France. Paris city officials have begun a formal inquiry, and the Hindu group, known as BAPS, denied making any demands to “limit interactions” with women employees at the tower.

The shutdown came a day after Prime Minister Narendra Modi inaugurated a temple built by BAPS (Bochasanwasi Akshar Purushottam Swaminarayan Sanstha) in a Paris suburb. In a 10-minute virtual address, Mr. Modi had called the construction a “new chapter” in India-France cultural relations. The External Affairs Ministry said the Prime Minister often addressed such events and India was not involved in the controversy.

According to officials managing the Eiffel Tower, BAPS leaders, who were in Paris for the temple’s inauguration, specifically asked for women employees to be moved out of sight of the delegation of monks, particularly their 93-year-old leader. The union of the Eiffel Tower employees, which called the one-day strike in solidarity with female colleagues, said the women, who had been replaced by men at certain posts, were instructed not to cross certain areas while the delegation was present.

“We are aware of the opening of a temple by the BAPS Sanstha in the Paris area. As to the issue pertaining to the Tower, this is a matter purely between the entities [BAPS and the Eiffel Tower authorities] concerned,” Ministry spokesperson Randhir Jaiswal said.

To a question from The Hindu on whether the government has asked BAPS for an explanation of its alleged demand to deny women employees access to parts of the Eiffel Tower or whether it would now distance itself from the group, Mr. Jaiswal said that it was a “common practice” for the Prime Minister to “convey his good wishes” on such occasions, and there would be no comment.

Earlier this year, India’s Ambassador to France, Sanjeev Singla, had spoken at a ceremony for the temple. India’s Ambassador to UNESCO, Vishal Verma, praised the BAPS group in a social media post on Tuesday and said his wife had participated in the “shilanyas” or stone-laying ceremony of the temple in 2022.

BAPS issues denial

In written responses to The Hindu, BAPS denied having made the requests.

“We want to be unequivocally clear: this coordination was undertaken purely as a matter of operational courtesy and logistics to ensure a smooth visit for a large group without inconveniencing the Tower’s employees or the public,” BAPS, France, said pointing out that the delegation had more than 100 members. “It was never, at any point, intended as a request rooted in gender, and any suggestion to the contrary does not reflect the spirit or values of our fellowship or the delegation,” it added, insisting that BAPS did not know about the denial of access to anyone.

However, the women employees had said earlier that they were made to feel “invisible”.

French right-wing and centrist Opposition leaders criticised the [Emmanuel] Macron government for the incident and demanded an explanation. “In France, we do not ask women to erase themselves. No dogma, no religion is above the laws of the Republic,” France’s Equality Minister Aurore Berge said.

Several French commentators questioned the reasons behind the group’s influence, pointing to the BAPS temple in the U.S. that faced legal cases after the Federal Bureau of investigation accused the group of labour code violations.



On Monday, Paris Mayor Emmanuel Gregoire ordered an inquiry into the incident, while Ariel Weil, president of tower operator SETE, issued an apology.

THE HOUSE OF MULTILATERALS

The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) held its 26th summit at Kyrgyz Republic's capital Bishkek on August 31-September 1, which was attended by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Russian President Vladimir Putin, Chinese President Xi Jinping, Iran's President Masoud Pezeshkian and other leaders of the member countries. The summit marked the completion of 25 years of the organisation that was launched on June 15, 2001 with China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyz Republic and Tajikistan — the Shanghai five — as its founding members. India and Pakistan joined the group in 2017.

The Bishkek meet was the first summit of the grouping since the U.S. and Israel started their war on Iran on February 28, 2026, killing the country's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and a host of other senior officials. The Bishkek Declaration expressed "deep concern", and condemned military strikes on Iran, reaffirmed "support for its sovereignty and territorial integrity", and criticised the U.S. and Israel for violating the principles of international law and the UN Charter.

They also condoled the assassination of Ali Khamenei and welcomed the peace process that is being supported and mediated by multiple countries, including SCO member Pakistan. In an indirect support for Iran in its nuclear negotiations with the U.S., the SCO summit advocated "inalienable right" of the member countries to "develop" "atomic energy for peaceful purposes".

The declaration also asserted that the only way to ensure lasting stability in the West Asian region is through a just settlement of the Palestine question. Member states maintained silence on Russia's role in the Ukraine war and added that "unilateral and unlimited build-up of global missile defence systems by groups of states" has a "negative impact on international security and stability".

The declaration also mentioned that "unauthorised satellite Internet services on the territory of Member States" is a violation of international law — an obvious reference to entrepreneur Elon Musk's Starlink providing Internet services in parts of Eastern Ukraine and Iran.

Indian delegation

Prime Minister Modi led the Indian delegation at the summit where he spoke about ensuring that there is "no double standards" in fighting terrorism and called for peace and stability in Afghanistan. He highlighted India's role in ensuring supply of relief materials to Taliban-controlled Afghanistan over the years, and spoke in favour of greater connectivity between the markets of the SCO members while respecting sovereignty and territorial integrity of the states.

The declaration also called on Afghanistan to form an "inclusive government". Mr. Modi's mention of connectivity while respecting territorial integrity is an apparent reference to the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) that has been a target of India's criticism over the years. This factor indicated a bit of dissonance within the grouping as India stayed away from endorsing the China-led BRI but other member states expressed support and also advocated alignment between the BRI and the Eurasian Economic Union.



Mr. Modi's focus on terrorism at the Bishkek summit highlighted an uncomfortable issue India will have to deal with over the next year. With the conclusion of the summit, Pakistan has assumed the chair of the SCO, and the group's next summit will be held in that country.

The Ministry of External Affairs has not yet clarified whether Mr. Modi will travel to Pakistan to attend the SCO summit next year. External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar had visited Islamabad in 2024 to attend the 23rd meeting of the SCO Council of Heads of Government. The Pahalgam terror attack of April 22, 2025, the subsequent Operation Sindoor, and India's decision to place the Indus Waters Treaty 'in abeyance' have further complicated India-Pakistan relations. These developments will be a factor in New Delhi's decision on the level at which the government sends representatives to next year's summit in Pakistan.

The Bishkek Declaration included strong language on the troika of challenges — "terrorism, separatism and extremism" — and "strongly condemned" terrorism, reflecting India's concerns as well as those of other members.

The SCO, which includes both Russia and Iran as members, provides a unique platform for the two countries to articulate their positions on the wars. It allows the primary actors in these conflicts to explain their objectives and positions in a multilateral setting. The SCO also gives the world an opportunity to engage China multilaterally, particularly on issues such as freedom of navigation in the South China Sea.

A platform for engagement

It also provides India and Pakistan with a platform for sustained engagement within a broader multilateral framework. Such engagement is important for regional stability and can help prevent bilateral hostilities from spilling over. The SCO does not have a collective defence component and several of its members have differences and disputes with one another — for example, India-Pakistan tensions and India-China border problem — yet, the grouping has managed to survive for 25 years.

The grouping has 29 charter bodies like the Council of Heads of State, the Council of Heads of Government, the Council of Ministers of Foreign Affairs, meetings of heads of ministries and/or agencies, the Council of National Coordinators, as well as over 40 working mechanisms of interaction in various fields.

These charter bodies meet throughout the year and serve as formal channels of communication on issues of concern to member states. In the event of a sudden conflict or a cross-border natural calamity, such frequent consultations can serve a practical purpose. The SCO also exerts some pressure on the Trump-era world order. Its leaders have periodically called for greater use of local currencies in trade, a practice viewed with scepticism in the West, particularly by the current U.S. leadership. The announcement of the establishment of an SCO Development Bank is another step in this direction.

Diplomatic objectives

India has used the SCO to advance its diplomatic objectives on multiple occasions since joining the grouping in 2017. Two relevant examples are the 2025 Tianjin Summit and the 2024 Kazan Summit. Seeking to rebuild ties after the setback at Galwan, India and China began to reengage at the Kazan Summit in Russia, where Mr. Modi met Chinese President Xi Jinping.



This was followed by another meeting between the two leaders in Tianjin where they agreed on an 'Early Harvest' proposal on boundary delimitation and resumption of border trade through three points. The Tianjin meeting demonstrated that the two sides retained the political will to meet despite the strain in ties following Operation Sindoor in May 2025, when China provided support to Pakistan as India targeted terror camps in Pakistani territory.

It also showed that, amid an uncertain phase in India-U.S. relations, with President Donald Trump imposing punitive tariffs on Indian goods, New Delhi could engage all major stakeholders and maintain necessary diplomatic dialogue.

EYES ON THE ROAD

Judicial fiat alone cannot prevent traffic fatalities

Despite hosting only 1% of the world's vehicular fleet, India accounts for around 11% of road traffic fatalities, due in some part to widespread non-compliance with wearing seat belts and helmets while driving. Post-crash investigations have often revealed victims being ejected from vehicles or suffering lethal secondary collisions against vehicles' interiors; children are also vulnerable due to the patchy use of child restraint systems and rear-seat belts. Recently, a Supreme Court Bench asked the Road Transport Ministry to consider a petition to reduce road traffic deaths by habituating the use of these measures. Actual policing is certainly wanting, including due to chronic shortages of traffic police cadres; there is also room to constrain manufacturers to install tamper-proof seat belt reminders and thwart modifications after purchase. The Motor Vehicles (Amendment) Act 2019 instituted or scaffolded various mechanisms to prevent road traffic deaths whereas the national data so far have not presented evidence of improvement at the scale India needs.

However, in 2024, Road Transport Ministry data said that two-wheeler riders constituted 46.2% and pedestrians 20.6% of road deaths. Seat belts and child restraints only protect occupants of enclosed vehicles, so better enforcing their adoption will address the reasons underlying only one-third of the total mortality. In fact, speeding has been found to be the dominant recorded violation associated with fatalities, and a national strategy focused on mitigating opportunities for vehicles to accelerate to high speeds may yield greater gains. Second, neither the Union government nor State governments have systematically employed the 'Safe System' approach. While individual responsibility and the duty of care accruing to schools and similar institutions matter, governments are still expected to design roads assuming that not everyone will behave perfectly. Put differently, they need to reduce the probability as well as the severity of crashes, including by identifying and fixing accident-prone locations, setting up physical environments that compensate for human error, reducing children's exposure to two-wheeler traffic, and improving timely access to trauma care. Finally, India lacks a public culture that reinforces safe behaviour and deters unsafe behaviour. For India to reduce road mortality in a sustained manner, governments must treat safety through a combination of approaches that does not overstate the role of individual decisions. It is also commendable that the Court has referred the petition to the Centre, rather than assume an interventionist posture as it did in 2019, in a tacit acknowledgment that road safety has outgrown judicial fiat.

SC ASKS CENTRE TO REVIEW NEET-SS CUT-OFF DECISION

The Supreme Court asked the Union government on Thursday to reconsider its decision not to reduce the cut-off percentile for National Eligibility-cum-Entrance Test-Super-specialty (NEET-

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SS) seats in the current year, while expressing concern about a large number of seats going unfilled annually.

The order from a Bench of Justices P.S. Narasimha and Alok Aradhe came after Additional Solicitor-General Aishwarya Bhati, for the Centre, said the government was willing to conduct a “stray round” for the vacant NEET-SS seats, but had decided not to lower the qualifying percentile. She said the vacant seats would revert to States such as Tamil Nadu.

The court was hearing a petition filed by the Tamil Nadu Medical Officers Association, represented by senior advocate P. Wilson, who said Tamil Nadu had 40 vacant seats left, and they should be returned to the State. The petitioner-association had challenged the “premature diversion” of 152 vacant super-specialty seats earmarked for in-service government doctors in Tamil Nadu to the all-India quota. It had also sought protection of the State’s in-service reservation policy, pending a final decision on reduction of the NEET-SS qualifying percentile.

Mr. Wilson stressed that many eligible candidates, mostly in-service government doctors serving in rural parts of the State, were awaiting a reduction in the qualifying percentile. He said the NEET-SS seats were “precious”, and cannot remain vacant.

Senior advocate Abhishek Manu Singhvi, for Tamil Nadu, said the State wanted the vacant seats to completely revert to it. He further urged the top court to lower the cut-off percentile.

The court said the fact that many seats remain unfilled makes the case for reduction of the qualifying percentile “rather compelling”.

Justice Narasimha advised the Additional Solicitor-General to “reflect a little more” about bringing down the percentile, and even consult with other members of the Bar on the issue.

Ms. Bhati urged the court then to “add a line” in its order “directing us to reconsider this... to consider reduction to the extent possible”.

The law officer revealed that even some of the experts had “varying views” on the question of lowering the qualifying percentile.

“Some amount of reduction can be made. For last years, we had even reduced it [qualifying percentile] to 0%,” Ms. Bhati submitted.

The court scheduled the case for further hearing and directions on September 17.

RAY OF HOPE

Courts are coming down on reflexive arrests of activists

The district administration in Noida, Uttar Pradesh, went to great lengths to detain 25-year-old Delhi University law student and activist Akriti Chaudhary on April 11, 2026, in connection with protests by workers in the city. But on September 2, the Allahabad High Court quashed her National Security Act (NSA) detention, terming it an “abuse of the draconian preventive detention law” and came down heavily on the administration. The High Court’s intervention is a silver lining in the dark cloud of extreme executive arbitrariness that is smothering the democratic soul of India. It termed the Noida administration’s conduct “despotic”, its allegations against the activist a “concocted story”, and noted that the District Magistrate had passed the NSA detention order “without application of mind”. Without mincing words, the High Court warned that an unhinged



bureaucracy could reduce the State of Uttar Pradesh to an “Orwellian dystopia”. The Division Bench of Justices Atul Sreedharan and Achal Sachdev ordered compensation of ₹5 lakh for Ms. Chaudhary, which is to be deducted from the salaries of the officers concerned. The facts of the case were brazenly in contradiction with the claims of the police and the district administration, but it also took a rigorous and conscientious Bench to provide this relief. It noted in its order that Ms. Chaudhary was already in the custody of the police when the violence that she is accused of took place.

The relief from the High Court has not set the activist free, as she is named by the U.P. Police in 11 other cases. It will be a long journey of legal battles to get her the freedom that every citizen in a democratic country deserves. That the police would go to such an extent to make life difficult for someone who stood up for the underprivileged must shock the conscience of the nation. Between April 10 and 18, 2026, industrial and contractual workers in Noida had staged protests demanding a wage hike and wage parity with neighbouring Haryana. On April 13, the protests allegedly turned violent. The Noida Police claimed to have “strong electronic and videographic evidence” of incitement against Ms. Chaudhary, and it turned out to be merely that, a claim which could not be established. Ms. Chaudhary could receive legal support and media attention that hundreds of others in comparable situations cannot easily access, while the workers remain trapped in miserable conditions because of oppressive business models and state policies that favour capital owners, with the promises made to them still unfulfilled. Yet, the Allahabad High Court’s intervention in Ms. Chaudhary’s case is a ray of hope that democratic protests will be heeded rather than suppressed by the strong-arm tactics of the executive.

EX-OFFICIALS FLAG CONCERNS OVER CENSUS DATA QUALITY, POTENTIAL NPR, NRC LINK

The Union government’s decision to advance the Population Enumeration phase of Census 2027 in four poll-bound States, coupled with the introduction of several new questions in the Census schedule, has prompted some former Census officials to raise concerns regarding the quality of data that is to be collected and the potential links between the Census, the National Population Register (NPR) and, ultimately, the National Register of Citizens (NRC).

There is a precedent for Census data having been used to prepare the NRC. Records show that this took place in 1951, during Independent India’s first Census, when the NRC was prepared across the country by “copying” data from the Census schedules. However, for unspecified reasons, a countrywide NRC was never published, except in undivided Assam, which at the time also included Manipur and Tripura.

Speaking to The Hindu, former Deputy Registrar General of India K. Narayanan Unni stressed that any link between the Census and population-registration activities remains speculative. However, some of the information being sought in the latest Census questionnaire resembled data collected during previous NPR update exercises.

The NPR, first created in 2011 and initially proposed to be updated with the first phase of the now-scrapped Census 2021, has been put on the back burner due to stiff opposition from political parties and civil society groups.

Mr. Unni said, “NPR is generated under the Citizenship Act, and data is supposed to be published. However, Census data is confidential and can only be used for statistical purposes. But in 1951, Census data was used to prepare the NRC in Assam...”



On August 14, 2026, the Registrar General and Census Commissioner of India (RG&CCI) notified a set of 40 questions to be asked during the Population Enumeration phase of the Census.

Some of the additional questions, such as particulars of a person's parents, including their names, religion, place of birth, Aadhaar, mobile phone number, voter ID and driving licence details, mirror those asked in the rehearsal form of the NPR in 2019.

The 1951 exercise

The NPR had been updated in 2015 and already has the family-wise database of 119 crore residents.

The 1951 Census report by R.B. Vaghaiwalla, the Superintendent of Census Operations for Assam, Manipur and Tripura, shows that the NRC was conceived primarily as a Census and administrative tool rather than a citizenship-verification exercise.

"An important innovation of this Census was the preparation of the NRC, in which all important Census data was transcribed from the Census slips. The Register uses the same symbols and abbreviations and is a copy of the Census slips," the 1951 report said.

Missing NRC entries were copied from Census slips, and missing Census slips were recreated from NRC entries under a special reconciliation exercise undertaken by Vaghaiwalla.

According to Vaghaiwalla, the register was intended to be maintained permanently and updated by village officials, thereby providing continuity between Censuses. Though Section 15 of the Census Act, 1948 ensures confidentiality and says that "records of census [are] not open to inspection nor admissible in evidence", the NRC was prepared using the data, establishing a precedent of using Census data to prepare the register.

A former Census official, speaking on the condition of anonymity, said the NPR and the Census were legally distinct exercises governed by different laws. The official pointed out that the update of the NRC in Assam in 2019 was not based on NPR data and required a separate data collection exercise.

On September 5, the RG&CCI advanced the Population Enumeration phase of Census 2027 in the poll-bound States of Uttar Pradesh, Punjab, Uttarakhand and Goa, while deferring the exercise in violence-hit Manipur.

Mr. Unni said that the decision to conduct the Census in four States ahead of the rest of the country could lead to under-enumeration of migrant workers, particularly from Uttar Pradesh.

Mr. Unni also questioned the utility of some of the new questions, particularly those relating to identity documents and vaccination history.

"Many of these details are already available in administrative databases. It is not clear what statistical purpose some of these questions will serve," he said.

CONCERNS OVER THE CENSUS QUESTIONS

The questions to be asked to every individual during the population enumeration phase of the 2027 Census were notified by the Central government last month. In a significant departure from the past, a number of personal details, which cannot be used to generate any useful statistics, are



being sought. This prompts a look at the individual questions, their possible uses and the implications of their inclusion in the Census.

The new questions in Census 2027 ask respondents to provide the details of the parents of every individual and spouses of the married persons in the household, nationality as declared, permanent residential address, place of COVID 19 vaccination, total number of bank accounts, mobile number, Aadhaar number and Voter ID number (if available), Passport number (if an Indian passport holder), and driving license availability.

The United Nations defines a population census as, “the total process of planning, collecting, processing, analysing, disseminating and evaluating demographic, economic and social data at the smallest geographic level pertaining, at a specified time, to all persons in a country or in a well-delimited part of a country”. It is evident from this definition that a census is viewed as an exercise to generate statistics for the use of the government in particular and the society in general.

One of the essential principles of official statistics is confidentiality of individual information. Principle 6 of the United Nations’ Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics states, “the individual data collected by statistical agencies for statistical compilation, whether they refer to natural or legal persons, are to be strictly confidential and used exclusively for statistical purposes.” India has adopted these principles.

Use of ‘name’ in the Census

As the Census is used to generate data useful for policy and planning purposes, information provided by an individual is used only for compiling the relevant statistics. The individual’s name has no relevance in the exercise, except to identify them during enumeration. Names have merely been placeholders and have not been present in Census databases. In fact, there have been no attempts in the Indian Censuses to computerise names at all. There are countries that include the name and provide access to past Census data for genealogical studies. For example, past data from the U.S. Census can be accessed 72 years after the Census exercise. There is no such rule or policy in India.

Now, respondents will have to provide the names of every individual in the household, along with those of their parents. This will be a tall order for respondents from institutional households, such as wardens of hostels, old-age homes, jails etc. A large number of children are now studying away from home, living in hostels, as paying guests, etc. February, being towards the end of the academic year, means they may not be at home. So, they would not be eligible for enumeration at their normal households. Even in normal households, the respondent may not know the details regarding the grandparents who may be living with them.

COVID -19 vaccination is now an old story. After the pandemic subsided, people have not been taking any vaccination and there have been no suggestions from the government to the people to get vaccinated. In view of this, it is highly doubtful whether information on the place of vaccination, which could have been as much as five years ago, could be put to any meaningful use.

Personal details

Information on mobile number, Aadhaar number and voter ID number are being asked ‘if available’. Also required is the passport number for those holding Indian passports. The meaning of the phrase ‘if available’ is not clear. A person may have one or more of these identifiers.



However, it is possible that the respondent may not have these numbers, possibly with the exception of the mobile number.

The question is whether 'if available' refers to availability with the concerned member of the household or with the respondent. If the phrase is interpreted as availability with the respondent, then it will not be available to the Census as a large proportion of the respondents are likely to be the housewives or elderly parents who may not keep these details of every member of the household. A similar problem arises with institutional households.

These numbers are not data items that could be used for any useful tabulations, except to determine whether these numbers are available. It is impossible to visualise more than 30 lakh Census enumerators spending time with the households to correctly record these numbers. The enumerators may not have the time and patience to obtain the relevant records and collect the information. Respondents in institutional households would find it impossible to provide the information, as they may not have these records with them. Even the individuals living there may have left their records back home. In normal households, visitors and domestic servants living for the entire duration of the Census enumeration period are to be enumerated. Would the respondent be able to obtain these details from them? If the respondents in domestic households with visitors/servants eligible for enumeration there and those in institutional households misuse the information, is there any protection for the individual, as the respondent is not a Census functionary?

Nationality as declared may also not serve any useful purpose. Illegal immigrants may declare that they are Indian nationals. After trying this question in the 1951 and 1961 censuses, it was discarded from 1971 onwards. It is worth noting here that after a lot of debates, the U.S. Census decided not to include the question on citizenship in the 2020 Census.

The total number of bank accounts held by each person is useful for preparing a distribution of persons by the number of bank accounts. For those with bank accounts, this information can probably be obtained by tabulating the number of accounts against each PAN, which is necessary to open a bank account. If the plan is only to determine the number of persons without any bank account, then it is enough to ask whether the person has a bank account. It is difficult for a simple schoolteacher appointed as an enumerator to ask the question on the number of bank accounts and get a correct answer from the upper-class respondents, who may not even be ready to answer the simpler questions.

Possible information for NPR

While preparing for the 2021 Census there were proposals for updating the National Population Register (NPR) during the Census exercise. However, several States objected to it. The Census is conducted by enumerators appointed by the State government under section 4(2) of the Census Act, 1948. Hence, the State governments may have the right to refuse the use of their staff to do any work that is not part of the Census. The Citizenship Act does not mention anything about the State government's role in the preparation of the NPR.

The information on the parents of individuals, permanent address, nationality, etc is very useful for preparing/updating the NPR, which is to form the basis for preparing the National Register of Citizens. It appears that the collection of such information through the Census questionnaire, though it does not aid the generation of any additional statistics, is aimed at the preparation/updating of the NPR. However, including such information in the Census



questionnaire and extracting it later to share it to another organisation within the government may violate the principle of confidentiality.

There is no objection to preparing a population register or a citizen register, and its importance and uses are well recognised. However, collecting information required for creating an NPR should be done through a process that is transparent and has legal basis, without jeopardising the Census.

The length of the questionnaire

With 40 questions, many requiring descriptive answers, the time taken for a household is likely to result in respondent fatigue. The respondent is required to answer similar questions for every individual in the household. This may result in the respondent becoming uninterested and potentially giving casual replies.

Furthermore, by adding questions that require recording the names and addresses, the workload of the enumerator has increased significantly.

By loading the Census with questions that are of no use for generating statistics, the quality of Census data may be seriously affected.

HOW SHOULD RUPPS BE REGULATED?

The story so far:

A 'BBC News Hindi' investigation has revealed that six Registered Unrecognised Political Parties (RUPP), all based in Gujarat, had received donations of around ₹1,700 crores for the year 2023-24. This is higher than the total received by five nationally recognised political parties, except the BJP, for the same period, which stood at ₹1,480 crores.

What are registered parties?

Political parties are an association or body of individuals that can be formed by citizens. Section 29A of the Representation of the People Act, 1951 (RP Act) lays down the requirements for registration of a political party with the Election Commission (EC). After satisfactory scrutiny of the documents submitted, the EC registers a political party as a RUPP. The RUPPs enjoy the following benefits — (a) tax exemption for donations received under Section 12 of the Income Tax Act, 2025, (b) common symbol for contesting general elections to the Lok Sabha/State Assemblies, and (c) 20 'star campaigners' during election campaign. The RUPPs are required to maintain the details of individual donors above twenty thousand rupees in a financial year and submit them to the poll body every year. As per section 29C of the Representation of the People Act, failure to furnish these details will result in losing income tax exemption.

The RUPPs, under the Income Tax Act, 2025, are required to accept donations in excess of two thousand rupees only through cheque or bank transfers.

What are the issues?

As per the EC notification, India had more than 2,800 RUPPs as of July, but only around 750 contested the 2024 general elections. This has resulted in the moniker — 'letter pad parties' — for the rest of the RUPPs. The RP Act does not confer explicit powers on the EC to de-register a political party if it fails to contest elections, conduct inner-party elections, or lodge requisite



returns. In the Indian National Congress vs Institute of Social Welfare & Ors (2002), the Supreme Court held that the EC does not have the power to de-register any political party under the RP Act. It may de-register only under exceptional circumstances, such as registration obtained by fraud, the political party ceasing to have allegiance to the Constitution, or being declared unlawful by the government. The EC periodically publishes the list of de-listed RUPPs. The October 2025 notification contains over 800 such parties.

However, the six RUPPs — Aam Janmat Party, Bharatiya National Janata Dal, Garib Kalyan Party, New India United Party, Satyawadi Rakshak Party and the Swatantrata Abhividyakti Party — remain on the list of active RUPPs as per the EC notification in October 2025. This is because they managed to field a total of 15 candidates during the 2024 Lok Sabha elections. The Association for Democratic Reforms periodically publishes reports on the status of submission of annual reports of RUPPs. In its July 2025 report, in which the annual reports of 2022-23 are analysed, it is stated that reports of only 26% of RUPPs are available in the public domain. Poor compliance with statutory requirements, coupled with a lack of transparency, results in these 'letter pad' parties being used as an opaque channel for tax evasion and money laundering.

What needs to be done?

The Law Commission, in its 255th report, had recommended amendments for de-registration of a political party if it fails to contest elections for ten consecutive years. The EC, in its memorandum for electoral reforms (2016), also suggested an amendment to the RP Act that would empower it to de-register a party. These are long-pending reforms that need to be carried out to empower the EC to act against non-serious parties, some of which are merely a façade for illegal financial transactions.

However, if parties contest elections merely to fulfil a statutory requirement, they could continue to misuse their tax exemptions and be used for money laundering and other nefarious activities. In the present digital world, it is not difficult for the Income Tax Department and other enforcement agencies to monitor the transactions of such parties and take strict action against any wrongdoing. This would act as a deterrent against the misuse of the benefits and exemptions available to political parties. The EC had also suggested that tax exemptions be provided only for political parties that win seats in Lok Sabha or Legislative Assembly elections. This can be viewed as an undemocratic and extreme measure, as there are parties that consistently contest elections without electoral success. Instead, similar to the 1% vote threshold for allotting common symbols to RUPPs, a suitable vote percentage threshold may be stipulated by law for RUPPs to avail of tax exemptions on donations received.

WHY IS THE CENTRE OPPOSED TO TOTALISERS?

The story so far:

On September 1, a Supreme Court Bench of Chief Justice of India Surya Kant and Justices Joymalya Bagchi and V. Mohana asked the Central government to examine the possibility of introducing totaliser machines for counting votes recorded in Electronic Voting Machines (EVM) in order to protect the secrecy of booth-wise voting patterns and prevent electors at individual booths from being identified and potentially victimised.

The case dates back to 2014, when two individuals, Yogesh Gupta and Imran Khan, moved a public interest petition (PIL) seeking a direction to the poll panel to mix votes cast at various polling



stations in a constituency to prevent candidates from intimidating voters in places that had rebuffed them.

What is a totaliser?

A totaliser is a proposal aimed at preventing candidates from determining the voting pattern of individual polling booths. A totaliser allows the votes cast in about 14 polling booths to be counted together. At present, the votes are tallied booth by booth. It was developed by Bharat Electronics Limited, Bengaluru, and Electronics Corporation of India Limited, Hyderabad.

A totaliser is an interface connected to the main control unit of a cluster of 14 EVMs. Pressing the result button on the totaliser gives the consolidated votes polled by each candidate across the 14 EVMs, without revealing the voting pattern of individual polling areas.

Why was the petition seeking totalisers filed in the Supreme Court?

Gupta and Khan had moved a PIL seeking a direction to the poll panel to mix up the votes cast in the various polling stations in a constituency. They said that it was necessary to prevent the candidates from intimidating voters in areas that had rebuffed them.

As part of their arguments, the duo gave the example of the alleged intimidation by late former Maharashtra Deputy Chief Minister, Ajit Pawar, in the Baramati constituency during the last general election. Pawar had allegedly threatened the voters that his party, the Nationalist Congress Party, would be able to detect voting patterns from the EVM readings and cut off their water supply if they snubbed it.

Booths in India are generally marked geographically. If there are social groups that are segregated or living in clusters, which is the case in many parts of rural India (and increasingly in urban slums as well), it is possible to roughly identify if a particular community that is numerically large in an area with a specific polling booth or station has voted in a certain direction. With the advent of advanced geospatial tools, it is even easier today to not only correlate polling booth trends and social settings but also draw causal insights. This was the fear expressed by the petitioners in 2014.

What has been the stand of the Central government?

The Centre has always opposed totalisers. In 2017, the Centre had told the apex court that identifying booth-wise voting patterns did not lead to voter intimidation and that there was no need to stop the disclosure of booth-wise results. It argued that knowledge of booth-wise vote shares allowed the candidates to work harder in areas where support for them was low, thus producing better results for everyone involved.

In 2018, Additional Solicitor General Maninder Singh told the Bench, which was led by then CJI Dipak Misra, that installing a totaliser could lead to data breach even before vote counting began.

More recently, the Centre again raised the same apprehension. This prompted the Court to give the Election Commission two weeks to respond to this fear.

A Law Ministry affidavit told the Court that a group of ministers headed by the then Home Minister Rajnath Singh had decided last September that "intimidation/victimisation of voters as apprehended may not occur on a larger scale in this era of media activism".



What has been the Election Commission's stand?

The Election Commission has been consistently supportive of introducing totalisers. It first suggested the measure to the United Progressive Alliance government in 2008. In a 2018 submission before the Supreme Court, the poll body stated that "a time has come for introduction of totaliser for counting of the votes." That support has continued into the current round of hearings. The poll body informed the Court that it had earlier recommended the totaliser system to the Union government. The senior advocate representing the Election Commission backed the goal of protecting voter anonymity, while also flagging some practical and legal challenges in actually implementing the proposal, including concerns around booth-wise verification and VVPAT.

What has the Supreme Court said now?

The Supreme Court asked the Central government to state its position on introducing a totaliser system for counting votes recorded through EVMs. The Court specifically sought to know if there are any impediments to introducing such a mechanism and if there would be any negative impact because of it. The Election Commission has also been asked to submit its proposal to the government.

VOTER LISTS SHRINK BY 15.7% IN 17 STATES AND U.T.S AFTER SIR

Since the 2024 Lok Sabha elections, voter lists of 17 States and Union Territories, where Special Intensive Revision (SIR) is under way in its third phase, have shrunk by 15.7% as per the draft rolls published by the Election Commission.

The cumulative total of voters in these States and U.T.s fell from 35,50,50,008 during the Lok Sabha polls to 29,93,00,115 in the draft rolls published after the SIR. Maharashtra recorded the largest drop in absolute numbers, losing 15,896,198 electors or 17.08% in the draft phase, while Delhi and Chandigarh registered the sharpest dips in percentage at 35.89% and 31.84% respectively.

Since the polls and till the cut-off date for the enumeration phase, these States/U.T.s had added around 57.75 lakh voters, which took the cumulative total of voters to 36,08,07,394. Out of it, 6.15 crore voters have been deleted as per the draft rolls.

The additions after the polls were heavily driven by Maharashtra, which added 47.92 lakh voters, while 10 other States, including Haryana, added about 9.83 lakh.

Delhi was among the remaining Six States/U.T.s which saw a decrease in the number of voters after the polls. While it had 1,52,14,638 voters during the polls, its pre-SIR rolls had 1,45,10,299 electors, a drop of more than 7 lakh.

It was followed by Uttarakhand (4.7 lakh), Odisha (3.17 lakh), Chandigarh (1.44 lakh), Punjab (1.1 lakh) and Arunachal Pradesh (10,937).

The third phase of SIR is being carried out in 16 States and three Union Territories. Of these, draft rolls have been published for 17 States/Union Territories, barring those for Nagaland and Tripura which would be out on September 20 and October 21, respectively. The numbers in the final voter lists could increase as the EC provides a window for people to submit claims and objections for additions and deletions from the draft as well as registration of new voters.



The rollout of final lists will start in States soon, with Mizoram, Sikkim and Manipur taking the lead on September 6.

Interestingly, out of these 6.15 crore voters deleted in this phase of SIR, only 1.11 crore are marked dead. Among the rest, 4.52 crore are marked “absent” and 49.58 crore as “having multiple enrolments” and around 3 lakh in the “others” category.

The SIR exercise is over in Bihar, West Bengal, Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Puducherry, Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat, Chhattisgarh, Goa, Andaman and Nicobar Islands and Lakshadweep. In Assam, due to legalities related to the National Register of Citizens (NRC), a “special revision” was conducted.

With the third phase, the exercise would cover the entire country except Himachal Pradesh, Jammu and Kashmir and Ladakh. The SIR schedule for these States would be announced later.

1.85 LAKH NAMES OUT OF MANIPUR, SIKKIM POLL ROLLS AFTER SIR

About 6.3% of voter names in Manipur and 11.2% in Sikkim have been removed from the electoral rolls during the special intensive revision (SIR) exercise. The final photo electoral rolls were published in both northeastern States on Sunday.

Before the SIR exercise began, Manipur had 20,93,076 voters, and Sikkim had 4,71,081. After the SIR, the names of 1.85 lakh voters — 1,32,456 in Manipur and 52,614 in Sikkim — have been deleted from the rolls. Manipur now has 19,60,620 eligible voters, while Sikkim has 4,18,467.

Before and during the SIR exercise, Manipur’s Kuki-Zo groups expressed fears that community members displaced after the ethnic conflict that erupted on May 3, 2023, would be deleted from the electoral rolls though the government sought to dispel such apprehensions.

More women voters

In Manipur, women voters (10,06,962) outnumber men (9,53,350), recording a gender ratio of 1,056 women for every 1,000 men electors. The State has 308 third-gender electors.

In a statement, the office of the Chief Electoral Officer (CEO) said the final photo electoral rolls were published in compliance with the instructions issued by the Election Commission of India. The draft electoral rolls published on July 5 had 19,34,399 electors.

Altogether, 96,985 claims and objections filed during the claims and objections period were processed for the final rolls. In addition, all forms received before July 5 were processed for final publication. “A total of 56,871 electors have been included, and a total of 30,650 electors have been deleted from the draft electoral roll,” said the statement.

The CEO’s office said it received 19,34,399 of the total enumeration forms generated for the electors. Altogether, 1,58,677 electors whose enumeration forms were not received were excluded from the draft rolls. Of them, 72,473 were identified as shifted, 43,000 as deceased, 34,740 as absent, 7,394 as duplicate entries, and 1,070 under other categories.

The Sikkim CEO’s office in Gangtok said the State’s final electoral roll has 4,18,467 voters, after the deletion of 52,614 names.



The draft rolls released in July had 4,33,294 electors, of whom 3,61,159 or 83.35% were successfully mapped with their own or parents' electoral details from the previous qualifying rolls or the last SIR. The remaining 72,135 electors (16.65%) could not be mapped, an official statement said.

'Logical discrepancies'

Among the mapped electors, the Election Commission's digital system identified 52,384 as having "logical discrepancies".

"A total of 1,24,519 electors, comprising those in the unmapped and logical discrepancy categories, were issued notices to appear for hearings and establish their eligibility. Following hearings and verification, 16,485 electors were found ineligible," the statement said.

Another 324 electors were deleted through Form-7 on grounds including death or shifting from the address. The total number of electors deleted during the claims and objections process was 16,809.

The final roll includes 2,12,534 men voters, 2,05,931 women, and two from the third gender.

MANIPUR MUSICIAN KILLED IN DELHI; 7 HELD, MINOR DETAINED FOR LYNCHING

A musician from Manipur, Chongtham Vikram Singh, living in Delhi's Ashram area, died on Monday of injuries suffered in an alleged assault by a group on Sunday night.

The Delhi Police, which registered an FIR under the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (BNS) for mob lynching, arrested seven men and detained a 15-year-old boy in connection with the case.

The accused were engaged in packaging and delivering food from nearby dhabas and were aged between 15 and 36, the police said.

Prior threats

In his complaint to the police, Yaiphaba, the victim's son, said his father had told him on the way to the hospital that people from a nearby dhaba had attacked him. Some of them had previously threatened Singh after he complained of excessive noise, the complaint said.

Singh, a guitarist and musician from Imphal, has been part of rock bands but has not been working for the past few years. He was also a music teacher.

Former Manipur Chief Minister and BJP leader N. Biren Singh said he was "deeply saddened" and "deeply concerned by the incident". "With evidence now emerging in connection with the incident, I urge the Delhi Police to take swift and appropriate action, thoroughly investigate the matter, and ensure that justice is delivered at the earliest," he said.

FIR registered

The Delhi Police registered an FIR against unknown persons under Sections 103(2) (involves murder on the grounds of race, caste or community by a group of five or more persons) and 3(5) (crimes committed by a group with common intent) of BNS.



The police said that “the circumstances leading to his assault and death are being ascertained and necessary legal action is being taken as per law”. The police have identified the arrested as Bharat Kumar, Pramod, Ramzan Khan, Deepanshu, Mohan Vishwakarma, Vijay, and Mannu.

Around 11.30 p.m. on Sunday, Yaiphaba and his mother were at home when they heard loud noises and Singh screaming. Yaiphaba said that when he opened the door, he found four to five people assaulting his father, “kicking and punching him”. When he raised an alarm and tried to stop them, the attackers fled. Yaiphaba said he had seen the faces of some attackers.

Yaiphaba and his mother took Singh to a private hospital where he died on Monday morning. His family members said the body was taken to the All Institute of Medical Sciences for a post-mortem examination.

KARNATAKA LIMITS RENDITION OF VANDE MATARAM TO 2 STANZAS

The Karnataka government has issued an order stating that only the first two stanzas of the National Song Vande Mataram are to be sung at State functions. The stand is in line with that of the Congress at the national level.

However, the entire six stanzas will be played or sung in functions involving the President, Vice-President, Prime Minister, or Governor, the order states. The order, issued by the Department of Personnel and Administrative Reforms (DIPR), follows a Cabinet decision.

The order acknowledges that Vande Mataram played an important role in instilling nationalism, unity, and patriotism among the people of the country during the Indian national movement for freedom.

It refers to the guidelines issued by the Union Ministry of Home Affairs prescribing the singing of the official version of the song, as well as the procedure to be followed while singing or playing it at various government and public programmes.

However, the order says that the State government has considered the need to maintain ‘uniformity, dignity and appropriate protocol’ with regard to the singing of Vande Mataram.

FALLING EDIFICE

Delhi’s ambition as an education hub is at odds with its civic infrastructure

The collapse of a five-storey building in Delhi, being run as a private hostel that killed seven and injured five in a densely populated colony abutting Delhi University’s South Campus, has brought to light the twin issues of haphazard development in the capital city’s residential areas and the shortage of affordable housing for students. With over 70,000 students entering Delhi University every year and almost half of them needing accommodation on a student budget, the city has failed to keep up with the growing demand. The University has, for all practical purposes, absolved itself of the responsibility, citing lack of land, leaving private players to cash in and run paying guest accommodations or private hostels that are not regulated. In a setup where every extra bed means more revenue, matchbox-sized rooms, often located in buildings that flout building bylaws and fire safety regulations and have no ventilation, are what several students call home. As soon as they arrive in the capital, students from many parts of the country realise that they are paying to live in the city not just in monetary terms but with their safety, security and sanity.



The Delhi government says that it wants the city to be a national education hub and harness the soft power of its youth, but that will be not possible without addressing the need for affordable, safe student housing. The Delhi government has suspended five senior officers of the civic body, ordered a probe and announced that it was working on introducing a stringent policy under which every building used for public activity would be required to undergo periodic structural audits and obtain safety certifications. It must go beyond these reactive measures to seek more durable solutions. In 2024, the basement of a coaching centre flooded due to heavy rains claiming the lives of three civil service aspirants. After that incident as well, probes were ordered, basements were sealed and legal action was taken against owners but a larger systemic change remains elusive. The Centre and the Government of NCT must work together with educational institutions to develop more residential, travel and learning facilities for students. The introduction of four-year undergraduate programmes also means that students will stay on for an additional year, increasing the pressure on accommodation. Private hostels can be part of the solution, but crumbling civic infrastructure, illegal construction and lack of safety audits must be tackled through policy and strict enforcement.

PERILOUS RETREAT

Gram sabhas must have a veto on issues relating to tribal land

Tribal organisations should recognise the Indian state's attempt to lower the legal barriers erected by the Forest Rights Act (FRA) as a threat to their survival. The Committee on Public Undertakings' suggestion that a project require the consent of only most, rather than all, gram sabhas affected by that project, as the FRA intends in spirit, portends a significant jurisprudential change. A regime that deems the acquiescence of 70%-75% of affected gram sabhas to suffice will reduce gram sabhas from democratic bodies protecting the constitutional rights of its specific inhabitants to corporate stakeholders. If the rule enters force, a project developer may bypass the consent of a village located directly within a proposed reservoir, say, while ensuring that less affected villages have provided their no-objection certificates. The matter is of a piece with the political fight over classifying tribal communities: by altering the demographic composition of who qualifies as a community member, the state will have an easier time splitting a village assembly and engineering consent. The refusal of the Tribal Affairs Ministry to claim jurisdiction over this issue creates a dangerous regulatory vacuum that leaves the Centre and State governments unchecked to rewrite the rules by which forested land is diverted for non-forest use. While the FRA does not include a clause requiring a no-objection certificate from every affected gram sabha, it is untrue that there is at present no legal requirement that gram sabha decisions can be bypassed.

The government has been rapidly scaling up energy infrastructure, including the long-stalled Teesta-IV project, to meet macroeconomic goals while, in a previous avatar, having passed the FRA to undo "historical injustices" meted out to forest-dependent communities. But the path the state seems willing to pursue, hewing to the notion that the consent requirement was never part of the FRA, is plainly ignoble. If the Environment Ministry entertains the idea, it must change the relevant rules or legislation openly and democratically. The Tribal Affairs Ministry resorting to a technicality, between the FRA and the Environment Ministry's rules, to recuse itself is hardly better as the bureaucratic manoeuvre could strip forest-dependent communities of their most potent legal instrument. The foundation of these communities' livelihoods, culture, identity, and political autonomy is land, so they have fought to resist displacement and dispossession and to secure customary collective ownership. In recognition of the social and environment services ST communities continue to render in India and their contribution to national development,



including helping meet India's climate commitments, the Centre and States must also strengthen the powers conferred by the Land Acquisition, Rehabilitation and Resettlement and Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Acts to gram sabhas in Scheduled Areas.

WHAT IS 'ONE NATION, ONE TIME'?

The story so far:

On August 27, the Centre notified the Legal Metrology (Indian Standard Time) Rules, 2026, making the Indian Standard Time (IST) the single reference for legal, administrative, commercial, and other official purposes across the country.

"The Rules will come into force 180 days from the date of their publication in the Official Gazette... The 180-day period will allow government departments, businesses, institutions and other organisations to make the required changes to their systems before the Rules come into force," the government said in a statement on August 30.

Why does India need a common time reference?

The government said the need for a common time reference has increased with the growing use of digital and technology-based systems. Banking and digital payments, telecommunications, railways, power systems, computer networks, and government records depend on accurate time and time stamps. "Differences between time sources can affect the coordination and recording of such activities. The Rules are aimed at ensuring that important systems across the country use accurate and consistent Indian Standard Time," it said.

The common time reference is expected to support accurate time-stamping of banking and digital payment transactions, coordination among railways, airports, and other transport systems, reliable functioning of telecommunication and internet networks, precise time-keeping in power systems, upkeep of government and legal records, and coordination of emergency services.

How did the push for a common time begin?

On January 27, 2025, the Department of Consumer Affairs had notified the Draft Legal Metrology (Indian Standard Time) Rules, 2025, proposing to synchronise time across India. It had teamed up with National Physical Laboratory (NPL) and India Space Research Organisation (ISRO) to "disseminate IST with millisecond to microsecond accuracy" from the five legal metrology laboratories.

IST, according to the government, is based on "Coordinated Universal Time (UTC) with a +5:30-hour offset (and) is maintained by the CSIR-National Physical Laboratory (CSIR-NPL)."

The government said that despite its importance, IST was not mandatorily adopted by all telecom service providers and internet service providers. It said many of them continued to rely on foreign time sources such as GPS. "Synchronising all networks and systems to IST is essential for national security, real-time applications and the smooth operation of critical infrastructure," it had said last year.

The government constituted a high-power inter-ministerial committee to formulate a policy framework, regulation, and legislation for the adoption of IST under the Legal Metrology Act, 2009. Helmed by the Secretary (Consumer Affairs), the committee had representatives from NPL, ISRO, IIT Kanpur, the National Informatics Centre, the Indian Computer Emergency Response



Team (CERT-In), the Securities and Exchange Board of India, the railways and telecom departments, among others.

What do the latest Rules mean?

According to the CSIR-NPL, the trademark for “IST® had been registered in 2024” but the time was not “legalised” in India. “IST is generated using advanced atomic clocks and satellite links to ensure that it is traceable to Coordinated Universal Time (UTC), the international reference time, with an uncertainty of less than 3 nanoseconds. The IST is widely disseminated with millisecond accuracy with NTP (Network Protocol Service) servers at CSIR-NPL,” the CSIR-NPL says on its website.

The CSIR-NPL says ISRO has been “given traceability to IST, with nanosecond accuracy” through satellite links to NavIC, India’s independent satellite navigation system.

The Rules emphasise reducing dependence on foreign satellite-based time sources. The Rules enable the use of NavIC, along with other approved Indian timing sources, for secure and reliable time dissemination.

As part of the ‘One Nation, One Time’ initiative, the government in July 2026 commissioned a White Rabbit Technology-based IST Dissemination Demonstration Network at the Regional Reference Standard Laboratory in Bengaluru. It said the new system “upholds the sovereignty of the nation’s digital infrastructure by eliminating India’s reliance on foreign time sources like GPS”. This would provide critical sectors “maximum protection” against cyber-attacks and data manipulation. The Bengaluru pilot demonstrated how IST could be disseminated across sectors.

GROUND CONTROL

ISRO must focus on space technology as a tool for development

The irony was evident: on the day the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) had its greatest success of the year — the launch of its first geosynchronous imaging satellite (EOS-05) on a temperamental GSLV — its employee organisations demanded clarity on its long-term plans. But this grievance was long in the making. Since the Indian Space Policy of April 2023, the message has been clear that ISRO would, one day in the unspecified future, stop making commercial satellites and launch rockets. Clearly inspired by NASA, it expects to focus on ambitious exploratory missions and, literally, moonshots. Why would a space agency ramping up space missions upset a section of employees? This is not the paradox it presents. The letter, co-signed by nine employee associations, and addressed to the chairman, seeks clarity on staff-strength, recruitment and the outsourcing of core functions. ISRO says that it will “not be privatised or reduced”; IN-SPACE, set up to facilitate private participation, says the agency will “not be diminished”, only that the industry’s role must grow. Both are silent on the core concern — potential job losses. This brings up an underlying tension that ISRO must deal with: does its vision of India’s space sector align with its founding principles, of not being enamoured of space races and being laser-focused on space technology as a tool for social development? Or is the image of power, where India is one of a handful of space-faring countries with a mushrooming of ‘space startups’, now the bedrock of that vision?

With a budget 16 times the Department of Space’s — \$24.4 billion against ₹13,705 crore — NASA too has scaled back since the 1960s: from 0.7% of American GDP in 1966 to 0.1% now, and from 36,000 civil servants at Apollo’s peak to about 14,000 today. Unlike NASA, which in its early years



designed and made every nut and bolt, ISRO has always had a manufacturing relationship with the private sector (Walchandnagar, L&T). What is different is that the buzz is not about established companies building on experience but new entrants with fleeting foreign capital, most interested in satellite data as a service. No sector can hope to be static; survival can mean significant changes to how it operates. There is yet no serious reckoning with the might of China's space programme. If India's space sector in 2035 is to be known as a source of export earnings, a nucleus of value-added services that brings in jobs and absorbs skilled labour, then hard choices taken today may be worth it. But jumping onto a bandwagon of space — as fuel for the science fiction fantasy of billionaires and colonial notions of conquest, to align with some misplaced notion of an 'exclusive' club — is foolhardy. ISRO must have a transparent policy that spells this out.

STEADY GAZE

ISRO's EOS-05 satellite has uses in varied areas from security to weather

The successful launch of the Indian Space Research Organisation's (ISRO) EOS-05 satellite is India's first earth-imaging satellite bound for a geosynchronous orbit, meaning that it is locked-in to the earth's rotation and can be tuned to continuously observe the same location. The rocket placed it in a transfer orbit early on Friday; onboard thrusters are expected to raise it to its final perch at some 36,000 kilometres above the earth's surface over the coming weeks. From there it can track fast-changing events such as floods, cyclones and forest fires, and monitor crops, forests, water bodies and land use. Unlike a conventional camera, its sensors examine how the earth's surface reflects different wavelengths of light, helping distinguish vegetation, water and other land cover. Because it is perched farther away than conventional low-orbit imaging satellites, its strength is not ultra-fine detail but the ability to return to the same broad areas very frequently. India has long had eyes in geostationary orbit, but they have been weather satellites, namely the INSAT-3D series. Its dedicated earth-imaging satellites have operated in low, polar or sun-synchronous orbits. Flying a few hundred kilometres up, they capture much finer detail, but move constantly around the planet, imaging a different strip of territory on successive passes and taking days to return.

EOS-05's timing could hardly be better. Given the devastation by the Bhote Koshi deluge in Nepal, which has claimed 1,344 lives, such satellites can play some role in understanding changes in landforms and how they may act as precursors to glacier-breaks and avalanches. Or, as winter approaches in north India, in establishing whether stubble fires over Punjab have genuinely declined or burning has simply shifted in time to slip past the polar satellites. ISRO has described the EOS-05 as a "strategic" satellite, a term that stretches from security to weather. All of this is premised on the data reaching a wide enough set of analysts who can turn the images into forecasts and actionable insight. There is cheer, too, that ISRO's first successful launch of 2026 — and another vote of confidence in the cryogenic stage that failed the agency in 2021 — comes after setbacks. But that does not soften the temperamental nature of launches. Two consecutive failures of the PSLV, the agency's workhorse since the 1990s, in May last year and again this January, both traced to the third stage, suggest that dependability is not infallibility. The usefulness of its payloads, and the cadence of its launches, should be ISRO's calling card, rather than any single launch as the hallmark of institutional credibility.



ARE NICOTINE POUCHES BEYOND THE LAW?

The story so far:

A new study led by the ICMR-National Institute of Cancer Prevention and Research has found that nicotine pouches are reaching Indian cities through online platforms, hookah shops and gig delivery services. The study comes after a warning from the World Health Organization in May 2026 about the dangers these products pose. Yet it is far from settled which Indian law, if any, governs them.

What are nicotine pouches?

A nicotine pouch is a small, tobacco-free, tea-bag-like sack containing nicotine, flavourings and plant-based fibres. Users place the pouch between the lip and gum for up to an hour, allowing nicotine to be absorbed directly into the bloodstream without smoke, vapour or spitting.

Does COTPA cover nicotine pouches?

The Cigarettes and Other Tobacco Products Act, 2003 (COTPA) governs the marketing, advertising and sale of cigarettes and other tobacco products. But its definition of tobacco products does not extend to all products containing nicotine. Had the legislature intended to cover every extract of the tobacco plant, it could have said so. Restrictions on the freedom of trade and commerce must be strictly construed and since nicotine pouches are not among the products listed in the Cigarettes Act, they fall outside it.

Are they regulated by the Drugs Act?

Nicotine is not listed as a drug in any schedule of the Drugs and Cosmetics Act, 1940. Nicotine patches and gums have, however, been approved as drugs by the Drug Controller General of India for therapeutic use in treating nicotine addiction. Schedule K under the Drugs and Cosmetics Rules, 1945 lists gums and lozenges and exempts them from licensing and prescription requirements if they contain less than 2 mg of nicotine.

If nicotine were not considered a drug at all, there would be no reason to exempt certain nicotine products in Schedule K. The very fact that only some nicotine products are exempted suggests that all others are meant to be regulated by the Drugs Act.

Against this, pouches are arguably unlike patches and gums. They make no therapeutic claim and do not purport to treat addiction; they are a substitute for cigarettes. On this reading, they do not qualify as drugs under the Drugs Act.

Why are they not covered by the law banning vapes?

The import and sale of vapes is banned by the Prohibition of Electronic Cigarettes Act, 2019 ("PECA"). If vapes were drugs, no separate legislation would have been needed: the government could have regulated them, or refused licences, under the Drugs Act. The enactment of PECA therefore suggests that the Drugs Act did not give it adequate power to ban them. Nicotine pouches are different from vapes: they contain no electronic device and produce neither smoke nor vapour. They are consequently not covered by PECA.



Could pouches be treated as food?

The Prevention of Food Adulteration Act and the Food Safety and Standards Act define food broadly: any processed, partially processed or unprocessed substance intended for human consumption. Court rulings on supari and chewing tobacco establish that the definition has a very wide amplitude, encompassing items that are chewed rather than swallowed. It is arguable, then, that nicotine pouches could fall within the broad definition of food.

Can pouches be imported into India?

Import restrictions flow from two statutes: the Foreign Trade (Development and Regulation) Act, 1992 and the Customs Act, 1962. The Foreign Trade Act empowers the Central government to prohibit, restrict or regulate imports; the Directorate General of Foreign Trade (DGFT) administers this and publishes the ITC-HS classification listing which goods are free, restricted or banned. Section 11 of the Customs Act allows the government to prohibit goods wholly or partly by notification, on grounds that include the protection of human, animal or plant life.

After the World Customs Organization updated the Harmonized System, a sub-category was introduced for oral nicotine products that do not involve combustion: 2404 91 30 covers tobacco-free single-use pouches of the Zyn or Lyft type, and 2404 91 90 covers other oral nicotine products not meant for therapeutic uses. These replaced a residual category for other manufactured tobacco substitutes; the codes for medicaments apply only where a product is strictly a cessation aid. Under the DGFT schedule and the rules of the Central Board of Indirect Taxes and Customs, goods under 2404 91 30 are “restricted”. Unlike “free” items, they cannot be cleared merely on payment of duty, and unlike “prohibited” e-cigarettes, they are not banned outright — but they require a specific licence or permission. In deciding, the DGFT cross-references the health and other ministries.

What about duty-free shops?

Nicotine pouches are currently available at a few duty-free stores at Indian airports. Such stores are licensed under Section 58 of the Customs Act and cannot claim to be entirely outside Indian law.

It is sometimes said that a duty-free shop lies outside the territory of India, and that it is the passenger who imports the goods on crossing customs control. In *Flemingo Duty Free Shop Pvt. Ltd. v. Shri Kaushik Bhattacharya* (2024), the Calcutta High Court held that a duty-free store did not “import” goods into India, being deemed to be located outside it for the purposes of the Customs Act, and that legal metrology labelling requirements therefore did not apply. This should not be read to mean no Indian law applies to duty-free shops. If no Indian law applied to stores, could they stock arms and ammunition? If a crime was committed in a duty free store, which court would have jurisdiction to try the case? Which police station would have jurisdiction to register a case? That would be just too absurd.

Cigarettes, alcohol, jewellery, watches, food and small electronic items are some of the goods permitted at duty-free shops. Nicotine pouches are not — unless one can argue they are food. Given their customs classification as restricted, it is unlikely that any import licence has been granted.



What is the legal position?

The legal position is intricate, but the remedy is not. A notification under the Customs Act and the Foreign Trade Act banning the import and sale of nicotine pouches on health grounds would take minutes to issue. If the government moves as slowly as it did with vapes, pouches will become fashionable, and demand will settle in. A ban notified after that point will only produce smuggling on the scale we now see with vapes and cause damage to health that will be hard to mitigate.

WHY DOES INDIA'S FOOD SAFETY SYSTEM NEED A CLINT EASTWOOD?

Between May and July, Tukaram Mundhe, a 2005 batch IAS officer from Maharashtra reportedly walked into 3,137 restaurants, issued 764 improvement notices and shut down 165 eateries. And became a Singham-style folk hero in the process, celebrated on social media and news channels as the bureaucrat finally did what the system was supposed to do.

The thing is, Maharashtra's Food and Drug Administration has FoSCoS — the Food Safety and Standards Authority of India's integrated digital platform — which is supposed to track licensing, inspections, lab results, and penalties, with the whole chain digitised and connected. So you don't really need a vigilante — it should be quiet, boring, predictable and effective work. There's information, but no enforcement, not until Mundhe shows up. In theory, FoSCoS is elegant. Violation found lab test ordered results analysed audit conducted adjudication penalty issued restaurant closed. Clean. Logical.

The system has too many blockers and not enough doers, however. Violations sit in audit, then in adjudication, then in enforcement — with each step a checkpoint that can delay matters indefinitely.

How others fixed this

Singapore has inspections and rules just like we do, but here's the critical difference: when a restaurant fails inspection, the rating gets published right there on the storefront, online, everywhere customers see it. The owner doesn't fear the inspector or worry about fines — he fears customers who see "Failed" and go somewhere else instead. Revenue drops the same week, the owner fixes the problem instantly and market pressure does what bureaucracy never could. In Denmark and Australia, violations go public within days, the media picks it up... and if one district is lenient, the neighbouring district looks clean by comparison, so officials can't hide.

What we shouldn't do

India needs to stop building systems for bureaucrats and start building systems for customers. Publication of violation data should be automatic — online within 48 hours, in food delivery apps, restaurant windows, so customers know before they eat.

Celebrating Mundhe is basically admitting the system doesn't work. A folk hero in regulatory enforcement is like one in water supply — it means something fundamental is broken.

Singapore doesn't have headlines about its food safety commissioner, neither does Denmark, or Australia, because when a system works it's invisible. So the question isn't where to find the next Mundhe but how to build a system that doesn't need him.



Many Mundhes...

Also, I realised while I was writing this — the ‘Mundhe principle’ is portable. Let’s take a quick look at other industries and categories.

Real estate: Buyers have no idea if a building was flagged for structural issues. But if property listings showed municipal violation history, demand drops for buildings and developers would rush to fix.

TV channels: There’s official data on complaints against news channels for promoting fake news, hate speech, bias, and so on. But if that data appeared where you were choosing what to watch...

Schools: Education department inspects and finds violations, but parents don’t see it. Imagine school violation data published where you’re comparing institutions — suddenly, principals would move faster.

Hospitals: There is data on doctor complaints, disciplinary actions, malpractice cases.

Patients don’t see any of it. You pick a doctor on reputation or luck. But if that data appeared in the public domain...

The lesson isn’t that India needs more heroes. It’s that India needs to stop hoarding regulatory data.

CENTRAL INSTITUTE DEVELOPS APP TO MEASURE FISH SIZE HANDS-FREE

The Central Marine Fisheries Research Institute (CMFRI), headquartered in Kochi, Keralam, has claimed to have developed a smartphone application that can measure the length and width of fish without physically handling them.

Named MatsyaMetri, the application, which has been designed for fisheries scientists, researchers, and field survey teams, facilitates rapid and systematic collection of biological data to support fisheries assessment and management.

The application was developed by Eldho Varghese, a senior scientist at the institute, according to a CMFRI release.

Grinson George, Director of the institute, said the application simplified biological data collection by automatically recording measurements and generating length-frequency datasets. The application allows multiple individuals of the same fish species or aquatic resource to be measured under a single sampling session. Once measurements are completed, the system automatically generates length-frequency distributions using appropriate class intervals.

The recorded measurements and the corresponding photographs can be saved along with the sampling session and subsequently exported as a CSV file for further analysis.

THE DILEMMA OVER TREATMENT OF ANCIENT, RELIGIOUS TEXTS

Two ongoing debates point to the double standards that Indian progressives confront. The central question relates to how an old text could be read and spoken about in the context of the present.



Congress leader Rahul Gandhi has made the complete rejection of Manusmriti the defining agenda of his politics, and points out that it dictates inferior roles for women.

In Kerala, Islamic scholar Kanthapuram A.P. Aboobacker Musliar has said the Quran dictates an inferior role for women in society, saying, “The Holy Quran states that women should live confined within their homes and must not make public appearances.”

Both interpretations share the commonality that they attribute a certain meaning to two ancient texts — Manusmriti, said to have been written between the 2nd century BCE and the 3rd century CE; and the Quran, believed to be written between 610 CE and 632 CE. Mr. Gandhi’s attribution to the Manusmriti, shared by many progressive people, is reprobatory; the second, to the Quran, is appreciatory from the vantage point of the cleric.

Conflicting ethos

What is the right thing to do? All liberal, progressive voices tend to think the role ascribed to women in the Manusmriti or Quran is unacceptable in a modern, secular constitutional republic.

The foundational ethos of a democracy demands that every citizen, irrespective of gender, be guaranteed liberty, equality and dignity. But beyond that point, the contradictions begin, because there are two ways to treat the texts in these cases.

One approach is to reject the entire text — which some critics of the Manusmriti and the Quran do. Critics and admirers of all old texts have originalists among them. The originalists and the literalists can uphold or reject the original, literal meaning of the Manusmriti or the Quran as the case may be.

A second approach is to reinterpret the text and its context and argue that the verses in the Manusmriti and the Quran cannot be read in isolation, and that there are instances of women playing leadership roles in early Islamic societies and ancient Indian traditions and texts. They suggest that the core philosophies underlying these verses can be repurposed for the modern era.

The various camps

Now, let’s turn to who is in which camp. The camp that can be broadly termed Indian cultural nationalists thinks that, for the Quran, the text itself is the problem and there is little that innovative interpretation can do to redeem it. Yet, this same faction becomes fiercely defensive of texts that are part of their own traditions. They are out to liberate Muslim women, but see no correlation between the status of Hindu women and their religious practices.

A mirror image of the same is enacted by a predominant section of the secular progressive segment, which is effortless in its complete condemnation of the Manusmriti, but when it comes to the Quran, it seeks to offer explanations and interpretations in order to pointedly avoid the complete rejection of the text. They somehow think that admitting to the problematic aspects of minority traditions can help majoritarianism, and often twist themselves in knots.

Of course, there is a strand of secular rationalists that treats all religious texts with equal contempt. There is a long tradition of Quran followers who reject any local accretion or interpretation of its tenets and practices. There are also Muslims who reject the claims of people such as the cleric cited above. Selective reinterpretation and condemnation of texts are guided by both political calculation and theological fealty.



There can also be a third way — it does not matter what either the Manusmriti or the Quran says about anything in public life. One can take the view that life today is governed by the Constitution and the rule of law, and not by any ancient text. But that is easier said than done, because modern law also protects religious faiths. Moreover, the boundaries between state law and religious tradition are porous, constantly bleeding into one another.

So, progressive thinking could take three paths: to reject all texts in their entirety, to repurpose them in progressive terms or to be agnostic about them. All paths have pros and cons, and there is no easy answer. M.K. Gandhi, an astute nation-builder, took the second path of reinterpreting the traditions for the modern world.

SHORT NEWS

BRICS NEW DELHI DECLARATION

- The 18th BRICS Summit was held on September 12–13, 2026, in New Delhi. The official theme for the Summit is Building for Resilience, Innovation, Cooperation, and Sustainability.
- The BRICS grouping on September 12 adopted the New Delhi Declaration, laying out common positions on issues ranging from trade and terrorism to artificial intelligence and institutional reform.
- Set against the backdrop of tariffs, trade tensions, and geopolitical fragmentation, the grouping expressed its opposition to unilateral trade restrictions amid efforts to ease cross-border payments and investments across BRICS countries. — The declaration also contained several India-specific outcomes, from harsher language on cross-border terrorism to new cooperation mechanisms spanning digital public infrastructure, health and finance.
- At the BRICS Leaders' Summit, Prime Minister Narendra Modi proposed establishing a '**Seafarers' Emergency Support Network**' to provide timely assistance and ensure the safety of personnel working at sea.
- The BRICS nations announced four new agriculture initiatives, including the establishment of **Agroecology and Regenerative Agriculture for Climate Resilience and Productivity and Digital Agriculture**.
- The leaders also agreed to the establishment of a collaborative, non-binding, and farmer-centric **BRICS AGRIN** (Agro-Inputs, Genetic Resources, and Information Network), while welcoming the launch of a **Global Forum on Farmers' Rights in Seed Systems**.
- The New Delhi Declaration agrees to support the establishment of a network of training hubs and **centres of excellence (CoEs) for mental health**, with Bengaluru-based National Institute of Mental Health and Neuro Sciences (**NIMHANS**) being the coordinating centre.
- The New Delhi Declaration acknowledges the significant progress in finalising the amendment to the **BRICS Remote Sensing Satellite Constellation (RSSC) Agreement** for including new space agencies.
- To keep track of the initiatives, the Prime Minister proposed a '**BRICS Continuity and Implementation Mechanism**.' This would enable the follow-up of all initiatives and outcomes



through the Troika (the troika refers to a framework comprising past, current and incoming chairs of the grouping).

What is BRICS ?

BRICS brings together eleven major emerging markets and developing countries of the world: Brazil, China, Egypt, Ethiopia, India, Indonesia, Iran, Russia, Saudi Arabia, South Africa and the United Arab Emirates. BRICS began as BRIC, Brazil, Russia, India and China, in 2006, following a Goldman Sachs projection identifying these economies as future engines of global growth. It evolved from a foreign ministers' dialogue into a leaders' forum, with its first summit held in **Yekaterinburg, Russia, in 2009**. South Africa joined in 2010, and the grouping expanded dramatically in 2024 with the addition of Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, Saudi Arabia and the UAE. Indonesia became the 11th full member in January 2025.

EAST-WEST OIL PIPELINE

— Saudi Arabia has temporarily shut its East-West oil pipeline after multiple attacks on the crucial network on September 10, raising fresh concerns over global oil supplies already strained by disruption in the Strait of Hormuz.

— The pipeline, also called Petroline, is one of the most important Hormuz-bypass routes for exporting Saudi Arabian crude. Saudi authorities described the shutdown as a precautionary measure. — The East-West Pipeline runs roughly 1,200 km across Saudi Arabia, from the **Abqaiq** oil processing centre in the kingdom's oil-rich east to the Red Sea port of **Yanbu** in the west. From Yanbu, oil tankers usually sail east to Asia through the Bab el-Mandeb, while those headed west go through the Suez Canal.

— Operated by Saudi Aramco, the pipeline allows Saudi Arabia to move crude oil overland from its main producing region to the Red Sea, rather than shipping it from terminals on the Persian Gulf through the Strait of Hormuz.

"MY FEED, MY WAY" INITIATIVE

— Australia on September 8 proposed giving social media users the option to select the content they see on their feeds, marking the next step in the government's push to improve online safety, following its world-first social media ban for children.

— Under draft laws proposed by the centre-left Labor government, social media platforms will be required to notify users and offer them a choice over their default feed.

— Users can choose to opt in to having their default feed include personalised content recommended by an algorithm. Alternatively, they can opt out of algorithmically recommended content and instead see posts only from the friends and creators they choose to follow.

— Prime Minister of Australia Anthony Albanese said the "My Feed, My Way" initiative would also require digital platforms to document the measures taken to address identified risks of harm to Australian users and ensure those measures remain effective over time.



Wacha-Damai border

India and China conducted Corps Commander-level talks in Arunachal Pradesh on September 6 amid reports of recent tensions in the Taksing area of the Upper Subansiri district. The talks were being held at the Wacha-Damai border meeting point on the Indian side to address ongoing issues along the LAC in the area. Wacha is India's easternmost border personnel meeting point, located in the Kibithoo sector in Arunachal Pradesh.

3-YEAR ROADMAP AND A VISION DOCUMENT FOR NARCOTICS CONTROL

- Terming drug menace the country's biggest national fight after ending Naxalism, Union Home Minister Amit Shah on September 6 unveiled a three-year roadmap and a vision document for narcotics control, with an aim to achieve a **"drug-free India" by 2029**.
- Shah said a 'four-pillar' roadmap vision document has been prepared to achieve the target. These pillars include intelligence and operation-based enforcement, precursor and synthetic drugs control, demand and harm reduction, and capacity building and coordination.

DEDICATED FREIGHT CORRIDOR (DFC)

- Among the projects that Prime Minister Narendra Modi inaugurated in Vadodara on September 8 were the last three sections of the Western Dedicated Freight Corridor (WDFC), together covering 326 kilometres and developed at a cost of over Rs 20,700 crore.
- These three sections between Gujarat and Maharashtra — New Sanand (N)-New Makarpura, New Umbergaon-New Saphale, New Saphale-New Jawaharlal Nehru Port Trust (JNPT) — mark the completion of the 1,506-km WDFC, which runs from JNPT in Navi Mumbai to Dadri (Uttar Pradesh) near Delhi. — DFC, special freight corridors, are one of the biggest infrastructure projects undertaken by the Railways. Currently, a total of about 426 freight trains run on both WDFC and Eastern Dedicated Freight Corridor (EDFC) corridors daily.
- The 1,337-km EDFC runs from **Ludhiana (Punjab) to Sonnagar (Bihar)**, and caters mostly to coal and mineral traffic from eastern India. The EDFC has two distinct segments — an electrified double-line segment of 936 km between Sonnagar (Bihar) and Dadri (UP), and an electrified single-track segment of 401 km between Ludhiana (Sahnewal) in Punjab and Khurja in UP.
- Due to their separation from the passenger network, the DFCs offer reduced transit time, less cost, and last mile connectivity at certain places. In Indian Railways, freight revenue plays a crucial role in subsidising passenger travel, with freight services accounting for over 65 per cent of the Railways' total earnings.
- Notably, in its Budget this year, the government announced plans for a third corridor, connecting Dankuni in West Bengal to Surat in Gujarat. The detailed project report is being prepared. **Google's India-first artificial intelligence models for agriculture**
- Recently, Google has launched India-first artificial intelligence models for agriculture. Google DeepMind's AnthroKrishi team has developed advanced satellite-based AI models that generate agricultural insights at scale and provide near real-time mapping and monitoring of agricultural fields and crops.



— The two models are **Agricultural Landscape Understanding (ALU)** and **Agricultural Monitoring and Event Detection (AMED)**, and they are designed to generate field-level agricultural intelligence.

— ALU leverages satellite imagery and machine learning to draw agricultural boundaries of fields, the basic unit of agriculture and essential in creating meaningful insights. Similarly other landscape elements like water bodies and vegetation can be identified, which can help with drought contingency planning.

— AMED tracks crop types, sowing, and harvesting stages across 12 crops, leveraging six years of data refreshed twice a month to provide near-real-time crop monitoring. These datasets are accessible via APIs and visual layers integrated into Google Earth, despite the coverage being limited to India.

— The data for ALU model is refreshed roughly every 6 months. The AMED model data, which builds upon ALU, is refreshed more frequently, approximately every 15 days, to provide more timely insights.

INDIA'S FIRST MAINSTREAM PLUG-IN HYBRID SUV AND PHEV

— MG Hector Tomahawk is India's first mainstream plug-in hybrid SUV. Unlike battery electric vehicles (BEVs) such as the Tesla Model S or the Tata Nexon electric that need to be plugged in before the battery is discharged, technologies such as HEVs and PHEVs bring together the best of both worlds.

— For instance, HEVs, or conventional hybrid electric vehicles combine a conventional internal combustion engine (ICE) system, like in a regular petrol car, with an electric propulsion system to produce a hybrid drivetrain that substantially lowers fossil fuel usage. — The PHEVs, or plug-in hybrid electric vehicles have a hybrid drivetrain that uses a combination of the internal combustion engine (ICE) and electric power for motive power, but is backed by rechargeable batteries, quite like the HEVs.

— A plug-in hybrid car has a comparatively bigger battery and offers a longer electric range than a traditional HEV. PHEV combines the positive attributes of internal combustion (range on long journeys) with those of plug-in electrics (a cleaner engine that typically costs less to run) in a single vehicle, resulting in a combination of features superior to those of a regular HEV.

SAGAR MANTHAN

— Kolkata-based Garden Reach Shipbuilders and Engineers (GRSE) Ltd on September 9 launched 'Sagar Manthan', an **indigenous ocean research vessel (ORV)** being built for the National Centre for Polar and Ocean Research (NCPOR), Union Ministry of Earth Sciences.

— In a major boost to India's capabilities in deep-sea exploration and scientific research, the Rs 840-crore research vessel is expected to be ready for use by early 2028.

— 'Sagar Manthan' is a 89.5-m long and 18.8-m wide ORV with a gross tonnage of 5,900 tonnes, and speed of up to 14 knots at 90% maximum continuous rating (MCR). The vessel was launched at the GRSE's Rishi Bankim Shipyard in Kolkata. The launch comes just five months after the keel-laying of the vessel.



— Once delivered, the ORV will be capable of underway swath multibeam as well as geophysical seismic surveys in coastal seas and deep waters at a maximum depth of 6 km. The vessel will also be able to carry out conductivity, temperature and depth (CTD) profiling and water sampling operations such as biological sampling using vertical and horizontal methods through various nets.

— The research vessel will also effectively carry out surface and deep-sea mooring and data buoy operations, seabed sampling using corers and grabs as well as rock dredging with chain bag dredges. The vessel will also undertake underway atmospheric observations, surface meteorological and current measurements and collect upper air data.

SWACHH VAYU SARVEKSHAN 2026

— The 2026 'Swachh Vayu Sarvekshan' rankings were declared in the national capital on September 7 and National Green Tribunal (NGT) chairperson Justice Prakash Shrivastava conferred the honours on all winning cities and towns. Awards were also conferred for the first time for municipal wards that have improved their air quality. — Swachh Vayu Sarvekshan is an annual assessment of 130 cities under the **National Clean Air Programme (NCAP)**. Launched in 2022-23, it is an initiative of the Ministry of Environment, Forests and Climate Change (MoEFCC).

— Efforts in waste management, road dust control, dust management from construction and demolition waste, and reductions in vehicular and industrial pollution are key parameters used to assess cities for final ranking. Improvements in the reduction of particulate matter 10 concentrations are given only a 2.5 per cent weightage.

— Cities and towns are divided into population-based categories: million-plus cities, cities with 3-10 lakh population, and cities with population under 3 lakh. A cash prize and mementoes are awarded to the top three cities or towns.

— The NCAP was launched in **January 2019** and covers 130 cities. The target for these cities is to reduce particulate matter (PM) 10 concentration by up to 40 per cent by 2025-26 compared with 2019-20 levels.

— **Lucknow**, the capital of Uttar Pradesh, **topped** the million-plus population category in the 2026 'Swachh Vayu Sarvekshan' for its efforts to improve air quality.

— **Indore**, India's cleanest city, secured the **second spot**, while **Jabalpur** finished **third** in the million-plus cities category. Meanwhile, Chennai, Jamshedpur, Kota, Kolkata, and Madurai ranked in the bottom five in this category, while Delhi and Mumbai ranked 30th and 37th, respectively.

— Last year, Indore topped the million-plus population category, followed by Jabalpur, while Agra and Surat jointly secured third place.

— In the category of cities with a **population between 3-10 lakh people**, **Rourkela topped**, followed by Firozabad and Guntur in joint second place, and Amravati in third place.

— In category 3 – cities with **less than 3 lakh people** – **Kalinga Nagar won** the first position, Angul the second, and Talcher got the third place.



LOSS AND DAMAGE FUND

- Nepal has suffered a catastrophic flash flood, with more than 1,000 dead, thousands still missing nearly 10 days later, and whole villages, bridges and roads swept away. Nepal's foreign minister, Shishir Khanal, said the country has written to the UN's fund for responding to loss and damage.
- The loss and damage fund is a global financial package to ensure the rescue and rehabilitation of countries facing the cascading effects of climate change.
- Notably, at the UN Climate Change Conference of Parties **2022 (COP27) in Egypt**, an agreement was reached to create a fund that will help low-income developing countries offset the damage from natural disasters caused by climate change. Named the **"Loss and Damage Fund,"** this financial mechanism was designed to provide crucial support to vulnerable nations facing the brunt of climate-related challenges.
- During the inaugural plenary session of the **(COP28) in Dubai, UAE**, the participants made a historic decision to create a dedicated fund aimed at addressing and compensating for the losses and damages incurred due to climate change, and the Loss and Damage Fund was officially launched.

Who has contributed most to the world's atmospheric CO₂?

The US is the leading contributor, at 25%, to the key cause of climate change, CO₂ accumulated in the atmosphere. Europe is next at around 20% with the Chinese now fast catching up at 15% of the global stock. India's contribution, on the other hand is under 4%. Moreover, India's per-capita CO₂ emissions at around 2 tonnes per year are half of the global average of 4.5 tonnes. After the floods, Nepal, whose own emissions are very little, said it is bearing the consequences of a problem it did not create.

ENDOMETRIOSIS

- India's first genome-wide study of the Endometriosis (where tissue lining the uterus overgrows outside it) has found evidence that genetic susceptibility may play a role in Indian women, while also identifying genetic signals that could be particularly relevant to the Indian population.
- Endometriosis affects about 10% of women of reproductive age, according to widely cited estimates. Despite its prevalence, diagnosis is often delayed for years, with symptoms such as severe menstrual pain frequently normalised or dismissed.
- The study comes as the World Health Organization (WHO) is developing new guidelines on endometriosis management, reflecting the growing recognition of the disease as a major public health concern.



“GRAM-NEGATIVE” BACTERIA

— A major study of hospitalised patients across India has found that infections caused by antibiotic-resistant “Gram-negative” bacteria are more likely to be fatal and more expensive to treat than infections caused by drug-susceptible strains.

— Gram-negative bacteria are a group of bacteria that can cause infections in different parts of the body, including the lungs, urinary tract, wounds and bloodstream. They include common hospital pathogens such as **Escherichia coli** (commonly known as **E. coli**), **Klebsiella pneumoniae**, **Acinetobacter baumannii** and **Pseudomonas aeruginosa**.

— These bacteria can be particularly difficult to treat when they develop resistance to antibiotics. One important group of antibiotics used for serious infections is carbapenems. When these bacteria become resistant to carbapenems, doctors have fewer effective medicines available to treat patients.

SAT-1 FOOT-AND-MOUTH DISEASE

— After around 60 years, a serotype of foot-and-mouth disease (FMD) is being reported again in parts of Europe and the Middle East. What makes this “outbreak” even more attention-worthy is that it is also appearing in countries where it has never been detected before.

— FMD SAT-1 is one of the seven serotypes of the foot and mouth disease virus. It has traditionally been associated with parts of Africa, which is why its detection in regions outside its usual range is significant.

— FMD is **highly contagious**, and it doesn’t need direct contact between animals to move from one place to another. The virus can spread from infected animals as well as through contaminated vehicles, equipment, footwear and animal products.

— For an infected animal, the illness can be painful and disruptive. It typically begins with fever, followed by fluid-filled blisters and sores in the mouth, on the tongue and around the feet.

— Importantly, FMD is not considered a significant human health threat, but its impact on livestock productivity, milk yields, farmer incomes and the wider agricultural economy can be substantial.

ORANGUTANS

— Residents near Badapai village in Balasore’s Bhograi area spotted five juvenile orangutans. Officials suspect the apes were brought into the state as part of an international wildlife-smuggling operation.

Arboreal	The largest tree-dwelling mammal species on Earth
Great ape	Asia's only great ape — close relatives of chimpanzees and gorillas

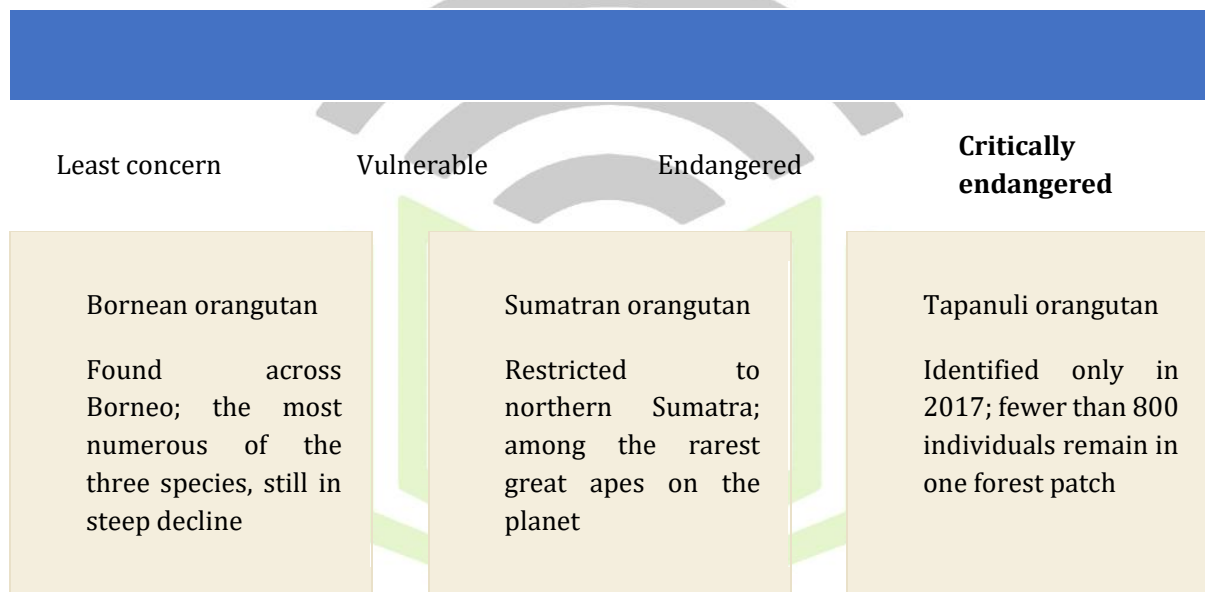


Highly intelligent	Known for tool use, problem-solving, and complex social learning
Reddish coat	Shaggy, reddish-brown hair distinguishes them from other apes

Conservation status

All three species are critically endangered

Habitat loss, poaching, and illegal trafficking have pushed every orangutan species to the brink. The IUCN Red List places all three in its highest risk category before extinction in the wild.



SWAMINARAYAN SAMPRADAY

— The Gujarat-based Bochasanwasi Akshar Purushottam Swaminarayan Sanstha (BAPS) ran into controversy in Paris after the Eiffel Tower was closed on September 7 following a staff protest over allegations that women employees were asked to step away from their posts during a visit by the sect's delegation on September 5. BAPS is a sub-sect within the Swaminarayan tradition.

— Founder of the Swaminarayan Sampraday, **Sahajanand Swami** was born Ghanshyam Pande in Chhapaiya village near Ayodhya in 1781. He founded the Swaminarayan sect in Gujarat after being initiated as Sahajanand Swami in 1802 as a disciple of Swami Ramanand, and came to be known as Lord Swaminarayan.

— Seen as one of Hinduism's many bhakti traditions and as reestablishing "Sanatan dharma", the sampraday then branched out into the **Vadtal (Nadiad) and Ahmedabad sects (Gadi)**, founded by two of Sahajanand Swami's nephews. Sahajanand Swami was a celibate and had no heirs, Raymond Brady Williams and Yogi Trivedi wrote in the book Swaminarayan Hinduism.



— The **major sub-sects of Swaminarayan Sampraday** are the: Shree Swaminarayan Vadtal, BAPS, the Maninagar Shree Swaminarayan Gadi Sanstha, the Swaminarayan Gurukul, Sokhda.

BAPS

The BAPS was founded in 1907 by Shastri Maharaj, who broke away from the Vadtal diocese in 1905. It takes its name from Bochasan village in Anand district and is said to be the largest sect, known for the Akshardham series of temple complexes. The 92-year-old Mahant Swami Maharaj is the sixth spiritual successor of Bhagwan Swaminarayan and the present guru of BAPS Swaminarayan Sanstha.

DOGRI SCRIPT

— Dogri has long been written in Devanagari, With its own script falling into disuse, now, civic authorities in Jammu are attempting to revive Dogri by putting up signboards at prominent locations and institutions.

— Dogri is an **Indo-Aryan language**, a major branch of the Indo-European language family that includes Hindi, Bengali and Punjabi, and belongs to the Western Pahari group, a cluster of related languages found mainly in the western Himalayas.

— Dogri is primarily spoken by the Dogras, the original inhabitants of Jammu and Kashmir's Jammu division, besides smaller groups in the adjoining states of Punjab and Himachal Pradesh, and Pakistan-occupied Kashmir.

— According to the 2011 census, Dogri was the primary language of nearly 2.6 million people in India. It was recognised as one of the 22 scheduled languages of India under the Eighth Schedule in 2003 and declared one of the official languages of the Union Territory of Jammu & Kashmir in 2020.

— Notably, Namey Dogra Akhar is a modified version of Takri, the original Dogri language script that had been used until the reign of Maharaja Gulab Singh.

THIRUKKURAL

— Prime Minister Narendra Modi gifted Russian President Vladimir Putin a translated version of the traditional Tamil text *Thirukkural* during their bilateral meeting on September 11.

— The text, authored by the poet-philosopher **Thiruvalluvar** (also known as "**Valluvar**"), is considered a seminal work of ancient Tamil literature and philosophy.

— *Thirukkural*, which translates to "sacred verses" or "sacred couplets" in English, consists of 1,330 stanzas or couplets, each of seven words called "kurals". These are arranged into 133 chapters, each containing 10 couplets.

— Regarded as an influential work on ethics, *Thirukkural* is divided into three books:

(i) The **Book of Virtue (Dharma)**, dealing with morality (aram) and values of an individual. It has 38 chapters.

(ii) The **Book of Polity**, which is filled with teachings regarding materialism (porul) and socio-economic values. This has 70 chapters.



(iii) The **Book of Love**, which details teachings of love (inbam). It has 25 chapters.

— *Thirukkural* was first published in English in 1840. Since then, it has been translated into more than 60 different languages. The edition that Modi gifted Putin is in Russian, translated by **Naira Mkrtchyan**. It was published this year by the Central Institute of Classical Tamil as part of its Thirukkural translation series.

WOMEN'S ASIA CUP 2026

— India has defeated Sri Lanka by 72 runs in the final of the Women's Asia Cup 2026 at the Dubai International Cricket Stadium, Dubai, on September 13.

— This is India's 8th Women's Asia Cup title win.

US OPEN 2026

— In women's singles, **Elena Rybakina** beat defending champion Aryna Sabalenka 6-4, 5-7, 6-2 in the US Open final to win the title and become the women's world No. 1 tennis player.

— In men's singles, Alexander Zverev beat Ben Shelton to win the US Open title. He also won the French Open earlier this year in June.

KETAKI KUSHARI DYSON

— Indian-born writer of diasporic literature Ketaki Kushari Dyson, who played a significant role in bringing Rabindranath Sagar's work to a wider audience through English translations and research, has died in England, a close family friend said. She was 86.

— Her scholarly works included research on Nobel laureate Tagore, particularly his paintings. She has made a significant contribution to translating Tagore's works into English. The most significant of her scholarly works was 'Rabindranath O. Victoria Ocampo-r Sandhane,' about Tagore's association with Argentine writer Victoria Ocampo. Her body of work includes several poems, plays, and novels like 'Nari, Nagari' and 'Jal PhunreAgun.'

DreamIAS



BUSINESS AND ECONOMY

WHY ARE VOLKSWAGEN AND JLR TRIMMING THEIR WORKFORCE?

The story so far:

The German carmaker Volkswagen and the British marquee brand Jaguar Land Rover (JLR) are shedding jobs — the former deciding to axe 50,000 positions and the Tata-owned brand 4,000. The latest cut will reduce Volkswagen's employee count by a lakh by the end of the decade, as the company had already reached agreements with employees since the end of 2024 to cut 50,000 jobs.

European carmakers have fallen behind Chinese manufacturers in the race to transition to electric vehicles and want to be shipshape in navigating the challenging terrain.

In July, BMW revealed its decision to cut its workforce by 8,000. Nifty homegrown brands are blocking Volkswagen's traffic in the lucrative Chinese market, and the company, under its chief executive, Oliver Blume, is taking a hard look at its worldwide operations, especially in the German market.

How have the two carmakers reached a settlement to cut jobs?

By no means has it been a smooth drive for the two giants who thrived in the heyday of internal combustion engines. Volkswagen had to contend with its powerful union to get approval for what many say is the most eventful restructuring in its 89-year history.

Workers hold 10 seats in the decision-making supervisory Board of the company and shareholders, including the State of Lower Saxony, another 10. The job cuts were announced after a tense meeting of the Board.

"Volkswagen is simply not a corporation that operates solely according to capitalist rules. Because of its history, Volkswagen also belongs to us, the employees," Daniela Cavallo, top union representative, said, as quoted by the Wall Street Journal.

Much of the money spent on building a plant at its Wolfsburg headquarters in the 1930s came from the earnings of the company's workers seized during Adolf Hitler's reign, and that gives a sense of ownership even to the present-day workforce.

The agreement stopped short of an announcement on closing down four factories at Emden, Hanover, Zwickau and Neckarsulm in Germany, deemed to have no future after 2030, when electrification is expected to stub out production of cars powered by internal combustion engines in Europe. The company has reset its targeted production to nine million vehicles a year, from 12 million before the COVID-19 pandemic and 10 million recently.

On the other hand, JLR, the cash cow of Tata Motors, is targeting £1.7 billion (around ₹28,000 crore) in savings through the job cuts, reports said. The cuts will largely target the white-collar workforce, while direct manufacturing jobs will be protected.

The company will scale down its breakeven point to 3 lakh vehicles from 3.5 lakh, reducing annual sales by 14% to cover its cost base. This will make it fitter in a rapidly evolving global market due



to rapid technological change, intense competition, and geopolitical uncertainty, JLR chief executive P.B. Balaji said.

Why are the two carmakers on the skids?

Volkswagen ruled Chinese roads for four decades till its growth engines started sputtering. The world's largest carmaker after Toyota was late to the EV race with fleet-footed Chinese carmakers, after dominating the market through a string of joint ventures. Even in Latin America and Africa, dominant markets of the German giant, Chinese carmakers are giving Volkswagen nightmares. In China, its sales skid by one-third of the 2019 figures, reports said.

There is no model blitz in taking on Chinese rivals pumped up by cheaper state-backed loans. The company lost out to manufacturers such as BYD and Geely owing to a perceived reluctance to take the wheel in the EV race.

For JLR, with the U.S. as its largest market but with no American production base, Donald Trump's tariffs have created potholes on the road to profits. The tariffs on exports to the U.S. from the U.K. range from 10% to 15% for its models. It was China where its sales plummeted the most despite its electric-only reinvention.

How are the companies changing gears in India?

Volkswagen, which underwent a renaissance in India in recent years as Skoda Auto Volkswagen India Private Ltd., with models made for India, is looking for an active partner for its business. Volkswagen expects to sign a deal with a local partner in India this year, the chief executive officer of its Skoda brand, Klaus Zellmer, said in India, as the German group struggles to build scale in the world's third-largest car market, Reuters reported in August.

Skoda is in charge of the group's strategy in India, where Volkswagen is in talks on a joint venture with the JSW group, which has indicated it wants a majority stake. Mr. Zellmer said VW was in discussions with an unnamed partner and was confident of completing a deal this year.

JLR is a wholly owned subsidiary of Tata Motors, which acquired the iconic British luxury automaker in 2008. It clocked its best first-quarter retail sales for 2026-27 at 1,665 vehicles, an 11% year-on-year increase, in India. The India-U.K. free trade agreement is benefiting the company. JLR and Tata Motors opened a plant in Ranipet in Tamil Nadu in February 2026.

GLOBAL WATCHDOG SAYS RISE OF 'DIGITAL HAWALA' IS AIDING MONEY LAUNDERING, TERROR FINANCING

A centuries-old underground banking system is now transforming into a tech-enabled network, with virtual assets adding new layers to "digital hawala".

The shift is being exploited for purposes ranging from routine money laundering to, in some cases, financing terrorist organisations, the latest Financial Action Task Force (FATF) report said.

The global money laundering and terror financing watchdog's report, titled "Investigating Professional Money Laundering, Underground Banking, and the Use of Hawala and Other Similar Service Providers", identifies the fusion of virtual assets with the traditional "hawala" system as one of the most significant developments. According to the report, nearly 70% of surveyed jurisdictions have reported the integration of new technologies into such networks.



Forms of digital hawala

The study has flagged six forms of “digital hawala” — a term covering a spectrum of technologies that facilitate the coordination, execution, settlement, or concealment of transactions.

One configuration involves digital coordination but traditional settlement, with operators using encrypted messaging applications, shared ledgers and online platforms to communicate instructions, recruit clients and couriers, and maintain records. The second is “digital customer interface”, such as mobile wallets or fintech apps, although settlement between operators happens via cash or trade in both cases.

The next is virtual asset-based settlement, where stablecoins are used to settle balances directly. In the “integration with formal digital infrastructure” configuration, funds are moved via payment service providers, fintech platforms, and virtual International Bank Account Numbers (IBANs).

The fifth is artificial intelligence-based tools for automated transaction structuring, dynamic mule-account routing, and high-speed fiat-to-cryptocurrency conversion. The last one involves “hawala” apps, which may be bundled digital ecosystems combining messaging, cloud storage, social media, Virtual Asset Service Providers (VASPs), lending apps, and even gaming platforms.

The FATF found that these configurations make transactions faster, more opaque and more complex, while expanding the network’s reach and resilience.

The report said that digitisation is acting as a catalyst for traditional settlement mechanisms rather than replacing them, with cash remaining critical at the collection and exit points.

Turkiye case study

It cited a case study of Turkiye’s discovery of a “digital hawala” network financing the terror group, the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). In 2023, raids on a self-described ISIL “administrative officer” led to the seizure of about \$57,250 in cash, followed by a further \$5,54,000, along with “hawala” notebooks and digital transfer receipts.

A jeweller and two mobile phone shops operated as fronts, and the transfers were disguised as charity donations.

WHY IS BRICS EXPLORING CROSS-BORDER PAYMENTS?

The story so far:

The 18th BRICS summit in New Delhi to be held in September, with India as the Chair, is expected to push for mechanisms to facilitate cross-border payments between members, including links between digital payment systems and central bank digital currencies (CBDCs), according to a report in The Hindu businessLine. Ahead of the summit, finance ministries’ and central bank representatives from BRICS countries met in Jaipur on August 12-13 to discuss financial cooperation, payments, and the wider use of national currencies in settling trade between members.

How do current cross-border payments work?

Sending money from one country to another requires a chain of transactions. Let’s say, an importer in Cape Town is buying passenger cars from an exporter in Chennai. The payment does



not travel directly from the South African bank to the Indian one. It travels via a series of intermediaries called correspondent banks that hold accounts with each other. Since the South African bank does not hold an account with the Indian one (and vice versa), the payment is routed through a larger international bank that deals with both and is typically headquartered in London or New York. Because very few banks hold both rupees and rand, the payment involves converting rand to dollars and dollars to rupees where, in essence, the dollar acts like a vehicle currency, even though no American is involved in the trade.

What is SWIFT?

Now, apart from the money, there are also instructions that travel between the banks. This is handled by SWIFT (Society for Worldwide Interbank Financial Telecommunication), which is a Belgium-based cooperative and overseen by the National Bank of Belgium along with the G-10 central banks, including the U.S. Federal Reserve. SWIFT is a messaging network, like a secure post-office. It enables institutions to exchange payment instructions through it and settle amounts separately. It is used directly by more than 11,000 institutions in over 200 countries. Smaller banks reach it indirectly through larger banks that are part of the SWIFT network, which is why it has become crucial and hard to displace.

What are the costs involved in each step?

Every intermediary charges a fee and the currencies are converted twice (rand to dollar and dollar to rupees). So the foreign exchange margins are paid twice. A 2019 BRICS survey of cross-border payment systems, conducted by Brazil, found that Brazilian respondents reported foreign exchange margins of 2.5% with the figure rising to 8.5% for payments in Africa and, in some cases, as high as 20%.

While speed of transactions used to be a major issue, SWIFT claims that its SWIFT Global Payments Innovation has helped reduce transaction times significantly. Some structural delays remain even as the transaction chain has also become thinner. The Bank for International Settlements (BIS) found that active correspondent banking relationships fell by 20% between 2011 and 2018 with regional declines varying from 12% to 30% and Latin America being the worst affected. The reasons for this decline were largely commercial. Payment volumes kept growing during this period, even as they travelled through a smaller network.

Why does BRICS want to change this system?

For developing economies, though, payments in a handful of dominant currencies such as the U.S. dollar, the euro and the Japanese yen expose countries to the monetary policies of the countries that issue them. The 2024 BRICS report under Russia's chairmanship argued that this part of the financial system is monopolised by a single institution, raising transaction costs. Alternatives to the system suffer from the fact that they have to convince a large number of banks and regulators to join before being useful. A bank that uses an alternative system to deal with sanctioned entities — several Russian banks were cut off from SWIFT in 2022, following Russia's invasion of Ukraine — also risks sanctions, which deters others from joining. A sanctions-hit Russia has pushed hardest for an alternative and is also the reason why others are wary of joining one.

What changes can be envisaged in the BRICS discussions?

The idea being explored is a payment system where, instead of payments moving through several correspondent banks with dollar conversions, national payment systems would connect to each



other directly. This could be done in pairs as India and Singapore have already done for remittances by linking the former's Unified Payments Interface (UPI) and the latter's PayNow systems. But building bilateral systems individually will not scale appropriately.

An alternative could be via a shared hub that each country joins. One such effort is Project Nexus, designed by the BIS and handed over to a company set up by six central banks, including India's Reserve Bank of India. It is set to go live only in 2027. Notably, it is not a BRICS initiative.

The BRICS discussions would extend this idea to the use of central bank digital currencies. Here, central banks issue digital versions of their currencies for use between banks — a settlement asset, not the retail digital rupee held by individuals — and exchange them on a common platform. Both legs of a currency swap would occur at the same instant or not at all, removing the risk of paying out before the other side pays, which speeds up settlement and reduces the capital banks must set aside against such transactions.

The 2024 BRICS report claims transactions settled this way would yield significant cost savings. Only one such platform runs today – mBridge, built by the BIS with the central banks of China, Thailand, Hong Kong, and the UAE, which the BIS handed to its participants and left in October 2024. Over 95% of its settlement volume is in China's digital yuan, according to People's Bank of China figures reported by Reuters.

The Kazan declaration of BRICS in 2024 agreed to “discuss and study the feasibility” of an independent settlement system called BRICS Clear, but the Rio declaration the following year did not mention it.

What is India's position?

India's own proposal, reported in January, is that members link their CBDCs for trade and tourism payments. Indian officials have been careful to frame the payment systems as a means of cutting transaction costs and speeding up settlement rather than as initiatives to displace the dollar — even as Russian proposals, and those of some Brazilian economists, have gone further, towards alternative financial systems that would reduce dependence on the dollar.

U.S. President Donald Trump, in November 2024, had threatened to impose 100% tariffs on BRICS countries if they moved away from the dollar and a further 10% tariff on countries aligning with vaguely defined “anti-American” BRICS policies during last year's Rio summit. The threats were not carried out. But even though they were not targeted at payment systems, this could perhaps be a reason why Indian officials have framed discussions only as a matter of reducing transaction costs.

AS YOGA AND AYURVEDA BECOME PART OF INDIA'S GLOBAL HEALTH DIPLOMACY, EXPERTS PRESS FOR CREDIBLE STANDARDS

Yoga and Ayurveda have moved beyond their traditional wellness identity and are increasingly becoming part of India's global health and diplomatic strategy, with the Centre seeking to expand their footprint through medical tourism, international education, practitioner mobility and trade agreements.

The shift is particularly evident in India's recent trade diplomacy. The India-Oman Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA), operationalised in June 2026, and the India-New Zealand Free Trade Agreement (FTA) contain dedicated provisions on health-related services and



traditional medicine. These include measures to ease licensing, develop standards and facilitate the mobility of Ayurveda, Yoga and Naturopathy, Unani, Siddha, Sowa-Rigpa, and Homeopathy (AYUSH) practitioners and instructors.

New opportunity

The India-European Union FTA, signed in January 2026, goes further, allowing AYUSH practitioners to use their Indian qualifications in EU countries where no regulatory framework exists and providing for AYUSH wellness centres and clinics.

The agreements represent an attempt to transform AYUSH from being a cultural export to a formalised health and services opportunity.

The India-Oman CEPA contains what the government describes as its first comprehensive commitment on traditional medicine across all modes of supply, while the India-New Zealand FTA has a dedicated “health and traditional medicine” annex covering AYUSH practices.

The New Zealand agreement also provides structured mobility pathways, including a dedicated visa quota for AYUSH practitioners. The government said the agreement would institutionalise cooperation in education, training, standards development and wellness services.

However, the diplomatic push also raises questions about how far formal recognition and market access will translate into actual international demand.

Experts point to the need for credible standards, evidence, regulation, practitioner quality and patient safety if AYUSH is to establish itself in increasingly regulated global healthcare markets.

Senior officials in the Ministry of AYUSH said the AYUSH visa, overseas training and exchange programmes were also helping expand the sector.

“Foreign medical arrivals rose from 1.83 lakh in 2020 to 6.44 lakh in 2024, as per our data. Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka, the United Arab Emirates, the United States, Germany, Russia, Malaysia, Mauritius and Saudi Arabia are among the important markets for AYUSH and Ayurveda treatment. The government does not publish a current consolidated country-wise ranking of AYUSH patients,” he said.

Absence of data

However, the figure of 6.44 lakh refers to overall foreign medical arrivals and not specifically AYUSH patients. The absence of consolidated data makes it difficult to assess AYUSH’s actual share of India’s medical-value-travel market.

The AYUSH visa, introduced in 2023, is another component of the strategy. Between January 2023 and December 2025, a total of 3,375 foreign nationals travelled to India on AYUSH visas or e-AYUSH visas, while another 579 travelled on AYUSH attendant visas or e-AYUSH attendant visas.

Earlier, the Ministry had reported that 1,646 AYUSH visas had been issued to nationals of 75 countries between January 2024 and February 2025.

Education is also emerging as another channel of influence. Under the AYUSH Fellowship Scheme, 260 students from 32 countries were studying AYUSH in Indian institutions.



The Ministry's international cooperation programmes also support training, seminars, conferences and knowledge exchange, including yoga and education overseas.

TRUMP'S UNUSUAL THREAT TO THE US FEDERAL RESERVE AND WHY IT MATTERS TO INDIA?

After months of threatening allies and rivals alike with tariffs to coerce them into signing lopsided trade deals, US President Donald Trump seemingly went a step further late last week and warned the Federal Reserve (Fed) to cut interest rates, or else the US would stop trading with countries with which it has a trade deficit.

Key Takeaways:

- While Trump's threat to the Fed has raised eyebrows among policy circles globally, this is not the first time that Trump has suggested extreme measures to influence the Fed to lower interest rates.
- During his first term too, Trump routinely pushed for lower interest rates and in September 2019 went on to suggest that the Fed should get the interest rates down to "zero or less" so that the US can start to "refinance its debt".
- Trump's warnings have gotten more and more aggressive amid growing worry over the US debt and trade deficit. The latest data showed that US debt has crossed a record \$40 trillion and the trade deficit also widened despite a slew of tariffs on trade partners.
- High debt numbers are increasingly making investors nervous amid rising oil prices due to the US-Iran war and are pushing US 10-year bond yield (a benchmark for global borrowing costs) towards 5%.
- International think tanks estimated that the US government will spend little over \$1 trillion this fiscal year paying interest on the debt, which is equivalent to its national defence spending.

Do You Know:

- Around 40% of India's crude oil imports, 60% of its LNG imports, and a whopping 90% of its LPG imports regularly came from West Asia through the Strait of Hormuz.
- The country's dependence on imports stands at over 88% for oil, 60% for LPG, and about 50% for natural gas. This means that the Strait of Hormuz effectively saw the movement of around 54% of India's LPG consumption.

RUDE LESSONS

India should learn from Canada and be wary of deals with the U.S.

The U.S.-Canada trade dispute has a few sharp lessons for India. The two economies have been deeply economically integrated since at least 1965, when they established free trade in automobiles and their parts. This then widened into a full-fledged free trade agreement in 1989, which was expanded into the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) about five years later. The economic integration between the U.S. and Canada has steadily continued and, by all accounts, has worked well for both economies. The target for the much smaller Canadian economy was to achieve economies of scale by producing vast amounts of a few products. According to

4TH FLOOR SHATABDI TOWER, SAKCHI, JAMSHEDPUR



Nobel laureate Paul Krugman, Canada accounts for 70% of the oil refined in the American Midwest, and supplies 60% of the nation's aluminium. It also supplies nearly all the types of lumber used in U.S. residential construction. Yet, despite this long and fruitful trade partnership, their economic relationship has fallen to a new low. Canada pulled out of negotiations over a new tariff deal citing last-minute insertions by the U.S. side. The U.S. has made a similar allegation against Canada. Canada recently levied reciprocal tariffs on the U.S. of up to 50% as a reaction to the 50% tariffs that the U.S. has imposed on imports from Canada. From September 29, the U.S. will outright ban certain Canadian alcoholic spirits, some dairy goods, and motorcycles. Statements by U.S. President Donald Trump are hardly conciliatory in nature.

The first lesson for India lies here: if this is how the U.S. treats a next-door neighbour, alliance member, and long-standing trade partner, India should not take for granted any favourable treatment that it might receive from the U.S. The second lesson is that barrelling ahead with trade deals might not always be the best plan. Before Canada, Malaysia also backed out of a deal it had signed with the U.S. It argued that once the U.S.'s reciprocal tariff system was deemed illegal, the benefit from a trade deal no longer outweighed the costs of opening up to the U.S. Despite the success of its recent trade pacts, India should weigh the same pros and cons when it comes to the U.S., especially since a deal might not be the end of the tariff pressure. India has faced this before. Despite the February 2026 agreement of 18% tariffs on imports from India, the U.S. has forged ahead with its forced labour and excess capacity investigations that could see tariff levels exceed that limit. India has done well to insist that a deal will not be struck until its advantage over its competitors is clear. The third lesson is that this advantage can vanish even after a deal is struck.

INDIA'S CARBON CREDIT SCHEME RECEIVES U.K. RECOGNITION: OFFICIAL

In a major breakthrough, the U.K. has recognised India's Carbon Credit Trading Scheme (CCTS) as a qualifying criterion for pricing relief under its carbon border adjustment mechanism (CBAM), a move that would reduce the tax burden on domestic exporters, an official said on Monday.

In a communication addressed to the Bureau of Energy Efficiency, Ministry of Power, the U.K.'s His Majesty's Treasury confirmed that the CCTS has been included in the U.K.'s published indicative list of overseas carbon pricing schemes assessed as qualifying criteria under a provision of the Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (Calculation of CBAM Rate and Determination of Carbon Price Relief) Regulations 2026, the official said.

"This will reduce the effective CBAM liability on Indian goods, directly benefiting Indian exporters," the official said.

THERE ARE LARGE INCONSISTENCIES BETWEEN GDP AND OTHER ECONOMIC INDICATORS: SAYS GARG

Former Finance Secretary Subhash Chandra Garg has questioned the credibility of India's latest GDP estimates. In an email response to The Hindu, he argued the sharp downward revisions to the size of the economy need a far more transparent explanation than the government's invocation of a new methodology, wider coverage and improved data.

At the centre of his concern is the absence of a transparent bridge between the 2011-12 base series and 2022-23 series. Mr. Garg said MoSPI must publish a back-series from 2011-12 to 2021-22 and set a timetable for doing so. "Perfectly valid demand," he said, arguing absence of



such a programme suggested that the government was “not very serious” about resolving the issue.

He was particularly concerned about the reduction in the estimated nominal size of the economy. The revision in Q1 FY26, he said, was part of a much larger change with GDP for 2024–25 reduced by ₹12.70 lakh crore. The Centre did not adequately explain why the revisions resulted in a smaller economy.

The standard explanation — new series incorporates wider coverage, new data sources and indices — was, in his view, insufficient. “Any better coverage leads to nominal GDP getting increased, not decreased,” he reasoned.

Mr. Garg offered two possibilities for the revisions: the earlier system overstated GDP on errors such as double counting or the GDP was deliberately overstated to produce stronger growth numbers, and later, written down under the cover of the new series. He gave no evidence of deliberate manipulation but said the scale of the revision made essential a detailed explanation.

He also questioned the price architecture underpinning the latest real-growth estimate. With consumer inflation over 4% and producer-price inflation about 9%, he said, the about 2.5% GDP deflator implied by the latest numbers appeared difficult to reconcile. “There is definitely a serious internal inconsistency,” he said, calling for the underlying price data to be disclosed and explained.

Mr. Garg was equally sceptical of the application of double deflation to manufacturing, arguing international best practices cannot simply be transplanted without sufficiently granular Indian data. Until the new methodology stabilises, he suggested the older system be run in parallel.

His concerns extend beyond methodology to the independence of the statistical system. India’s data infrastructure needs “massive modernisation,” he said, but the statistical system could still produce reliable numbers if there was no “political interest to produce results in a certain direction.” Statisticians needed greater freedom from political control.

No statistical noise

The broader problem, Mr. Garg argued, was the divergence between GDP and other indicators of economic well-being. Weakness in household incomes, employment, consumption and sentiment cannot always be dismissed as statistical noise, he said, particularly when particular data outcomes turn politically sensitive.

GDP itself, he stressed, was not a measure of welfare. India does not adequately publish the “income leg” of national accounts showing how value added is divided between labour, corporations and government. With per-capita GDP still low, he argued India must target 9–10% growth while redistributing income more effectively and reducing unproductive government expenditure.

For Mr. Garg, the government’s technical responses have therefore failed to close the credibility gap. Its explanation for the reduction in GDP, he said, remained “officialese, obfuscatory” and “sheds no light.”

He was unequivocal about the central issue: the downward revision in GDP was real and, in his assessment, must ultimately be explained either by an earlier overstatement or by acknowledging earlier growth was artificially inflated. “Nothing can falsify my argument,” he said.



C. RANGARAJAN FLAGS FEWER REGIONAL RURAL BANKS AS 'A STEP IN THE WRONG DIRECTION'

Former Reserve Bank of India Governor C. Rangarajan has criticised the consolidation of Regional Rural Banks (RRBs), saying the move has undermined their local and regional character and could eventually lead to their merger with universal banks.

"What has happened to Regional Rural Banks?" Mr. Rangarajan asked while speaking at an event in Chennai marking the 10th anniversary of Equitas Small Finance Bank.

He said RRBs had now been merged, leaving one RRB per State. In one case, he said, the parent bank had also absorbed the RRB. "To me, this is a step in the wrong direction," he said.

"It essentially loses the local and regional character of these banks, and ultimately they may get merged with the universal banks as well."

RRBs were originally set up with the idea that their local character would help distribute credit more evenly, Mr. Rangarajan said. He also recalled that the evolution of credit provision to vulnerable and weaker sections had involved several institutional initiatives, including bank nationalisation, priority-sector credit, RRBs, Local Area Banks, self-help groups and, subsequently, small finance banks.

According to a July 2025 written reply in the Lok Sabha by Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman, the government has progressively consolidated Regional Rural Banks (RRBs) since 2005 to improve their operational viability and take advantage of economies of scale. In the first phase of amalgamation, between 2005 and 2010, the number of RRBs was reduced from 196 to 82, while subsequent phases brought the number down further. Under the latest 'One State-One RRB' phase, the number was reduced from 43 to 28, effective May 1, 2025.

Mr. Rangarajan also called on the Reserve Bank of India to consider ways to incentivise the setting up of small finance banks, saying their current numbers would not be sufficient to meet unmet credit needs.

"There is something we must do about SFBs. I believe they will have a role to play," he said.

He said there were currently only 11 small finance banks, adding that this would not be enough to meet the unmet credit needs of the sector.

He said that small finance banks today have an obligation to fulfil the same set of conditions as universal banks. Unless prospective promoters were motivated by other considerations, he said, there would be little incentive to set up such banks.

"So, I would appeal to the Reserve Bank of India to look at how to incentivise the setting up of small finance banks," he said.

Mr. Rangarajan said the aspiration of SFBs to eventually become universal banks was not a problem.

"There is nothing wrong with that. I am not complaining," he said.

He added that the performance of SFBs in their mandated areas would count and said they had done extremely well in the areas in which they were required to work.



The former chairman of the Prime Minister's Economic Advisory Council said India's response to gaps in credit delivery had repeatedly been to create new institutions. "Whenever we felt that something was not happening, we said, 'We will create a new institution,'" he said.

But he cautioned that simply creating a new institutional structure would not necessarily solve the underlying problem.

"Creating an institution by itself is not the answer, because institutions can come and still the problems will continue."

He said the record of SFBs showed the spirit with which management took on the task was important.

GROWTH SPURT

Alternative powertrains are now mainstream in automobiles

According to data released by the Federation of Automobile Dealers' Associations (FADA), total vehicle registrations in August have increased 17.5% year on year, recording the all-time highest volume for the month, and with alternative powertrains, i.e., CNG, electric, and hybrids, leading passenger vehicle sales for the first time. But upon a closer look, some confounding factors emerge that also warrant caution about the figures. First, July 2026 itself was a strong month, with the August numbers 6.4% lower, possibly due to the monsoon. Second, the number of vehicles retailed in rural areas grew 19.7% year on year over 15.1% in urban areas; passenger vehicles sales likewise increased 24.9% in rural areas versus 10.9% in urban areas. This could be due to rising disposable incomes and consistent state capital expenditure on semi-urban infrastructure. However, tractor sales have in the past indicated monsoon-related rural stress, and while their sales are virtually unchanged year on year, they declined 25% month on month. Together with two-wheelers and passenger vehicles selling well, the trend suggests that non-farm rural incomes and mobility could be strengthening more than capital spending linked to agriculture. Third, last year, the GST Council reduced taxes on small cars, motorcycles (up to 350 cc), three-wheelers, buses, and goods vehicles, so August 2025 sales growth dropped as buyers waited for the new rates from September. Fourth, while CNG, hybrid, and electric powertrains beat petrol/ethanol vehicle sales by 1.1 percentage points, most hybrid vehicles still burn petrol while CNG itself is a fossil fuel. So the lead taken by alternative powertrains is not synonymous with a lead of non-fossil-fuel vehicles.

That said, petrol vehicles falling behind is still notable; the data also show that between August 2024 and August 2026, CNG and electric powertrains contributed most of the surge, implying that Indians are switching to alternatives that are cheaper to run, in light of the West Asia conflict and, to a lesser degree, concerns over ethanol blending. Next, the move away from petrol is uneven: three-wheelers are predominantly electric while two-wheelers catch up, and passenger cars' powertrains continue to diversify. And electrification continues to reflect rising consumer demand as much as industrial policy. Finally, FADA also reported that, despite record sales, dealers are holding 38-40 days of inventory against the recommended 21. So while the petrol era is far from over, the Indian automotive industry has commenced the mass-market integration of alternative powertrains. But that said, only if September-November preserves the gains in alternative powertrains after the base effect disappears, and dealer inventories return to normal levels, can August 2026 be considered a historic moment.



FCNR(B) DEPOSITS: UNDERSTANDING WHO FINALLY BEARS THE FOREIGN EXCHANGE RISK

The story so far:

The Reserve Bank of India (RBI) introduced a special swap facility in June to encourage non-resident Indians to put money into FCNR(B) deposits, as the rupee faced pressure from high oil prices and India sought to strengthen its foreign-exchange reserves.

The response was much stronger than the RBI's initial target, as Indian banks mobilised more than \$127 billion through these deposits, against an initial target of about \$50 billion.

The RBI subsequently closed the window for fresh FCNR(B) deposits on August 31, 2026.

The scheme has given banks a relatively cheap source of foreign-currency funding and added substantially to India's foreign-exchange reserves. The deposits typically have three-to-five-year maturities, raising the question of who bears the currency risk when the principal and interest have to be paid.

Risks to RBI

The RBI's special swap facility shields banks from foreign-exchange risk on the principal amount of the FCNR(B) deposits. Reuters reported that the interest payments, however, have to be managed by the banks independently.

Under the arrangement, the RBI bears the cost of hedging the foreign-currency exposure, according to a Bank of America (BofA) Securities Research report.

It estimated that this hedging cost could be up to 3%, while SBI Research used an average hedging cost of around 3% a year in its calculations. So, the RBI's cost comes from protecting the dollar value of the principal against movements in the rupee-dollar exchange rate.

Handling cost

The RBI has received foreign currency through the deposits, adding to the country's reserves. SBI Research said the RBI had recouped \$31.2 billion of its foreign-currency assets by August 7, 2026, equivalent to 55% of the amount mobilised at that point. It also said the RBI may use part of the amount to invest in U.S. securities because of higher yields.

BofA estimated that the RBI could earn around 4.5-5% on the foreign exchange reserves generated through the deposits.

It said this could potentially more than offset a hedging cost of up to 3%, assuming the foreign-currency holdings are hedged for five years.

SBI Research assumed FCNR(B) mobilisation of \$65-70 billion and a 3% annual hedging cost, and calculated an annual notional cost of about \$2.1 billion. If that cost remained at 3% for five years, the cumulative cost would be about \$10.5 billion.

It argued that this cost is relatively small compared with India's foreign-exchange reserves. Against current reserves of around \$700 billion, it calculated the five-year cost at 1.45% of the reserve stock.



Risks to banks

The central bank's swap facility does not cover the interest that banks have to pay depositors in dollars.

That means banks have to arrange the dollars needed for these interest payments and manage the foreign-exchange exposure themselves. Reuters reported that foreign banks are largely hedging this exposure, while most state-run banks and several private-sector Indian lenders have left it unhedged.

Unhedged exposure

The main reason cited by bankers for not hedging the exposure is the cost of hedging.

Reuters reported that hedging the foreign-exchange risk on interest payments for three-to-five-year deposits costs banks about 3% a year.

The interest on these deposits is paid when the deposits mature.

Some banks have therefore chosen not to pay that cost and instead plan to buy dollars when they actually need to make the interest payments.

One banker at a mid-sized State-run lender told Reuters that the bank expected to handle the payments through spot dollar purchases when required, rather than locking in protection in advance.

What if rupee weakens?

Consider a bank that has to pay \$1 million in interest.

If the dollar costs ₹95, the payment would require ₹9.5 crore.

If the rupee weakens and the dollar rises to ₹100 at the point of maturity, the same \$1 million payment would require ₹10 crore.

A bank that has hedged its exposure would have protection against such a currency movement.

A lender that has left the exposure unhedged would have to bear the higher rupee cost.

This could become a broader concern because much of the future interest-payment exposure has been left unhedged.

If the rupee weakens significantly, banks may need to buy dollars at the same time to meet their interest obligations. That could increase demand for dollars and add to pressure on the rupee. That means the FCNR(B) scheme has not eliminated currency exposure altogether.

The central bank has taken on the exposure associated with the principal through its swap, while banks continue to face currency risk on the interest payments in the future.



WHAT COULD HAVE PROMPTED THE LATEST HIKE IN LPG PRICES?

The story so far:

After two successive months of decline in LPG prices, oil-marketing companies hiked prices of the commercial variant of the bottled hydrocarbon gas by approximately ₹10 per cylinder across the country on September 1. The 19-kg cylinder in Delhi now costs ₹2,747.5 per cylinder whilst the price of the 14.2-kg cylinder remains unchanged.

What is the latest price hike about?

Industry observers state the latest hike in the commercial segment primarily caters to offset the under-recoveries (that is, the losses OMCs incur because of the difference in prices at which they sell to consumers against the price they should receive for meeting the cost of production and distribution) for the domestic segment.

The latest government data reported that India's State-owned oil-marketing companies were incurring under-recoveries of ₹188 per domestic cylinder in early August, down from ₹500 per cylinder in July and more than ₹700 per cylinder in June. According to data, the packaged domestic segment accounted for 90.4% of all LPG consumption in the country during April and June this year. Further, about 10.6 crore Pradhan Mantri Ujjwala scheme beneficiaries — approximately 33% of the domestic segment — receive an additional subsidy of ₹300 per cylinder.

Speaking to The Hindu, Prashant Vashisht, senior vice president and co-group head, corporate sector ratings, at ratings agency ICRA, said, "At present, the under-recovery on domestic LPG cylinders is hovering at about ₹200 per cylinder. Thus, the latest hike potentially tries to somewhat compensate for that amount, although the proportionate sales of commercial LPG are much smaller [compared to the domestic variant]. I would not read much into it".

What does the supply situation look like?

On the supply side, imports of petroleum, oil and lubricants (POL) products registered a decline of 45.1% between April and July this year, according to data from the government's Petroleum Planning and Analysis Cell (PPAC). It attributed this to "reduction in imports of liquefied petroleum gas (LPG), pet coke and fuel oil (FO) etc."

However, essential to note that India's oil-marketing companies ramped up their daily production of bottled hydrocarbon gas from 34,000 metric tonnes to 55,000 metric tonnes to offset the impact of lower imports. Further, following an August 13 directive, India's upstream companies, along with private and public oil-marketing companies have been set a daily production target of 63,810 metric tonnes.

Are we looking at a potential impact?

Speaking to The Hindu earlier, Manpreet Singh, treasurer at the National Restaurants Association of India, said the impact of the latest hike, standalone, would be "negligible" although it may prompt concerns about price increases in the future.

Although it is essential to note the impact from the industrial segment, which requires bottled hydrocarbon gas to run their furnaces, such as in the glass-making industry and elevated demand is expected to seep in because of the festive season. However, the segment too is increasingly transitioning to piped natural gas, seeking secure and consistent supplies. According to data from



the Petroleum and Natural Gas Regulatory Board (PNGRB), industrial sales of piped gas increased by 30% between April and June this year compared to the same period last year.

WHY INDIA MUST RETHINK THE WAY IT VALUES SKILLS, JOBS AND PRODUCTIVE WORK

India, celebrated as the world's fastest-growing economy, has become the world's fourth-largest economy, and is expected to be the next engine of global growth. Yet beneath these numbers lies a grim reality: India is drifting toward the middle-income trap, in which countries exhaust their gains from cheap labour and rapid catch-up and fail to transition to an innovation-driven, productivity-based economy. Weak job creation, stagnant wages, sluggish private investment, and low productivity are reinforcing one another, threatening to stall the country's rise before it reaches high-income status. Many countries in the Global South are caught in this trap. India's structural crisis is unique and more serious than not just a consequence of wars in West Asia disturbing its supply chain or premature automation from AI.

The signs of distress are visible in the youth protests across the country. Private investment remains sluggish, wage growth is stagnant, and household consumption is weak. Manufacturing has failed to generate enough jobs, while post-pandemic recovery has favoured large corporations and the digital economy, leaving the informal sector barely touched. Jobless growth emerges because productivity gains stay concentrated in narrow, capital- and skill-intensive enclaves that create little employment. This simultaneous rise of rising inequality and low productivity is a dangerous trap.

Two failing engines

Economists are typically divided in explaining this trap. Those trained in pro-market orthodoxy argue India needs another set of market reforms — no less than what occurred during the 1991 moment — more labour flexibility, agricultural reform, deregulation, and infrastructure investment. Those on the left and typically in the Keynesian mould argue that the economy suffers from weak aggregate demand and needs more public spending, redistribution and social protection. Both arguments hold a kernel of truth, but miss the larger point: India's current situation stems not only from supply and demand constraints but from institutions shaped by social norms, which decide both how markets set incentives and prices, and how the State allocates resources and provides public goods.

It is no surprise, then, that both the State and the market operate suboptimally. Private capital, more freer from regulation than ever, does not do well on productivity and innovation. Its competitiveness comes from cutting costs rather than innovating. It couldn't even absorb knowledge that comes with FDI. It couldn't increase productivity that results from both inter-sectoral movements and innovation within sectors either. On the other hand, capital is heavily subsidised, lowering its relative price vis-à-vis labour in a labour-surplus economy. India's innovation is skewed, with R&D spending at a paltry 0.65% of GDP, while technology adoption remains weak and far from spontaneous. Despite the government's growing size, India's capacity to intervene — even to provide basic services like health centres or schooling — remains among the lowest anywhere.

The Left-Right debate focuses on the size and quality of government expenditure, but the problem lies elsewhere. The same social norms that shape resource allocation also drive its inefficient use. For instance, India has historically underfunded mass education while subsidising higher education for elites, tilting spending toward the privileged. That same elite bias later drove the



service-sector-heavy growth of post-reform India, letting upper castes monopolise better occupations while relegating low-productivity work to others.

Undervaluing useful skills

India's social norms are distinctive: they decide how State and market function while producing durable inequality and legitimising it. Having long undermined mass education, India's vocational training system remains poorly managed and chronically underfunded. Fewer than 3% of the workforce has any formal vocational education. Of roughly 14,000 ITIs offering about 25 lakh seats, actual intake is only about 48%, and even among graduates, the employment rate is just 63% — far below the 90%-plus seen in many other countries.

Societies set up institutions based on their interests and norms. Economists often take self-interest as central to economic motives. Yet social norms determine the kind of institutions that take shape, which in turn decide how individual efforts are channelised into productive activities. These institutions work as the taproot of entrepreneurial success. As this year's Nobel Prize winner Joel Mokyr has argued, modern growth depends on the accumulation and diffusion of "useful knowledge," the practical skills that enable societies to innovate, adapt and raise productivity.

For Mokyr, sustained growth rests on the coevolution of science, technology and the spread of useful knowledge, something that failed to take strong root in India. India has historically privileged abstract education over vocational and technical knowledge. University degrees command prestige while technical courses training electricians, welders, machinists and carpenters do not. This hierarchy is not accidental. It reflects centuries of caste-based occupational stratification, where manual and artisanal work has been systematically undervalued despite its indispensable role in industrial development.

The result is a chronic shortage of skilled manufacturing workers even as millions of educated young Indians struggle to find decent jobs. Ironically, India's Chief Economic Adviser, V Anantha Nageswaran, recently urged the youth to pursue trades such as welding and plumbing instead of chasing software jobs or MBAs.

But it won't happen unless India changes its social valuation of skills. Take the marriage market: some skills and occupations carry a premium over others. These social valuations shape educational choices, occupational aspirations and ultimately the allocation of labour.

Data show a persistent and steady decline in the labour intensity of production technology across sectors. Even in traditionally labour-intensive sectors, the trend is likely to accelerate with the advent of AI. India therefore needs to recalibrate not just production and distribution, but also their valuation. Without changing the cultural valuation of skills and the way production itself is organised, India may fall into a low-income, low-productivity trap.

Diffusion of useful knowledge

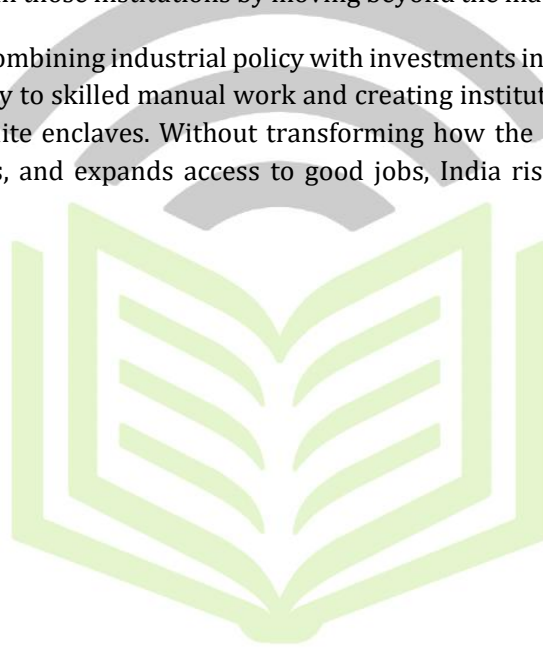
Countries that escaped the middle-income trap — from South Korea to China — did not simply build factories but built institutions capable of creating and diffusing useful knowledge across domains. China's interventions in education and health laid the foundation for its later productive capacity. Its early state-led industrialisation was accompanied by massive investments in technical education, local manufacturing capability and technological learning. By contrast, countries such as Brazil, Argentina, Thailand and the Philippines, which failed to build or sustain



such institutions, became stuck in the middle-income trap. Like India, large sections of their populations remain dependent on public transfers and handouts to secure the basic requirements of a prosperous existence.

As an alternative to this trap, Harvard Economist Dani Rodrik has recently proposed what he calls productivism — an approach that shifts attention from ex-post redistribution to creating productive employment. It calls for the dissemination of economic opportunity and differs from free market orthodoxy in giving the government an important role over the markets in shaping economic opportunities. It emphasises the real economy over finance, jobs over redistribution and production over consumption. A truly inclusive economy, according to him, gives people dignity and social recognition as productive members of society. It can happen not just by recalibrating the policy framework but by overhauling the institutional framework and changing the norms that underpin those institutions by moving beyond the matrix of state-market binaries.

For India, this means combining industrial policy with investments in vocational education. It also means restoring dignity to skilled manual work and creating institutions that spread technology beyond a handful of elite enclaves. Without transforming how the country values skills, builds productive capabilities, and expands access to good jobs, India risks being locked into a low-productivity economy.



DreamIAS



LIFE AND SCIENCES

FROM MOON'S FAR SIDE, A SATELLITE TO LOOK FOR THE FIRST RADIO SIGNAL

Cosmologists are literally over the moon at the prospect of listening to the universe telling its story like never before.

At the heart of this excitement is a small satellite named CosmoCube, which scientists from the Royal Astronomical Society (RAS) plan to send to the far side of the moon, which permanently faces away from the earth.

Expected to be launched before the end of this decade, CosmoCube will orbit the moon and use it as a natural shield from radio interference generated on the earth.

Two-year mission

The compact satellite will have around 40 minutes on the lunar far side during its orbit every two hours, when it will be cut off from all radio noise from the earth. This is when it can capture ultra-faint cosmic signals, particularly one emitted by neutral hydrogen atoms — the most abundant element in space.

"While passing behind the moon, the satellite would listen for an extremely faint radio 'whisper' produced by hydrogen in the very young universe, before the first stars and galaxies had fully formed," Eloy de Lera Acedo, head of the Radio Astronomy and Cosmology research group at the University of Cambridge, who is leading the project, said via email.

A study on the CosmoCube project was published in Nature Astronomy on August 14.

The RAS researchers expect the satellite to gather more than a thousand hours of data during its two-year mission.

"During its scientific observations, CosmoCube would ideally remain radio-silent while behind the moon, so that its own communications did not contaminate the measurement. The recorded data could then be transmitted to the earth during a different part of its orbit," Dr. de Lera Acedo said.

"The satellite carries a very sensitive and accurately calibrated radio receiver, or radiometer, operating at low frequencies (10-100 MHz) which would separate the incoming radio waves into many frequency channels so that scientists [can] search for the characteristic fingerprint of early hydrogen."

Dark ages

Current models of the universe suggest that once upon a spacetime, right after being engendered by the Big Bang, the universe must have been a very dark place filled with neutral hydrogen.

This inky black period is called the Cosmic Dark Ages. It stretched from about 3,80,000 years to around 200 million years after the Big Bang. The first stars and galaxies were yet to ignite their nuclear furnaces and switch on the lights in the universe, ushering in what is known as the Cosmic Dawn.

Today, we can detect blurred pictures of that infant universe in the cosmic microwave background (CMB), the primaeval radiation emitted shortly after the Big Bang.



But no one quite understands what happened during the subsequent Dark Ages as there is nothing for even the state-of-the-art instruments of today to 'see' of that mysterious era.

In that sense, the story of the universe would have been left untold at that point but for a Dutch astronomer, Hendrik van de Hulst. In 1944, Van de Hulst predicted a rare quantum mechanical phenomenon called a spin-flip transition that could have prompted the neutral hydrogen filling the cosmos to emit a feeble light.

He reckoned that this light could be detected at a specific wavelength of 21 cm. Unlike visible light, this ancient radiation, whose corresponding frequency is 1,420 MHz, penetrates interstellar dust clouds to bring us snapshots from the very beginning of space and time.

(Of course, as the universe expands, this radiation is stretched to wavelengths of many metres by the time it reaches us.)

First lights

In 1951, the U.S. physicists Harold Ewen and Edward Purcell at Harvard University observed the 21-cm radiation for the first time, heralding the age of spectral-line astronomy.

It meant cosmologists could pick up the story of the universe again because they had a means to study the Dark Ages, one of the few periods in cosmic history that has never been directly observed.

Around 150 million to one billion years after the Big Bang, light from the first stars and galaxies split the ubiquitous neutral hydrogen in the cosmos into free electrons and protons.

This 'Era of Reionisation' lifted the dark cosmic fog from the universe and made it transparent, traces of which we now see as the cosmic microwave background.

CosmoCube will also help investigate the Hubble tension: the difference in results when we measure the expansion of the universe by studying nearby celestial systems and the CMB of the early universe.

"CosmoCube would not simply make another direct measurement of today's Hubble constant," Dr. de Lera Acedo said. "Instead, it would examine a largely unexplored period between the CMB and the formation of the first stars." This will help cosmologists test some of the new-physics explanations proposed for the Hubble tension, including dark matter (which does not emit or reflect light but accounts for more than 80% of the universe's mass).

'Extraordinary promise'

As Dr. de Lera Acedo put it, "If a model changes the early expansion history, introduces an additional radio background, or allows new interactions between dark matter and ordinary matter, it may leave a measurable signature in the 21-centimetre signal. CosmoCube could provide an independent test of such ideas."

The 21-cm signal from neutral hydrogen is like the proverbial needle in a haystack as it is buried beneath foreground radio emissions probably tens of thousands of times stronger.

To isolate it and reveal how the very first stars and galaxies formed is a formidable challenge even for advanced platforms such as CosmoCube and India's PRATUSH — a proposed radio telescope



and radiometer in lunar orbit (its name is short for 'Probing ReionisATion of the Universe using Signal from Hydrogen').

As Dr. de Lera Acedo said, "That combination, extraordinary scientific promise coupled with extraordinary experimental difficulty, is precisely why the radio-quiet environment behind the moon is so valuable."

CHINA ADVANCES COMBAT-READY HUMANOID ROBOTS

At the World Humanoid Robot Games in China last month, robots jumped, boxed and danced. Some fleet-footed bots ran faster than Usain Bolt over 100 meters. Spectators cheered the machines' improving capabilities and their meme-worthy stumbles.

Two days after the Games ended, the People's Liberation Army's official newspaper drew its own conclusions from the show. The PLA Daily called for researchers to accelerate the transfer of cutting-edge technologies from laboratories to military training grounds for robotic "combatants."

China's defence establishment is accelerating research into humanoids' military uses and planning for their eventual wartime deployment, according to a Reuters review of more than 100 Chinese military procurement notices, academic studies, patents, official publications, government records and defence company materials.

Military institutions are testing humanoids against battlefield requirements, seeking to acquire robots and technologies to train them, and studying how they might function alongside troops, the previously unreported records show. The work gained momentum in 2025 and 2026, focusing on robot perception, manipulation, and training data.

Chinese manufacturers accounted for about 95% of global humanoid shipments in 2025, according to Bank of America (BofA) Global Research. That commercial dominance gives the PLA access to an expanding industry while developing its own military applications.

China's robot defence research underscores how rapidly military technologies are evolving globally. In the Russia-Ukraine war, semi-autonomous drones that use artificial intelligence (AI) for navigation and targeting have transformed reconnaissance and attack, while robots carry supplies and retrieve casualties. Reuters has previously documented the Chinese military's efforts to learn from Europe's deadliest conflict since World War II.

Autonomous systems

That evolution is driving worldwide military interest in autonomous systems.

"Going where we don't want humans to go is one of the most compelling reasons to develop robots in the first place," said Dennis Hong, a professor of mechanical and aerospace engineering at UCLA. "If losing a robot means avoiding the loss of a human life, then the robot can become expendable."

China's defence ministry and the National University of Defense Technology (NUDT), the PLA's premier research institution, didn't respond to requests for comment about humanoid robots' military applications.

Reuters found no evidence that China has deployed an armed humanoid with an operational PLA unit. The robots remain energy-intensive and unreliable outside controlled demonstrations.



Battlefield environments pose many variables and challenge robots' abilities in unpredictable ways, said Aaron Johnson, a professor of mechanical engineering at Carnegie Mellon University.

Urban assault force

Already, China has a vision for humanoid robots in urban warfare.

Six "combat robots" – humanoids, robot dogs or unmanned vehicles – would be split up between two assault teams. Working with ground troops, the robots would clear an enemy-occupied building, floor-by-floor and room-by-room.

That scenario was described in an August 2025 paper by researchers at NUDT's test centre in Xi'an. The study modelled an urban assault force using equipment the authors projected could be available within five to 10 years. It didn't specify the robots' rules of engagement, the weapons they would carry, nor how they would handle civilian encounters.

Improvements in balance, perception and endurance could make humanoids useful in places including buildings, tunnels and ship interiors, said Juo-Min Chou, a researcher at Taiwan's Institute for National Defense and Security Research. "Their two hands and two feet could, in theory, combine mobility, climbing and manipulation," she said.

Cheaper to deploy

For simpler reconnaissance or logistics missions, however, quadruped, tracked or wheeled robots would generally be cheaper and easier to deploy at scale, Chou added.

Chinese military commentary envisions an expanding range of roles for humanoids. A July 2025 article in PLA Daily argued that humanoid missions could eventually evolve "from supporting combat toward primary combat" and discussed how robots might be authorised to fire on a living target that had been verified by a human.

In December, the PLA Eastern Theater Command released an AI-generated montage that showed military robots, including humanoids and quadrupeds, overwhelming Taiwan's defences in a hypothetical future conflict.

China isn't alone in exploring battlefield uses for humanoids. Last year, the U.S. Army launched a competition to develop "militarised humanoid capabilities" that could eventually work alongside soldiers. The Army said potential roles included reconnaissance, security, obstacle clearing, hazardous-material operations and offensive and defensive missions in urban terrain. Up to 10 finalists were due to test their systems with U.S. military experts this year, with as much as \$1.25 million available for follow-on contracts.

U.S. trails China

The U.S. robotics industry, however, trails far behind China in developing two-legged and four-legged machines. Reuters reported last month that China's Unitree robots – among the world's leading producers of humanoids and quadrupeds – based designs for its best-selling robot dogs on innovations financed by the U.S. military. The Pentagon and the U.S. Army didn't comment for this story.



Infiltrating enemy

Chinese interest in humanoid robots' military applications began to pick up in 2024. That year, NUDT and China's Academy of Military Sciences hosted a defence-technology forum that included a session on military applications for humanoid systems, according to NUDT's website. Neither institution responded to Reuters' questions.

A year later, NUDT explicitly framed humanoid robots as battlefield tools. A university competition in June 2025 featured an event that simulated "infiltration behind enemy lines," requiring robots to enter an area, map it and locate targets, according to its website. Another envisioned robots conducting identity checks, discipline inspections and security patrols at military bases.

The military-research university described the competition in part as a proving ground for humanoids to eventually "move toward the battlefield."

Procurement records around that time reflected that ultimate goal.

In May 2025, the PLA issued a tender to purchase a humanoid robot, including installation and technical training. Four months later, a procurement notice that listed an NUDT email as its contact address sought an "embodied humanoid robot intelligent perception and dexterous operation system."

The records contained few specifics. Reuters couldn't determine whether the tenders were filled, and if so, which companies won or which robot models were supplied.

In June this year, the PLA budgeted about \$300,000 for a system to collect and label camera, radar and motion data for humanoids, including information about terrain they could traverse, according to another military procurement document.

The specifications show Chinese military interest is extending from robot bodies into the perception, manipulation and training systems that defence scholars say are essential for humanoids to move beyond controlled demonstrations.

Remote operation

By 2026, humanoid development had spread beyond military academia into China's defence industry.

The Fuxi robot made by Norinco, a state-owned defence conglomerate, is one example. Company materials published in August described the full-size humanoid as capable of sentry duty, all-weather reconnaissance, intelligent patrol and fulfilling dangerous roles. Fuxi can be paired with Norinco's teleoperation system, which allows a human operator to control a humanoid remotely, as per the firm.

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN AI BECOMES FIRST CONFIDANT IN A MENTAL HEALTH CRISIS

For some people, particularly youngsters, an AI chatbot is becoming the first place they turn to when they are distressed. It has its advantages: it is available at any hour, does not appear to judge them and can respond instantly. But when conversations involve thoughts of suicide, the limits of this interaction become consequential. Every conversation with an AI chatbot may not be harmful,



but an apparently empathetic response could reinforce hopelessness, prolong rumination, or delay professional help in some people already at risk, say experts.

AI use for mental health support is now common. A U.S. survey of 1,009 people aged 12 to 21, published in JAMA Pediatrics found that 19.2% had used AI chatbots for mental health advice in 2025. Nearly 43% of these users did so at least monthly, while 5.8% used them daily or almost daily. Nearly two-thirds had not told anyone about this.

Another analysis of more than 6,20,000 publicly available ChatGPT conversations found that 4.9% could be classified broadly as involving mental health, although only 0.21% met a stricter definition involving an identifiable person explicitly seeking mental health help.

Studies have also found that chatbots are generally better at recognising very low- and very high-risk scenarios, but struggle to distinguish between intermediate levels of suicide risk.

This is particularly concerning for psychiatrists, as suicidal distress is rarely expressed in a single, explicit statement and often emerges through a combination of subtle or changing cues.

‘Not always direct’

“Suicidal distress is not always direct; people may hint, use humour or gradually disclose their thoughts,” said Mithun Prasad, consultant, psychiatry, SIMS Hospital, Chennai. Keyword recognition alone, he said, is therefore inadequate; the context and consistency of a conversation matter.

Sabaresh Pandiyan, consultant, psychiatry, Rela Hospital, Chennai, pointed to another issue: the ‘internal loop’, particularly among younger users, who may derive comfort from the empathetic part of an AI response, while ignoring advice to seek professional help. Repeated reassurance can also make suicidal thinking seem less urgent. “Talking about suicide or venting about suicide is not the problem, reinforcing hopelessness is,” he said.

Nithya M., consultant psychiatrist, Apollo Speciality Hospitals, Vanagaram, Chennai, emphasised that AI could amplify existing distress, prolong rumination or substitute validation for intervention.

In clinical practice, psychiatrists see patients use AI to discuss relationships, workplace problems and other personal concerns before speaking to family or friends. Dr. Pandiyan said around 60-70% of patients in his setting discuss such matters with AI first. For some, this may help them recognise a problem and seek care earlier. Others may spend months trying to manage difficulties themselves before consulting a professional.

Dr. Nithya said warning signs can include patients quoting AI responses verbatim, withdrawing from human confidants, resisting professional help or developing a rigid view of themselves or their relationships based on chatbot responses.

Not a substitute for care

There may be limited situations in which patients use AI alongside clinical care. Dr. Prasad said some patients use chatbots between appointments to record medication effects or organise their thoughts, and later bring a summary to their psychiatrist. This can provide the clinician with information about what happened between consultations. But such use does not make AI a substitute for psychiatric assessment. A chatbot does not have access to a person’s psychiatric



history, personality, psychological defences, adverse life experiences, protective factors or current mental state. It may validate an emotion without recognising when urgent assessment is needed. This is particularly concerning when a person has psychosis, mania or distorted beliefs.

Psychiatrists call for mandatory safety audits, independent clinical assessments and clearer liability frameworks. Companies should be required to investigate and report serious safety incidents. Public education should also explain where AI is and is not appropriate.

Experts add that any response must also address the stigma that prevents people from seeking mental healthcare. Families and communities need to create safer spaces for people to talk about distress and seek help.

When a person is in a mental health crisis, experts said, the priority should remain timely human assessment and support. AI cannot take the place of that care.

WHY AUSTRALIA'S MUSIC INDUSTRY BANNED AI MUSIC IN CHART LISTING

The story so far:

Australia's music industry body — the Australian Recording Industry Association (ARIA) — on August 25 banned songs wholly made using AI, noting such tracks will be ineligible for listing on its charts. The announcement comes after the viral fame of an AI remix of Madonna's 1989 song 'Like a Prayer,' made by Australian music producer and disc jockey Josh Fawaz earlier this year. The AI song enjoyed multiple weeks on the country's top 20 chart and ranked second on ARIA's top 20 Australian singles chart, per AP. It also scored over 23 million views on YouTube.

The use of AI to compose the song was not clearly disclosed initially, angering listeners and musicians who want synthetic music to be transparently labelled.

Which songs are banned under the new rules?

The industry body ARIA's rules do not ban outright the use of AI in music. Neither does it have a zero-tolerance policy for AI in art. Instead, the updated code notes that a recording developed with the help of Gen AI is eligible for listing when it is "substantially human made" and "raises no stream or chart manipulation concerns." This still leaves a lot of room for artists to create music with Generative AI tools.

In fact, ARIA CEO Annabelle Herd insisted that the chart listings should evolve to "keep room for" artists already using AI tools in their work.

"The ARIA Charts will always remain a transparent measurement of the music Australia consumes, but a chart that rewards unlicensed AI output would undercut the very basis of the recorded music we exist to represent," she said.

What penalties will users and distributors face?

ARIA has stated that it may reject ineligible recordings, apart from excluding them and removing them from charts whenever needed, adjusting chart positions, withdrawing accreditations, or rescinding its awards.

But when considering the global music industry as a whole, there is not much punitive action that original music artistes and producers can take against users making AI-generated versions of their



songs. The optics of a world-famous singer suing a small creator over an AI remix do not favour the true creators.

Instead, musical artistes and the companies representing them have been taking AI music generation platforms such as Suno and Udio to court, accusing them of using copyrighted works without permission.

In late August, music publishers including Sony Music Publishing and Warner Chappell sued Anthropic, as well as its co-founders Dario Amodei and Benjamin Mann, alleging digital piracy and the data harvesting of copyrighted works.

Anthropic disagreed with the claims and intends to defend itself in court, reported TechCrunch.

Scraping copyrighted content to build AI is still a grey area. However, the 2025 ruling against Anthropic in the authors' lawsuit that ended in a landmark \$1.5 billion settlement made one thing clear: that U.S. courts may take a more serious view of AI companies pirating copyrighted content for AI development.

Will music platforms be held accountable for AI?

To truly exclude AI-generated music from human creations, even casual listeners need a reliable way to differentiate between the two at first glance. For this, transparent labelling standards are required across streaming platforms such as Spotify and Apple Music.

Later this month, Spotify users can expect to see "AI Persona" labels that identify artists who were entirely created with AI. In addition to this, Spotify will not include AI Personas in listeners' editorial or algorithmic recommendations.

The labels will depend on both self-disclosure as well as the platform's own checking process. Users will also be able to learn if the artist self-disclosed their AI status, or if Spotify had to apply the label.

While this label applies to AI artists, the platform has features such as AI Credits and SongDNA in order to understand if specific tracks were created with AI.

But more users are asking for ways to filter AI-generated or AI-assisted music entirely. A spike in unlabelled AI song tracks on platforms such as Instagram makes it difficult for creators to curate background music for their videos and photos. For example, art-based businesses marketing handmade goods to buyers can face flak over accidentally using AI music in their Reels. Taking down and re-uploading the Reel would cost them views.

Challenges exist offline as well. Music lovers and connoisseurs have complained that AI soundtracks are seeping into more public spaces, as commercial properties such as stores and cafés err on the side of caution by choosing generic AI music over popular licensed tracks they may need to pay for.

SULPHURIC ACID: NOT SO DEADLY

Researchers have found that certain peptides — short chains of amino acids that make up proteins — are not only stable in 98% concentrated sulphuric acid but also fold into the complex 3D shapes required to perform the functions central to life.



Thus, the findings, published Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences on September 4, defy the assumption that concentrated sulphuric acid is a bane for the building blocks of life. Scientists had previously found nucleic acid bases and amino acids to be stable in the same solvent; this is the first time a macromolecule important to biology has been shown to be capable of the same feat.

Normally, strong acids break down peptides in a process called hydrolysis; as the name suggests, water molecules break down one or more important bonds. Since 98% sulphuric acid contains almost no water, the reaction that would normally shred the peptide bonds can't happen, allowing the peptides to remain stable for several weeks at room temperature.

Using nuclear magnetic resonance spectroscopy, the researchers found that these peptides folded into a specific shape called an omega loop, using the sulphuric acid molecules themselves as a kind of scaffolding to help maintain the shape.

This is however a significant departure from how proteins behave in water, where they typically form different structures like helices or sheets.

The findings are important for the search for life beyond the earth. For example, Venus is covered in clouds of concentrated sulphuric acid, which scientists previously assumed were too harsh an environment to host any complex chemistry. The new findings question this assumption.

SLUMPING: A SOFT-CORAL THREAT

Ko Myeong-hyo loved the vibrant colour and thriving life of South Korea's soft corals when she first began diving off the coast of Jeju island six years ago, looking to harvest seafood for sale. "Watching the coral garden collapse and turn white, it was so disorienting," Ko says now, after two years of rising temperatures and harsher weather brought by climate change have led to many corals slumping over and dying. "I was afraid the whole sea might be collapsing."

The 'slumping' phenomenon is showing up again this year, says the Paran Ocean Citizen Science Centre, a group of divers who monitor the island's UNESCO-listed soft corals, mostly around uninhabited islets south of Jeju.

Unlike hard corals supported by rigid calcium carbonate skeletons, soft corals rely on internal fluid pressure to keep upright.

Environmental changes can disrupt that pressure, leading them to slump or collapse.

"If another large-scale 'slumping' happens, corals partially recover and then a lot break off and deteriorate again, and that keeps repeating, their capacity to recover just keeps declining," said researcher Kim Taihun.

Kim and Anna Beate Jöst, a colleague at the Korea Institute of Ocean Science and Technology, documented Jeju's 2024 soft coral slumping event for the first time in a May article in the journal Scientific Reports.

Kim said this year's event resembled that of 2024, but could worsen should high water temperatures persist through September, and the historic El Nino may trigger typhoons and heavy rains.



Coral researchers say such weather conditions, plus water flowing down from China's Yangtze River affecting the area's salinity, can trigger slumping.

STRIPED HYENAS HELP KEEP INDIA CLEAN, BUT REMAIN MISUNDERSTOOD

Thanks to its unusual appearance, preference for decaying meat, and nocturnal activities, the Indian striped hyena is a tragically misunderstood animal. Estimates suggest there are around 5,000 to 14,000 striped hyenas worldwide, of which some 1,000 to 3,000 are in India — possibly one of the largest groups in any country. These estimates are a benchmark for research since data on striped hyenas is otherwise scarce. India itself lacks an official census for the animal.

According to the non-profit Wildlife SOS, hyenas are the mounts of witches in the folklore of certain cultures, and these beliefs hamper efforts to conserve the striped hyena.

Despite India's hyenas enjoying the highest level of legal protection under the Wildlife (Protection) Act 1972, there is no proper unified action plan to conserve them. There are only a few fragmented regional initiatives. In West Bengal, for instance, the Wildlife Information and Nature Guide Society has been running awareness drives to dispel negative beliefs under a Wildlife Trust of India-funded project. The Tamil Nadu government has allocated Rs 14 lakh to conserve striped hyenas as part of a larger package to protect less-known endangered wildlife. A National Action Plan that can unite the financial and logistical capacities of such State-level programmes can help protect the animals across borders more efficiently.

However, inadequate data is a major roadblock. Sans a proper population estimate, its geographic distribution will remain unclear, and without this detail it is impossible to establish safe havens. The striped hyena's shy, elusive nature also makes mapping its population an arduous challenge, although a sliver of hope remains in India's proven ability to estimate the nationwide population of the snow leopard. Increasing awareness of the ecological value of striped hyenas will help mitigate the cultural beliefs keeping striped hyenas on the brink. For one, it is unreasonable that they are disparaged for feeding on carrion when just that activity ensures clean landscapes and water sources. Given that decaying meat is a hotbed of pathogens, their role as natural public health agents is crucial. If these scavengers disappear, ecosystems will destabilise.

Reframing cultural narratives in superstitious communities without hurting people's sentiments is not easy, but community engagement can help spread change. India needs striped hyenas far more than it realises.

DRAGONFLIES ARE BELLWETHERS OF EARTH'S ECOSYSTEMS

In the imagination of children, flying holds a special place. Folded pieces of paper become aeroplanes ready to be launched, eager gazes follow soaring eagles, and dragonflies are the helicopters of their fantasies.

Dragonflies (called sitara in Hindi) are indeed wonders of flight. These insects belong to a lineage whose members were among the planet's first flying organisms. About 300 million years ago, their ancient kin had the same aerodynamic features, but with a wingspan that extended to 72 cm. The spectacle of these giant ancestors of dragonflies would have left any modern observer spellbound.

India is home to around 600 species in the order Odonata, which includes dragonflies and the slender damselflies. The pages of The Hindu sometimes feature colourful pictures of newly discovered Indian species, usually in either the Northeastern States or in the Western Ghats where



Karnataka, Kerala, and Tamil Nadu meet. But alas, ecological surveys increasingly report missing dragonfly species and shrinking populations. In a world where public attention is fixated on large mammals, why do these ancient insects merit so much thought?

One notable trait of the Odonata is that they split their life cycle, being aquatic in the early stages and terrestrial and aerial as adults. Nymphs, as their larvae are called, live in water — be it in wetlands, ponds or in flowing streams. The adults hover, accelerate, and swoop on four independently articulated wings. But in all phases, dragonflies are the dominant insect predators. The nymphs feed on the larvae and pupae of mosquitoes and other insects. One growing dragonfly nymph can finish off a hundred mosquito larvae in a day. In flooded paddy fields, nymphs feed on the aquatic stages of crop pests, while dragonflies prey on leafhoppers and other damage-causing insects.

That said, dragonflies are sometimes also the prey.

The Odonata are themselves susceptible to the actions of pesticides, particularly systemic pesticides such as fipronil. These chemical compounds are absorbed by plants and make the whole plant toxic to insects. So over time, excessive pesticide levels lead to a decline in dragonfly numbers. Conversely, the presence of a healthy population of dragonflies and their nymphs in agricultural zones is a sign of well-managed farming without excessive pesticide use.

Away from human-dominated landscapes as well, dragonfly populations are affected by a changing planet. Some species in the Western Ghats have evolved to flourish in forests where water seeps from wet, marshy soil into mountain streams. In more recent years, cycles of drought and excessive rainfall have not been kind to several endemic Indian species, such as the blue hawklet (*Hylaeothemis apicalis*), a strikingly colored dragonfly with blue-green eyes, but which is very rarely seen these days.

While looking to dragonflies and damselflies as the bellwethers of our ecosystems, we also continue to unearth new facets of what makes them unique. Recent research on the eyes that provide 360-degree vision to dragonflies has shown that there are 16 or more genes that code for visual opsins, the proteins that detect colour and light. We humans make do with just four visual opsins: one each for the red, green, and blue colours in our cone cells and a fourth for low-light vision by the rod cells. The molecular abundance gives dragonflies a very sensitive visual system that even perceives ultraviolet light (PNAS 112 (11) E1247-E1256).

Even as their numbers dwindle, these fascinating creatures continue to provide us with new insights.

The article was coauthored with Sushil Chandani, who works in molecular modelling.

ODD EXPRESSIONS

Why do people make odd facial expressions when self-administering eye drops?

People often make oddly tense facial expressions when putting eye drops in their own eyes because the activity significantly tasks the nervous system.

To place a drop in your eye, you need to control yourself while something approaches a sensitive part of your face. People instinctively tense their facial muscles and may open their mouths as part



of this effort. This is similar to the involuntary grimaces people make when doing something requiring fine motor control.

The brain doesn't always activate only those muscles needed for an activity. When you focus on a difficult movement, other muscles can also become activated unnecessarily. Facial muscles are particularly prone to this.

Next, the eye blinks reflexively when the dropper approaches it, so you need to deliberately suppress blinking while also keeping your eye open and aiming accurately, creating tension around the eyes, forehead, and the mouth.

BHUTAN LEADS SOUTHEAST ASIA REGION IN ELIMINATING RABIES

Bhutan has become the first country in the World Health Organization's Southeast Asia region to eliminate dog-transmitted rabies as a public health problem. The WHO, on Saturday, validated Bhutan's achievement. The mountain kingdom's last rabies death was in June 2023.

Rabies is a viral disease that is almost always fatal if clinical symptoms appear. It is estimated that rabies still claims the lives of approximately 59,000 people each year, with a third of these fatalities occurring in India, where it remains a huge problem with local bodies failing at animal birth control and vaccination programmes.

The disease is endemic throughout the country except for the Andaman and Nicobar and Lakshadweep Islands, and cases are reported from all over the country, the year round. About 96% of the mortality and morbidity is associated with dog bites.

Target for 2030

The National Rabies Control Programme aims to reduce mortality from rabies among human beings and progressively achieve the target of bringing rabies deaths to zero by 2030.

In a message shared on the WHO website, its Director-General, Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, congratulated Bhutan "which is another step towards our goal to end human deaths from dog-transmitted rabies by 2030".

He further noted the interventions that made the success possible: "Bhutan's success shows that the health of humans, animals and the environment we share is inextricably linked. By uniting health workers, veterinarians, and communities, Bhutan has shown that the fight against rabies is won not in silos, but through solidarity across all sectors."

Two-pronged strategy

WHO validation recognises that a country has eliminated dog-transmitted human rabies and consequently through the absence of human deaths from the disease for at least two years, while demonstrating the capacity to prevent transmission from re-emerging.

Rabies deaths are preventable. A two-pronged strategy is advocated globally — vaccinating dogs to curb the disease at source, and using post-exposure prophylaxis (PEP) after a bite. PEP consists of thoroughly washing the bite area with water and soap, administering a full course of human rabies vaccine, and whenever necessary, rabies immunoglobulins.



Nilesh Buddha, Officer-in-Charge, WHO South-East Asia Region, complimented the country: “The dedication of health workers, veterinary professionals and De-suung volunteers known as ‘Guardians of Peace’ helped take dog vaccination, population management and community awareness to every part of the country.”

A strong collaboration was initiated between the Ministries of Health and the Agriculture and Livestock, together with partners, local governments and communities, united through a One Health approach, Bhutan’s Health Ministry sources explained. Continued access to PEP, mass dog vaccination, dog population management, community engagement and strengthened surveillance marked the country’s programme.

HOW SCIENTISTS ARE USING MENSTRUAL BLOOD IN OSTEOARTHRITIS TREATMENT

For most of history, menstrual blood has been dismissed as biological waste. But emerging research is now recasting this material as a goldmine for non-invasive diagnostics and regenerative medicine. Its potential applications are surprisingly broad, ranging from innovative cervical cancer screenings to advanced cartilage repair.

Much like saliva or blood plasma, menstrual fluid is rich with biological information. It is packed with immune cells, endometrial tissue, proteins, and genetic fragments.

Scientists are now digging into these biomarkers hoping to find ways to detect diseases early, and thus drop the use of invasive clinical procedures.

Stem cells

Researchers have recently reported that they had used menstrual blood to spot cancer early. Normally, medical workers have screened for cervical cancer using clinical check-ups that many people skip due to discomfort, cost, limited access to healthcare, and in fact plain embarrassment. As a result, screening rates remain low even in economically developed regions.

In 2025, a large population-based study in The BMJ by researchers from China offered a workaround. The team found that menstrual blood collected directly from sanitary pads could be tested for human papillomavirus DNA and precancerous lesions just as accurately as cervical swab samples collected by a clinician. Of course, the method excludes those who do not menstruate, but the fact that it offered a non-invasive, inexpensive, and suitable test that could begin from home is notable.

Menstrual blood is also gaining research focus thanks to stem cells derived from it. The groundwork for this was laid back in 2007 when a team from the U.S. and Canada successfully isolated menstrual stem cells from menstrual blood. These cells came from the endometrium, the uterine lining that breaks down and rebuilds itself on a monthly cycle without scarring — something other human tissue cannot do. The researchers believed the stem cells had something to do with that ability. In the lab, the menstrual-blood-derived stem cells readily divided and proved to be tough and versatile.

Researchers are already using them to grow uterine organoids — small functional models of the uterus located outside the body and used to study conditions like endometriosis. The stem cells could reveal traces of exposure to chemical compounds like phthalates and parabens, which was previously not possible to discern without an invasive examination.



Indeed, while bone marrow stem cells are still the gold standard for many therapies, extracting them is a gruelling process. It is painful, requires anaesthesia, and bears significant surgical risks. Menstrual-blood-derived stem cells however can be collected non-invasively, and sans the ethical baggage that often complicates stem-cell sourcing.

As the science of these cells has matured, so have their applications. For instance, in 2025, a team in China studied the role they could play on Niemann-Pick disease type C1. This is a rare and devastating inherited condition that is caused by cholesterol and lipids build-up inside cells, leading to rapid neurological decline, loss of motor function, and dementia. The study found that menstrual-blood-derived stem cells could significantly lower neuroinflammation and cell death in experimental models of the disease. The work is still in its early stages, but for a condition whose therapeutic options are currently limited to drugs easing the clinical symptoms, a potential new advance is welcome.

A 2023 study by Iranian researchers showed that when these cells were delivered alongside their conditioned medium — the nutrient-rich fluid they had been cultured with — they helped accelerate heart recovery in rat models after a heart attack.

In hepatology, menstrual-blood-derived stem cells have been found to suppress the specific liver cells responsible for scarring and fibrosis. Because they naturally migrate towards areas of inflammation and cancer, researchers are also exploring engineering these cells to deliver therapeutic genes directly to a tumour site, sparing the rest of the body from the toxic side effects of chemotherapy.

Many experts increasingly believe extracellular vesicles (EVs) are the future of regenerative medicine. They are easier to standardise than whole stem cells — which are complete, living biological units that can divide and adapt within the body, but vary significantly from one batch to another. They also carry risks of becoming unintended tissue types. Because EVs are not whole cells, but rather clumps of proteins, lipids, RNA, and signalling molecules enclosed by membranes secreted from the parent cell, they can't divide or differentiate into other tissues. This makes them safer, more stable alternatives and less likely to trigger immune rejection, can be engineered to evade immune detection, and can be frozen and stored just like conventional biological drugs.

Menstrual-blood-derived stem cells can be made to release these EVs when cultured in specific conditions in the lab, such as hypoxia (low oxygen) or by adding inflammatory cytokines.

Ordinary challenges

In a notable study published in Scientific Reports in February, a team from Lithuania isolated EVs from healthy donors and introduced them to human cartilage cells taken from patients who had undergone joint surgery. Within hours, the cartilage cells had absorbed the EVs and produced a new extracellular matrix, the scaffolding of healthy joints. When the team simulated joint inflammation, the vesicles reduced the release of markers associated with cartilage degradation.

Since osteoarthritis disproportionately affects women, the researchers also tracked hormone receptors. Specifically, when they examined how EVs affected receptors in the joint tissue, they found that the EVs had increased the expression of the progesterone receptor in cartilage cells, potentially restoring a hormonal signalling pathway that tends to deteriorate in women following menopause.



While most current treatments for osteoarthritis mask the pain, these findings suggest a way to actually slow or reverse the damage. Even though the research is nascent, if the findings hold up in future trials, any benefits will matter considering the number of people living with this condition, estimated to be 595 million worldwide in 2020.

Some significant hurdles remain as well. Scientists do not yet know how long these cells will survive once they are introduced into the body. There is no long-term human safety data— partly because there are no reliable markers to track the cells once they are inside a patient. Producing consistent, high-quality batches also remains a challenge, since no standardised benchmarks exist to verify the cells before use. The cells must themselves behave differently depending on the donor, varying with age, hormonal status, contraceptive history, and the conditions in which the cells were grown in the lab.

Then again, these are ordinary challenges of early-stage biomedical research rather than reasons to dismiss what has already been found.

PROTEIN: REEL, REALITY AND WHAT CONSTITUTES A WHOLESOME MEAL

In the past, a 'healthy plate' was the single prominent determinant of what constitutes healthy eating. Things, however, are far more complex today, as awareness grows about each meal, micro meals, snacks and what must comprise each such unit.

Even as, on one side, awareness about packaging and labels on packaged foods grows with the new FSSAI (Food Safety and Standards Authority of India) mandates, on the dark side, online/social media continue to influence food fads and generalised opinion gets packaged as expert advice. The flavour of a few seasons now, seems to be protein.

India is asking the wrong question about protein, the Physicians Association for Nutrition, India (PAN-India) said in a White Paper, issued in the context of the National Nutrition Week between September 1 and 7.

"Protein has become one of the most talked-about and most misunderstood topics in nutrition. Conversations are dominated by grams, "complete vs incomplete" labels, and high-protein product marketing. These measures are useful, but none of them alone tells you whether someone's diet is actually healthy or adequate," the paper says.

The treatise starts by contesting a basic principle: The conventional idea that animal protein is "complete" and plant protein is "incomplete" is oversimplification. Plant foods too contain all the essential amino acids the body needs; the amounts of each just vary by food. Within a varied diet with enough calories, the body gets what it needs across the day; you do not need to combine specific foods at every single meal, the nutritionists argue.

Push for protein

At the heart of the concern is excessive influence wielded on social media that pushes the protein narrative and sits in judgment over those not calibrating their protein per meal or per day. From recommending adding fish and chicken, to protein shakes and even, lately a 'Profee' (protein and coffee) the online space has become a hyperactive protein-pushing zone. Algorithms aggressively push recommendations and create fresh anxiety over whether one is getting enough protein or not.



Meenakshi Bajaj, dietician, Tamil Nadu Government Multi Super Speciality Hospital, says: "Unfortunately, social media content is available anytime and everywhere, just a swipe away. As a result, it often appears to have more influence than qualified professionals or evidence-based medicine. It is unfortunate that patients, regardless of age or education, can fall prey to food fads. Content shared by influencers, gym trainers, people with large followings, and unqualified health enthusiasts are being followed without checking the source, credentials, or scientific basis."

She adds: "Just yesterday, I met a qualified professional undergoing dialysis who had read on social media that people on dialysis require high protein. While that is correct, the post did not explain appropriate protein sources. He was consuming three to four whole eggs daily, along with 17 to 20 almonds and walnuts, which contributed to very high potassium and phosphorus levels that could be life-threatening. Had he consulted a qualified dietitian, she would have explained suitable food sources and cooking methods to control potassium and phosphorus while still meeting his protein needs."

Another reason why protein has occupied centre stage is the growing use of GLP-1 antagonists, used widely for weight loss. Those on these drugs, are advised to watch muscle loss, a side effect of the process of losing weight. Protein is also said to assist with satiety in managing hunger. During any rapid weight loss process, protein may be burned for energy instead of serving the traditional function of tissue maintenance and repair.

The White Paper —Rethinking Protein in Plant-Based Diets — argues that protein should be understood within the context of a person's complete diet rather than reduced to grams, amino-acid scores or marketing claims.

As per the Indian Council for Medical Research - National Institute of Nutrition recommendations, a healthy Indian adult must have approximately 0.83 grams of protein per kilogram of body weight daily, making it about 50 grams of protein for a 60-kg adult. This is the generalised norm, however, children in their growth phase, breastfeeding women, sportspersons and older adults might require more protein, the quantity going up to 2 grams per kg per day.

Chennai-based health and fitness coach Priyadarshini Raju says, "I wouldn't call consuming protein itself a fad, but yes, there is a great deal of hype around protein right now. You don't need to have protein written on the package of everything that you find in the aisle of a supermarket. However, for our population, a meal is extremely carbohydrate dominant. Just rice, chapati, idlis, dosas."

For clients, her advise is to add a small amount of protein to each meal, as also fibre. But what kind of protein? "Breakfast can be as simple as besan or oats, or if you're having dosa, just add a little paneer or tofu to it, if you are a vegetarian. Similarly, for lunch, add the same, or fish or chicken. The meal doesn't have to be protein dominant but yes, there should be a little protein along with your carbs and fibre; fats, anyway, we get enough of in our traditional diets."

Plant vs animal proteins

The paper pitches a similar angle: "In a varied diet with adequate calories, people generally do not need to combine specific proteins at every meal. Traditional combinations such as rice and dal, roti and chana, or idli and sambar are useful, but the more important issue is eating sufficient quantities of protein-rich foods," also challenges the familiar claim that animal proteins are "complete" while plant proteins are "incomplete".

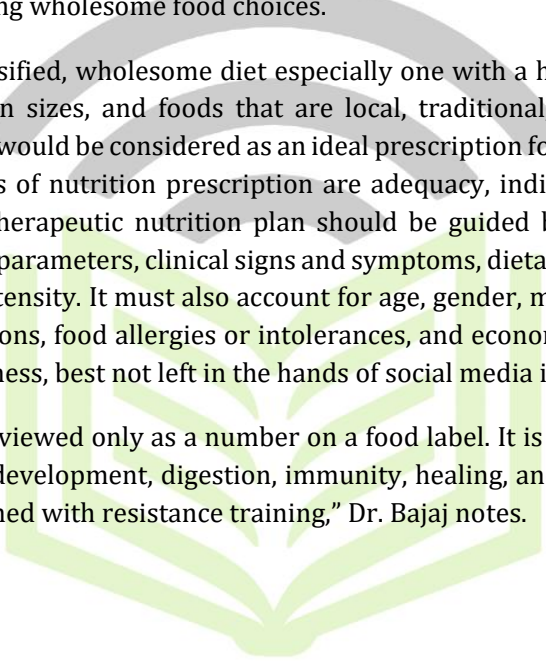


Almost all plant foods contain all nine essential amino acids; there is a difference of course, and it lies in their relative proportions. It goes on to recommend prioritising pulses, beans, lentils, soy foods, nuts, seeds and whole grains, as they provide protein along with good fibre, unsaturated fats, vitamins, minerals and beneficial plant compounds.

PAN-India also addresses another elephant in the room: Supplements. While arguing that protein supplements are not routinely necessary for healthy adults, they might have a role to play in helping athletes, older people with poor appetite, individuals on GLP-1 medications, or those recovering from illness. Ms. Priyadarshini agrees. "As far as supplements, I might recommend them to people who do are reluctant to bring any protein in their diet, especially vegetarians who have just a carb-loaded diet. Otherwise, I think as long as you're able to fit in whole foods into your diet, you will be good. That is the best way." Her vote is for raising awareness of protein consumption and making wholesome food choices.

Dr. Bajaj says: "A diversified, wholesome diet especially one with a high dietary diversity score, age-appropriate portion sizes, and foods that are local, traditional, and seasonal rather than packaged or processed would be considered as an ideal prescription for good health." She explains that the core principles of nutrition prescription are adequacy, individualisation, and avoiding excess. "Therefore, a therapeutic nutrition plan should be guided by ABCDE: anthropometric measures, biochemical parameters, clinical signs and symptoms, dietary assessment, and exercise type, frequency, and intensity. It must also account for age, gender, medical and surgical history, drug-nutrient interactions, food allergies or intolerances, and economic status," she adds. Food, ergo, is a complex business, best not left in the hands of social media influence.

"Protein should not be viewed only as a number on a food label. It is an essential macronutrient that supports growth, development, digestion, immunity, healing, and muscle protein synthesis, especially when combined with resistance training," Dr. Bajaj notes.



DreamIAS