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India to sign U.S. deal only after clarity on rates

Any deal must be weighed against tariff structure and comparative advantage, says senior official

U.S. court ruling against tariffs hadn't come when govt. said deal will be signed in March, adds official

However, Commerce Secretary maintains India is engaged with U.S. for a mutually beneficial deal

T.C.A. Sharad Raghavan
NEW DELHI

India will sign a trade deal with the U.S. only after the country settles its "tariff architecture" and clarifies country-wise tariff rate, sources in the government have said.

"Any deal that we finalise and sign has to be seen against the tariff structure or comparative advantage that India gets in the U.S. market," a senior official in the Ministry of Commerce said. "The U.S. is working on trying to recreate a tariff architecture globally. If they are able to finalise that, at that juncture it would be right to sign the deal," the official said.

This comes against the backdrop of two trade-related investigations the U.S. is carrying out that could potentially see additional tariffs being levied on a number of countries, including India.

Meanwhile, Commerce Secretary Rajesh Agrawal said that India remains engaged with the U.S. on a trade deal.

"Pursuant to the U.S. Supreme Court judgment dated February 20, 2026 invalidating reciprocal tariffs, the reciprocal tariffs are no longer in force," Mr. Agrawal told presspersons on Monday. "The U.S. government has issued Executive Orders imposing 10% tariffs pursuant to Section 122 of the Trade Act, 1974 on certain products from all countries," he added. "India remains engaged with the U.S. side for a mutually beneficial trade agreement," he said.

India and the U.S. announced a trade deal on February 2 and a joint statement on the finalisation of a framework for the deal was released on February 7. At the time, Commerce Minister Piyush Goyal had said that the deal would be signed in March.

The U.S. Supreme Court on February 20 ruled against the validity of U.S. President Donald Trump's use of the International Emergency Economic Powers Act (IEEPA) to levy reciprocal tariffs on America's trade partners. It is after this that the U.S. imposed the 10% tariffs on all its trade partners under Section 122 of the Trade Act, 1974. These tariffs are in force for a period of 150 days from February 24.

"The U.S. deal was to be signed in March. When we said this, at that time the Supreme Court judgement on IEEPA tariffs had not come," the official explained. "Now with the Supreme Court judgement on IEEPA tariffs, the tariffs per se don't exist."

Additionally, over the course of March 11-12, the U.S. Trade Representative initiated two separate investigations into the U.S.' trade partners under Section 301 of the Trade Act, 1974. If the findings of these investigations warrant it, the U.S. can impose additional tariffs on particular countries.

Under the framework announced by the two countries, the U.S. was to impose an 18% tariff on most goods imported from India. Now, the new rate will depend on the rates the U.S. imposes on India's competitors.

"Depending on how their tariff architecture settles, that will determine where India will land," the official said. "In case all others are at 19%, 20%, 21%, 22%, then India will remain at 18%. But if others come down, then India will also come down. That is something for the U.S. also to take a call on."

On Russian oil

Mr. Agrawal also highlighted that the U.S.' removal of tariffs on India is linked to its import of Russian oil.

"On February 7, 2026, the 25% additional ad-valorem tariffs imposed by the U.S. on certain Indian exports citing India's imports of Russian oil were removed," Mr. Agrawal noted.

Following the start of the ongoing conflict in West Asia, the U.S. Treasury Department issued an order to "allow" India to import oil from Russia, a concession it later expanded to all countries.

"On petroleum, whether we are buying it at a premium [from Russia], the Petroleum Ministry would be the right forum to answer it in detail," Mr. Agrawal said.

He said, "But we do monitor the import data and we can say that we are buying Russian oil and there has been an increased buying of Russian oil in the current month because of the challenges we are facing."

Tariff travails

In 2025, U.S. imposed 25% reciprocal tariffs on India. An additional 25% linked to import of Russian oil was later imposed taking total tariffs to 50%. A timeline of events thereafter:

- **Feb. 6, 2026:** India and the U.S. issue a statement on framework on interim pact
- Additional 25% Russian oil-linked tariff removed **(Tariff on India: 25%)**
- **Feb. 20:** U.S. SC strikes down reciprocal tariffs
- **Feb. 24:** U.S. imposes 10% tariff on all countries for 150 days. **Tariff on India: 10%**
- **Mar. 11-12:** USTR launches probe which could lead to additional tariffs
- **Mar. 16:** Govt. sources say deal will only be signed after U.S. finalises tariffs on India and other countries

India's trade deficit stands at $4 billion in Feb.

NEW DELHI

India's trade balance stood at a deficit of about $4 billion in February compared with a surplus of $2.7 billion a year earlier due in large part to merchandise exports staying flat while imports of both merchandise and services grew significantly during the month. » PAGE 12

KEY HIGHLIGHTS

Context

- India has deferred signing the trade deal with the U.S. pending clarity on the U.S. global tariff structure ("tariff architecture").
- Triggered by:
  - U.S. Supreme Court (Feb 2026) striking down tariffs under IEEPA.
  - Imposition of 10% temporary tariffs under Section 122, Trade Act 1974 (valid for 150 days).
  - Launch of Section 301 investigations into trade partners.
- Earlier, India–U.S. had agreed on a trade framework (Feb 2026).

Key Points

- India seeks comparative tariff advantage over competing countries.
- Proposed 18% tariff on Indian goods may change depending on tariffs imposed on others.
- Section 122 (Trade Act, 1974) → Temporary tariffs (≤150 days).
- Section 301 → Allows U.S. to impose tariffs after investigating unfair trade practices.
- IEEPA tariffs invalidated → earlier reciprocal tariffs withdrawn.
- U.S. removed 25% additional tariffs on Indian exports linked to Russian oil (Feb 2026).
- India continues increased imports of discounted Russian oil.

Static Linkages

- Comparative Advantage (David Ricardo) → Basis of trade negotiations.
- WTO MFN principle → Non-discriminatory tariffs.
- Tariffs vs Non-tariff barriers in trade policy.
- Balance of Payments (BoP) and trade deficits.
- FTAs → Reduce tariffs and enhance market access.

Critical Analysis

Positives

- Ensures better bargaining position
- Protects domestic industry
- Focus on relative competitiveness

Challenges

- Delay in agreement may affect exports
- Exposure to U.S. protectionist policies
- Geopolitical linkage (Russian oil) complicates trade

Way Forward

- Finalise deal based on comparative tariff advantage
- Diversify export markets
- Strengthen domestic manufacturing (PLI)
- Ensure WTO-compliant trade strategy
- Balance strategic autonomy with economic interests

Naval warships escort Indian vessels from Gulf of Oman

Saurabh Trivedi
Saptaparno Ghosh
NEW DELHI

The Indian Navy has deployed warships to escort Indian-flagged merchant vessels transiting through the Persian Gulf region, according to official sources.

Three Indian Navy ships have escorted the Indian-flagged merchant ships *Shivalik*, *Nanda Devi*, and *Jag* Laadki from the Gulf of Oman after they crossed the Strait of Hormuz. The warships ensured safe transit of the vessels through vulnerable waters.

Though the conflict has been intense in the Persian Gulf west of the Strait of Hormuz, the Gulf of Oman, east of the strait, has also seen attacks. *Jag* Laadki, carrying more than 80,000 tonnes of crude oil, left Fujairah terminal

Safe arrival: LPG carrier *Shivalik* reached the Mundra port on Monday. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

in the UAE on Sunday. The vessel had a narrow escape when the terminal was attacked while it was loading.

Sources said that naval ship escort to Indian merchant ships will continue to be provided. Some 22 Indian-flagged ships are still stranded west of the strait.

While officials declined to disclose the names of the naval ships involved, a senior official confirmed that the warships were operating in the region under Operation Sankalp, a mission aimed at safeguarding merchant shipping and protecting India's maritime interests in the Gulf region.

Launched in June 2019, Operation Sankalp ensures safe passage of Indian-flagged vessels through critical sea lanes, and saw action, including during the Houthi attacks.

Meanwhile, LPG carrier *Shivalik* reached Mundra Port on Monday evening, the government confirmed. Earlier in the day, Rajesh Kumar Sinha, Special Secretary at the Ministry of Shipping, told reporters in an inter-ministerial briefing that priority berthing and documentation has been arranged to ensure there is no delay in discharging the cargo.

Nanda Devi, another LPG carrier, is expected to reach Kandla port on Tuesday. Individually, the vessels are holding 46,000 tonnes of cargo, cumulatively, 92,172 tonnes.

"Seafarers on board [all the three vessels] are all safe and would reaching tomorrow at Mundra port," Mr. Sinha said.

Addressing reporters at the same briefing, Sujata Sharma, Joint-Secretary at the Ministry of Petroleum and Natural Gas, said that cooking gas continues to be an "issue of concern", though supply of LPG to domestic consumers continues uninterrupted. No dry out has been reported among distributors, she added.

Separately, in response to a query, the senior official informed that domestic LPG production had increased 36% since the supply maintenance order.

Responding to queries about U.S. President Donald Trump seeking countries send warships to guard passage of vessels from the Strait of Hormuz, Randhir Jaiswal, spokesperson at the External Affairs Ministry, said the issue has not been taken up in any bilateral setting.

KEY HIGHLIGHTS

Context

- Indian Navy escorted Indian-flagged merchant vessels (Shivalik, Nanda Devi, Jag Laadki) through Strait of Hormuz–Gulf of Oman region.
- Deployment under Operation Sankalp (2019) due to rising maritime threats (attacks near Fujairah, Gulf tensions).
- ~22 Indian ships remain stranded in high-risk zone west of Hormuz.

Key Points

- Operation Sankalp:
  - Launched: June 2019
  - Objective: सुरक्षा of Sea Lines of Communication (SLOCs) & Indian shipping
  - Activities: Escort, surveillance, presence missions
- Strategic Importance:
  - Strait of Hormuz: ~20% global oil trade passes
  - India imports ~80–85% crude oil (major share via this route)
- Recent Developments:
  - Attack near Fujairah oil terminal highlights vulnerability
  - LPG cargo escorted (~92,000 tonnes) safely to Indian ports
  - Govt ensured priority berthing & supply continuity
- Energy Security:
  - LPG supply stable domestically
  - Domestic production ↑ ~36% (govt data)

Static Points

- Strait of Hormuz: connects Persian Gulf–Gulf of Oman–Arabian Sea
- UNCLOS (1982) → right of transit passage
- Concept of SLOC security in maritime strategy
- India's doctrine: Freedom of Navigation
- Strategic Petroleum Reserves (SPR) for energy security

Critical Analysis

Positives

- Ensures uninterrupted energy supply
- Enhances India's role as net security provider in IOR
- Protects Indian seafarers & trade

Challenges

- Risk of regional escalation
- High operational cost for Navy
- Continued dependence on West Asia
- Diplomatic balancing (US–Iran–Gulf)

Way Forward

- Diversify energy sources (renewables, alternate suppliers)
- Expand Strategic Petroleum Reserves
- Strengthen naval capabilities & MDA
- Promote regional maritime cooperation
- Develop alternate corridors (e.g., INSTC)

Economic stagnation, job mismatch behind 'distress migration' from Punjab, say experts

Vikas Vasudeva
CHANDIGARH

The State's Economic Survey noted that a combination of 'pull' and 'push' factors is behind brain drain

Even as Punjab's Economic Survey 2025-26 noted that a combination of "pull" and "push" factors is behind brain drain from the State, experts argue that Punjab is witnessing 'distress migration' owing to the continued failure of the political leadership to address the root causes pushing people to leave.

"Better standards of living in developed economies such as Canada, the U.S., Australia, and the U.K. remain the biggest pull factor attracting youth with high aspirations," stated the survey tabled in the Assembly on March 8.

"On the other hand, a rising number of push factors are also at play. Lack of employment opportunities that suit the aspirations and qualifications of Punjabis is one of the leading reasons. This is substantiated by the fact that of the total 1,22,842 applicants registered with the State's Unemployment Bureau in 2025 (as of 30th September), 58% were unskilled and 42% categorised as skilled," the survey stated.

It added that as agricultural growth has reached a plateau, several children of farmers are migrating abroad in search of jobs.

Ranjit Singh Ghuman, Professor of Eminence (Economics) at Guru Nanak Dev University, Amritsar, pointed out that the Economic Survey has correctly identified unemployment, mismatch between youths' aspirations and the availability of jobs, and shrinking employment opportunities in agriculture as key drivers of migration.

"Recent studies in Punjab show that unemployment, corruption, a bad politico-administrative system, fear of drug addiction, and social insecurity are the major push factors behind migration of youth," he told *The Hindu*.

'Lack of political will'

"Unfortunately, the political leadership seems to lack the will to resurrect Punjab and instil a sense of confidence in the people's psyche. The Punjab government must come out of denial mode and correct growth fundamentals, create an enabling environment for growth and employment, and address the basic reasons behind migration," he said.

Lakhwinder Singh, a visiting professor at the Institute for Human Development, New Delhi, said Punjab's gross fixed capital formation as a percentage of GSDP has been falling since the mid-1980s due to lack of capital investment.

"Given the structure and slow growth of Punjab's economy, employment elasticity is low. A lack of new employment opportunities has created hopelessness among the youth. The second reason is the deteriorating quality of existing employment in both public and private sectors," he said.

KEY HIGHLIGHTS

Context

- Punjab Economic Survey 2025–26 highlights increasing migration of youth.
- Migration driven by pull factors (abroad opportunities) and push factors (domestic distress).
- Experts describe it as "distress migration" reflecting structural economic issues.

Key Points

- Unemployment & Skill Mismatch:
  - 1.22 lakh unemployed registered (2025)
  - 58% unskilled, 42% skilled → mismatch with job market
- Agricultural Stagnation:
  - Plateau in growth → reduced employment absorption
- Declining Investment:
  - Falling Gross Fixed Capital Formation (GFCF) since 1980s
- Low Employment Elasticity:
  - Growth not translating into jobs
- Governance Issues:
  - Corruption, weak administration
- Social Factors:
  - Drug abuse, insecurity
- Migration Trend:
  - Increasing among youth and farmer families

Static Linkages

- Push–Pull Theory of Migration
- Disguised Unemployment (Agriculture)
- Employment Elasticity of Growth
- Structural Transformation (Lewis Model)
- Human Capital Flight (Brain Drain vs Brain Gain)
- Role of Capital Formation in Growth

Critical Analysis

Issues:

- Brain drain of skilled youth
- Distress-driven migration (not aspirational)
- Weak industrial base
- Agricultural crisis
- Social consequences (illegal migration, exploitation)

Limited Positives:

- Remittances inflow
- Global exposure

Way Forward

- Diversify economy (MSMEs, manufacturing)
- Skill alignment with market demand
- Increase investment (improve GFCF)
- Agricultural diversification
- Improve governance & reduce corruption
- Promote safe and legal migration

ASI allows T.N. Archaeology Dept. to conduct excavations at Keeladi, seven other sites

N. Sai Charan
CHENNAI

After a delay of several months, the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) has granted permission to the Tamil Nadu State Department of Archaeology (TNSDA) for conducting excavations at eight historical sites, including the 11th phase of excavations at Keeladi.

The approval has been given to conduct excavations at Keeladi and its clusters in Sivaganga district, among other sites. FILE PHOTO

According to officials, the approval has been given for excavations at Keeladi and its clusters in Sivaganga district; Pattinamarudhur in Thoothukudi district; Karivalamvanthanallur in Tenkasi district; Manikollai in Cuddalore district; Adichanur in Villupuram district; Vellalore in Coimbatore district; Telunganur-Mangadu in Salem district; and Nagapattinam.

Following the recommendation of an expert committee, the Exploration and Excavation Section of the ASI granted the permission on March 13 under the Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Sites and Remains Rules, 1959.

In July 2025, the TNSDA sought the ASI's approval for excavations at these sites, which were announced by Finance Minister Thangam Thennarasu in the Tamil Nadu Budget for 2025-26. Following delays, Tamil Nadu officials wrote to the ASI, as the excavation season runs from January to July in the State.

Centre's nod sought

Recently, Chief Minister M.K. Stalin also urged the Centre to grant the approval at the earliest, stating that the monsoon would disrupt fieldwork in the second half of the year.

KEY HIGHLIGHTS

Context

- Archaeological Survey of India approved excavations at 8 sites in Tamil Nadu.
- Includes 11th phase of Keeladi excavation (Sivaganga district).
- Permission granted under Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Sites and Remains Rules, 1959.
- Proposal submitted by Tamil Nadu State Department of Archaeology in July 2025.
- Delay raised concerns as excavation season: Jan–July.

Key Points

- Sites approved:
  - Keeladi (Sivaganga)
  - Pattinamarudhur (Thoothukudi)
  - Karivalamvanthanallur (Tenkasi)
  - Manikollai (Cuddalore)
  - Adichanur (Villupuram)
  - Vellalore (Coimbatore)
  - Telunganur-Mangadu (Salem)
  - Nagapattinam
- Keeladi significance:
  - Evidence of urban settlement (brick structures, drainage)
  - Discovery of Tamil-Brahmi inscriptions → early literacy
  - Linked to Sangam Age (300 BCE–300 CE)
- Coastal sites (e.g., Nagapattinam):
  - Indicate maritime trade (Roman & Southeast Asia links)
- Approval based on expert committee recommendation

Static Points

- AMASR Act, 1958:
  - Governs protection of monuments/sites of national importance
- AMASR Rules, 1959:
  - Regulate excavation permissions
- Tamil-Brahmi script:
  - Earliest script in South India
- Sangam Age:
  - Early historic period with urbanization & trade networks
- Archaeology helps reconstruct proto-historic and early historic phases

Critical Analysis

Positives

- Strengthens evidence-based history of South India
- Promotes cultural heritage & tourism
- Expands understanding of non-Gangetic urbanization

Issues

- Delay in approvals affects excavation cycles
- Limited funding & technical capacity
- Risk of politicisation of findings

Way Forward

- Time-bound clearance system for excavations
- Enhance Centre–State coordination
- Use advanced techniques (DNA, carbon dating, GIS)
- Develop site museums & digital record

Jaishankar discusses West Asia situation with EU counterparts

The Hindu Bureau
LONDON

On the second day of his Brussels visit, External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar met with European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen and had discussions, including about the situation in West Asia and Ukraine. Mr. Jaishankar was invited to interact with Foreign Ministers from the 27-member bloc, during the EU Foreign Affairs Council meeting on Monday, as per a statement from the External Affairs Ministry.

"We also discussed developments in the Middle East and in Ukraine. De-escalation, stability and energy security are our shared objectives," Ms. Von der Leyen said in a post on X, about her meeting with Mr. Jaishankar. The EU and India were focused on implementing the trade deal signed in January in New Delhi, "as soon as possible", she said.

S. Jaishankar meeting Foreign Ministers from the EU at the Foreign Affairs Council Meeting in Brussels on Monday. ANI

Thanking the EU's top diplomat Kaja Kallas for inviting him to the Foreign Affairs Council, Mr. Jaishankar said, "Our conversation today therefore covered trade, investment, technology, mobility and defence in particular."

"The stronger convergence between India and the EU in a multipolar world is also expressed in closer consultations," he added, saying West Asia, Ukraine, and the Indo-Pacific were discussed at the meeting. On Sunday, Mr. Jaishankar publicly thanked Armenia for the safe evacuation of 550 Indian nationals from Iran.

Ahead of the meeting, Ms. Kallas had outlined various options the EU was considering to open the Strait of Hormuz, a crucial body of water through which a quarter of the world's oil passes.

Mr. Jaishankar had said that India would be happy to share what New Delhi was doing with Tehran, with European countries, although he acknowledged that every country had a different relationship with Iran. He had also said there was no *quid pro quo* involved with Iran permitting the passage of two Indian-flagged tankers carrying LPG crossing the Strait on Saturday, saying this was based on a "history of dealing" with each other.

Calling the conflict "most unfortunate", he called for other countries to engage with Tehran. The Minister had also emphasised that India did not have a "blanket arrangement" with Tehran for safe passage of ships, but it was being arranged on a case-by-case basis and discussions were ongoing.

KEY HIGHLIGHTS

Context of the News

- S. Jaishankar visited Brussels; interacted with EU leadership.
- Met Ursula von der Leyen and EU Foreign Ministers.
- Discussions on West Asia tensions, Ukraine conflict, India–EU trade deal, energy security.
- India coordinated with Iran for safe passage of ships through Strait of Hormuz.

Key Points

- India–EU strategic partnership (since 2004); Trade & Technology Council (2022).
- EU = one of India's largest trading partners (~€120+ billion trade).
- Focus areas: trade, investment, technology, mobility, defence.
- Strait of Hormuz → ~20–25% of global oil transit (critical for India's imports).
- EU exploring options to ensure maritime security.
- India's Iran engagement based on case-by-case approach (no formal arrangement).
- Evacuation of ~550 Indians → diaspora protection capacity.

Static Linkages

- Strategic autonomy in India's foreign policy.
- UNCLOS → freedom of navigation.
- Energy security → diversification of supply sources.
- Importance of Gulf region for India (oil + diaspora).

Critical Analysis

Pros

- Strengthens India–EU cooperation in a multipolar world.
- Enhances energy security coordination.
- Boosts trade and technology partnerships.

Cons / Challenges

- Divergence on Russia–Ukraine issue.
- Dependence on unstable West Asia region.
- Delays in finalising India–EU FTA.

Way Forward

- Fast-track India–EU FTA negotiations.
- Diversify energy imports (renewables, alternate routes).
- Strengthen maritime security cooperation.
- Enhance diplomatic engagement in West Asia.

Neighbourhood diplomacy and its West Asia challenge

Suhasini Haidar

With the sinking of the Iranian warship, *IRIS Dena*, in the Indian Ocean, by the United States on March 4, the war in West Asia came home to South Asia. With each passing day, the war that began on February 28 has reached South Asian homes in a number of ways – disrupting the availability of daily necessities, travel, trade, food and fuel for cooking and transport, fertilizers, and the safety of citizens in the West Asia region.

Approximately 25 million South Asians live and work in West Asia, including 10 million Indians, five million Pakistanis, between five to six million Bangladeshis, two million Nepalis, and significant numbers from Sri Lanka, Bhutan, and the Maldives. Afghans – between five to eight million – are refugees in Iran. In addition, Indians make up about 15% of the population of seafarers, or crew aboard merchant ships worldwide, along with other South Asians, all of whom are at risk of harm, particularly those positioned around the Strait of Hormuz, where Iran has weaponised access. As New Delhi formulates its next steps in the war, it is necessary to consider not only what it will mean for the whole region but also its own ties with each neighbour.

India's stance could raise eyebrows

It is important to recognise that New Delhi's posture at the start of the war – when U.S.-Israel strikes killed Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and much of his immediate family – has been out of step with most of the region. Bangladesh and Pakistan issued statements condoling Khamenei's death almost immediately, the Maldives condemned the U.S.-Israel attacks on Iran and Iran's counter-attacks equally, and the Sri Lankan Foreign Minister offered his condolences. In contrast, it took South Block five days to send Foreign Secretary Vikram Misri to the Iranian Embassy.

It took another week for the Ministry of External Affairs to express "grief" over the killing of more than 150 students and teachers at a school for girls abutting a naval base in Minab. Even in the wider region, a statement by Foreign Ministers of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) criticised U.S. and Israel for "initiating" attacks, and subsequent attacks by Iran.

This is less about optics and more about India's – and South Asia's – cultural values: the killing of Khamenei, an 86-year-old religious leader of a state, violated international norms, regardless of how his policies were viewed. That India's statements in the following days condemned Iran's retaliatory strikes without ever criticising U.S. or Israeli actions against Iran and Lebanon is an anomaly.

It is possible to explain the initial reactions in light of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Israel two days before the strikes, and his statement in the Knesset that India would stand with Israel "in the moment and beyond". But as the horror of the escalating war mounts and the Iranian regime demonstrates its resilience, there is a need to calibrate a more balanced response. India's traditional position, of building strong bilateral ties with every country in West Asia, without taking sides in regional fault lines has always kept it in a position of trust and goodwill; this was proven during Mr. Modi's outreach to Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian for the passage of Indian ships in the Strait of Hormuz.

In addition, the U.S.'s unabashed pride in bombing *IRIS Dena* near Sri Lanka without even attempting to help the surviving sailors has come as a shock to many in the region. It is admirable that the Indian Navy immediately assisted the Sri Lankan Navy in the rescue operations, and that both Delhi and Colombo offered safe harbour to other Iranian military ships in the area. Yet, the Indian Navy's failure to express its condolences for the deaths of the sailors who had recently been its guests at India's multinational naval exercise MILAN 2026 and the International Fleet Review in Visakhapatnam in February, is difficult to understand.

The conflict will test India's regional influence and strategic balance

Economic, regional and maritime security

Going forward, India must reassure its neighbours – other than Pakistan, which it has no relationship with at present – that it remains cognisant of their concerns. As energy shortages deepened, New Delhi received requests for petrol and diesel from Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and the Maldives; landlocked Nepal and Bhutan may follow suit if the situation worsens. India must plan ahead to avoid a repeat of 2021, when it had to halt vaccine supplies to its neighbourhood for several critical weeks to deal with the crisis caused by the spread of the delta variant of SARS-CoV-2. Subsequently, India's "Vaccine Maitri" programme did much to ease those memories, and enforced the need for an "all of region" approach to such situations.

Since 2020, South Asia has been has been buffeted by several crises: COVID-19, supply chain blockages from India-China tensions along the Line of Actual Control, sanctions affecting grain, oil, and urea amid the Russia-Ukraine conflict, fluctuations in remittances due to constant flare-ups in West Asia, the impact of the Trump administration's tariff policy on the region's labour-intensive apparel and fashion industry, and seafood exports, and the growing shadow of Artificial Intelligence on jobs in a region with a restless young population.

It is not a coincidence that many of India's neighbours have seen youth protests erupt, and new governments installed as a result – an example is Nepal's election on March 5 which brought its first Gen-Z-led government to power. The Bharatiya Janata Party's poll losses in the general election in 2024, which resulted in Mr. Modi's first minority government within a coalition, are also attributed to the disaffection of unemployed and underemployed youth. The changes have impacted India's diplomacy, as the Modi government has had to amend its more muscular neighbourhood policy to engage leaders elected on these mandates and who are less beholden to India.

India must also recognise that its position as "net security provider" in the region has been challenged by the U.S.'s sinking of the *IRIS Dena*, which cuts more deeply given their joint membership of the Quad (the strategic forum comprising the U.S., Japan, India, and Australia).

At their last meeting in July 2025, the Quad Foreign Ministers issued a statement reaffirming their commitment to "peace and stability" in the Indo-Pacific region and declaring that they "strongly oppose any unilateral actions that seek to change the status quo by force or coercion", a reference to China. With the U.S. behaving unilaterally, India must move to strengthen its own coalitions in the maritime region, including the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), the Colombo Security Conclave, and the Information Fusion Centre - Indian Ocean Region (IFC-IOR) so that it is not caught unawares in the future. South Asia requires more regional trade, connectivity and energy sharing platforms, along with more conversations on regional security, as each country in the subcontinent is a stakeholder.

On the global stage, India's position as Chair of the Quad requires it to host a summit this year – when U.S. President Donald Trump is to visit India. But India's immediate priority should be to convene a Quad Foreign Ministers' meeting to ensure better communication and chart a more stable course for the maritime region in view of the West Asia war.

New Delhi must restore the balance

On the other side of the global North-South divide, India is also due to convene the BRICS Summit in 2026 – while bringing current rivals and BRICS members Iran and the United Arab Emirates to the table may be difficult given current tensions, New Delhi's diplomatic skills must be exerted in forging consensus for a BRICS statement that also highlights South Asia's economic and security concerns. Having momentarily abandoned its balancing act between the U.S.-Israel and Iran, it is time for India to restore the balance in its West Asia policy. New Delhi's traditional position on the tightrope may be tense, but it gives a more beneficial vantage point from which to steer the future of its people and those across the wider neighbourhood.

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KEY HIGHLIGHTS

Context

- Feb 28, 2026: War begins with U.S.-Israel strikes on Iran (killing Ayatollah Ali Khamenei).
- March 4, 2026: U.S. sinks Iranian warship IRIS Dena near Sri Lanka.
- Spillover to South Asia:
  - Disruption of trade, fuel, food, fertilizers
  - Threat to diaspora & seafarers
- ~25 million South Asians in West Asia (~10 million Indians).
- Indians ≈ 15% of global seafarers (risk near Strait of Hormuz).

Key Points

- Strait of Hormuz: ~20% global oil trade; Iran has weaponised access.
- India's response:
  - Delay in outreach to Iran
  - No direct criticism of U.S.-Israel; condemned Iran's retaliation
- Regional reactions:
  - Bangladesh, Pakistan, Sri Lanka → condolences to Iran
  - Maldives → neutral
  - ASEAN → criticised U.S.-Israel
- Maritime role:
  - Indian Navy escorted ships & aided rescue (IRIS Dena)
  - No formal condolences to Iranian sailors
- Economic impact:
  - Oil price rise → inflation
  - Fertilizer, food, remittance disruptions
- Regional pressure:
  - Fuel requests from Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Maldives
- Geopolitics:
  - U.S. unilateral action challenges India's net security provider role
  - Contradiction with QUAD principles

Static Linkages

- India imports ~85% crude oil
- Strategic autonomy, balance of power
- SLOCs importance
- Diaspora & remittances
- SAGAR doctrine
- QUAD, BRICS, IORA

Critical Analysis

Positives

- Strong ties with U.S.-Israel
- Naval assistance & regional role

Concerns

- Perceived policy imbalance
- Risk to Iran ties (Chabahar)
- Weak regional alignment
- Energy & food security risks
- Undermines neutral mediator role

Way Forward

- Restore balanced diplomacy
- Diversify energy sources
- Strengthen IORA, CSC, IFC-IOR
- Protect diaspora
- Support neighbours (fuel, trade)
- Use QUAD & BRICS for stability
- Reinforce maritime leadership

Belém as a test of a new model of forest finance

The climate summit that was held in Belém, Brazil in November 2025, refocused renewed global attention to a difficult but unavoidable truth: protecting tropical forests requires more than ambitious pledges – it requires a fundamental shift in who holds power over those forests. As world leaders gathered in the Amazon city, the signature initiative was Brazil's Tropical Forest Forever Facility (TFFF), or a finance mechanism presented as a paradigm shift in global conservation. Yet, amid the flurry of announcements and diplomacy, persistent tensions revealed that major challenges remain around participation, equity and accountability.

The difference

The TFFF proposes to compensate countries for maintaining standing forests, not just for avoiding deforestation. As reported, the Fund has already secured more than $5.5 billion in initial commitments, including a $3 billion pledge from Norway. Unlike many past funds, it is not structured purely as a donation vehicle. Rather, it is set up to generate returns and reward long-term forest conservation. Critically, at least 20% of its performance-based payments are reserved for indigenous peoples and local communities, whose daily stewardship plays an outsize role in keeping forests intact.

This allocation is not symbolic. According to the Rainforest Foundation US, indigenous and local communities were deeply involved in co-designing the facility. Across months of global consultations, more than 400 community leaders shared their perspectives. The model offers something new: not only financial support but also formal decision-making power. Yet, important gaps remain. For instance, indigenous representatives do not have voting rights on the main governing bodies of the Fund, raising questions about how genuinely inclusive decision-making will be.

Even as the TFFF proposes this inclusive architecture, many civil society groups have voiced their strong criticism. The Global Forest Coalition (GFC) described the fund as "colonialistic", arguing that it benefits intermediaries rather than forest peoples. Its worry was about a mechanism built around market logic and financial returns that may not address the root structural causes of deforestation, such as agribusiness expansion, oil and mining projects, and large infrastructure, all of which continue to drive forest loss. According to the GFC, rewarding standing forests without curbing exploitative activities risks creating a superficial conservation narrative.

Compounding this, some critics argue that the payment rate, around $4 a hectare in earlier proposals, is inadequate given the manifold ecosystem services that forests provide. There is a risk that national governments could absorb most of the funds, while communities on the ground may see little benefit. The success of the TFFF, therefore, depends not just on its size but on strong delivery mechanisms and rigorous, locally accountable institutions.

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The real test is whether it will protect the communities protecting the forest

Conservation overlooks power imbalances

Amid these debates, Brazil has taken steps to buttress access. On the sidelines of COP30, it announced a dedicated digital platform to help forest countries navigate TFFF eligibility. The platform, developed with partners such as the UNDP, FAO, WWF and the Global Alliance of Territorial Communities (GATC), promises technical assistance, capacity building and peer collaboration. It is stated that independence from the TFFF's governing structures is meant to prevent conflict of interest while focusing on inclusion and knowledge sharing.

This structure matters because forest conservation has long overlooked deep power imbalances. For many indigenous groups, protecting the Amazon is not just an environmental fight but also a struggle for survival. This was clear at COP30, where indigenous protesters entered the venue demanding territorial rights, insisting that their land cannot be treated as a commodity. Many felt excluded from decisions that directly affect their homes.

Land rights remain central to this debate. Ahead of COP30, the Forest and Climate Leaders' Partnership (FCLP) renewed its Forest and Land Tenure Pledge, committing $1.8 billion from 2026 to 2030 to support indigenous, local and Afro-descendant communities. The pledge was a key part of the Belém agenda, reflecting scientific warnings that the Amazon's future remains at risk without secure land rights.

Civil society groups also stressed that climate justice and nature protection cannot be separated. Conservation International called COP30 a chance to secure long-term funding for the Amazon, supporting forest protection, community governance and sustainable livelihoods. They warned that sidelining indigenous leadership weakens both climate action and human rights.

Yet, financing alone cannot counter pressures from infrastructure, agribusiness and extractive industries. The protests in Belém showed that money means little without real shifts in power. Without strong accountability, funds risk flowing to intermediaries while local communities continue to face land loss and displacement.

Beyond the money

The TFFF's launch in Belém is a major step, but its credibility depends on whether it actually transfers power to forest communities rather than reinforcing old hierarchies. For indigenous peoples, forests are home and survival. The real challenge is in ensuring that finance reaches them in forms they control, turning promises into lasting protection. A future of genuine conservation will depend on whether global finance strengthens community rights instead of replicating old patterns of exclusion.

The views expressed are personal

KEY HIGHLIGHTS

Context of the News

- The 30th UN Climate Change Conference (COP30) held in Belém, Brazil (Nov 2025) focused strongly on tropical forest conservation.
- Brazil launched the Tropical Forest Forever Facility (TFFF) as a global financing mechanism for forest protection.
- The initiative reflects a shift from "pledge-based conservation" → "performance-based financing."
- Comes amid concerns of Amazon rainforest degradation, with scientific warnings about reaching a tipping point (IPCC reports).
- Linked to global commitments under Paris Agreement and Global Biodiversity Framework (Kunming-Montreal, 2022).

Key Points

- Nature of TFFF
  - Rewards countries for maintaining standing forests, not just reducing deforestation.
  - Structured as an investment fund (not pure aid) → generates returns.
- Funding
  - Initial commitments: $5.5 billion+
  - Major contributor: Norway ($3 billion).
- Inclusion Component
  - At least 20% funds reserved for Indigenous Peoples & Local Communities (IPLCs).
  - Over 400 community leaders consulted (Rainforest Foundation US).
- Governance Concerns
  - Indigenous groups lack voting rights in core governing bodies.
- Criticism
  - Global Forest Coalition (GFC) termed it "colonialistic."
  - Concerns over:
    - Market-based approach
    - Ignoring root causes: agribusiness, mining, infrastructure
- Payment Issues
  - Proposed rate: ~$4/hectare (criticized as inadequate).
- Support Mechanisms
  - Digital platform launched with:
    - UNDP, FAO, WWF, GATC
  - Focus: capacity building & access facilitation
- Parallel Initiative
  - Forest and Climate Leaders' Partnership (FCLP):
    - $1.8 billion pledge (2026–2030) for land tenure & community rights.

Static Linkages

- Forests act as carbon sinks (NCERT Geography – carbon cycle).
- IPCC: Tropical forests critical for limiting warming to 1.5°C.
- Forest Rights Act, 2006 (India): Recognizes community forest rights.
- Article 21: Right to life includes healthy environment (SC judgments).
- CBD (1992): Emphasizes in-situ conservation & indigenous participation.
- REDD+ mechanism: Payment for reducing emissions from deforestation.
- Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 13 & 15).

Critical Analysis

Positives

- Shift from deforestation control → holistic forest conservation.
- Recognizes role of indigenous communities in ecosystem stewardship.
- Moves toward sustainable finance model (long-term viability).
- Encourages global burden-sharing.

Concerns

- Power asymmetry:
  - Indigenous communities lack real decision-making authority.
- Market-driven approach:
  - Risks commodification of forests.
- Leakages & elite capture:
  - Funds may be absorbed by national governments/intermediaries.
- Inadequate valuation:
  - $4/hectare undervalues ecosystem services.
- Ignores structural drivers:
  - Agribusiness expansion, mining, infrastructure

Way Forward

- Ensure voting rights for indigenous communities.
- Strengthen local governance & transparency mechanisms.
- Increase valuation of ecosystem services.
- Align finance with land tenure security.
- Regulate agribusiness & extractive industries.

Beginning and end

The state must allow its citizens the right to die with dignity

The incontrovertible nature of both life and death makes them fiendishly difficult to legislate or adjudicate. Interfering with the very elemental beginning and end points of life must seem daunting. Nothing else can explain the long dalliance that laws have had with euthanasia to facilitate the intentional ending of a life, globally. In India, last week, the Supreme Court, in a landmark decision, approved the withdrawal of life support, including artificial nutrition and hydration, for Harish Rana, who went into a persistent vegetative state (PVS) following a head injury over 12 years ago. Invoking the constitutional idea of dignity, the Court observed that it would not be compatible with temporarily keeping alive a terminally ill patient who is brain dead or in a PVS, only because it is possible to leverage technological advancements to do so. This forces a life of indignity: patients endure a slow, agonising death. As the end of life approaches, a loss of control over human faculties denudes life of its meaning, it added. The Court went on to expand the right to live with dignity under Article 21 to encompass the right to die with dignity. In India, in the absence of legislation on the subject, the courts have consistently had to engage with the euthanasia question over the years. The Smt. Gian Kaur vs The State Of Punjab (1996) case might have set off the trend, but the debate entered the public realm with the Aruna Shanbaug petition in 2011. The Court, in this instance, did not allow for euthanasia as the nurses caring for her demurred, but went on to lay down guidelines for withdrawing or the withholding of medical treatment or medical support to allow for natural death. In 2018, a Supreme Court Constitution Bench held that the right to die with dignity is a fundamental right.

Besides benefitting Harish Rana in the instant case, the judgment will undoubtedly make it easy for terminally ill patients and their families 'to let go'. As technology advances in leaps and bounds, more life-preserving hacks will become available to all who are able to pay for them but could erode the patient's dignity. The judgment is intended to introduce compassion into end-of-life care for patients with unalterable medical conditions. The concept of a living will, a legal document empowering individuals to state their preferences for medical treatment in situations where they become incapacitated, vegetative or are unable to communicate, again endorsed by the Court, must also be popularised. In the grey zones, it is the law that can give people the courage to take the right call.

KEY HIGHLIGHTS

Context

- Supreme Court allowed withdrawal of life support (including artificial nutrition & hydration) for a patient in Persistent Vegetative State (PVS) for 12+ years.
- Reaffirmed that Right to Life (Article 21) includes Right to Die with Dignity.
- Strengthens earlier judgments on passive euthanasia and living will.

Key Points

- Passive euthanasia permitted: Withdrawal/withholding of life-sustaining treatment under safeguards.
- Active euthanasia illegal in India.
- Living Will valid: Individuals can decide future medical treatment if incapacitated.
- Dignity principle: Artificial prolongation of life may violate dignity.
- Applies to terminally ill, brain-dead, or PVS patients.
- Courts filling gap due to absence of specific legislation.

Important Judgments

- 1996 – Gian Kaur Case: No fundamental right to die.
- 2011 – Aruna Shanbaug Case: Allowed passive euthanasia with guidelines.
- 2018 – Common Cause Case: Recognized living will + right to die with dignity.
- 2026 – Present Case: Expanded practical applicability; simplified withdrawal process.

Static Linkages

- Article 21 – Life includes dignity.
- Difference: Active vs Passive euthanasia.
- Doctrine of informed consent.
- Ethical principles: Autonomy, Beneficence, Non-maleficence.
- Role of judiciary in policy vacuum.

Critical Analysis

Pros

- Upholds human dignity.
- Provides clarity for doctors & families.
- Encourages patient autonomy (living will).

Cons

- Risk of misuse/coercion.
- No comprehensive law yet.
- Ethical dilemma for medical professionals.
- Low awareness of living wills.

Way Forward

- Enact comprehensive euthanasia law.
- Promote living will awareness.
- Strengthen palliative care.
- Ensure strict safeguards & medical boards.
- Create standard national guidelines.

In war on Iran, Israel knows what it wants — US does not

HUSSEIN BANAI

THE ISLAMIC Republic of Iran cannot win the current war with Israel and the United States. It only wishes to survive it. This distinction, seemingly small, is in fact the key to understanding everything Tehran has done since the start of the war on February 28, and everything it is likely to do next. Survival is not a fallback position for the Islamic Republic; it is, and has been since the republic's founding in 1979, the paramount objective around which all other decisions are organised. What looks from the outside like defiance or recklessness is, from the inside, the rational execution of a doctrine that has kept the regime in power for nearly half a century.

Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini built the survival imperative into the constitutional architecture of the state from the beginning. The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), established within months of the revolution, was given a mandate distinct from that of the conventional armed forces: Where the regular army was tasked with defending Iran's borders, the IRGC was charged with preserving the revolution itself. This was a deliberate and consequential choice. The Islamic Republic would always maintain a military force whose primary loyalty was to the political order, not the nation-state, and whose purpose was to guarantee that the system endured regardless of what the Iranian people, the clerical establishment, or the outside world demanded of it. Over four decades, that institutional purpose has calcified into something more than strategy. It has become the operating system of the Iranian state, absorbing protest, sanctions, proxy war, and now open military assault with the same essential response: Hold, repress, and outlast.

The succession of Mojtaba Khamenei as Supreme Leader is the clearest recent illustration of this logic. Within 10 days of his father's killing, the Assembly of Experts named the 56-year-old as the republic's third Supreme Leader. His principal qualification was his closeness to the IRGC and his capacity to maintain continuity within the hardline security establishment. His appointment was an act of institutional self-preservation conducted at speed, under fire, and in explicit defiance of American objection. US President Donald Trump had said the choice would be unacceptable. Iran chose him anyway, and in doing so demonstrated that the Islamic Republic does not organise its most important decisions around what its enemies find acceptable. The decapitation strategy assumed the body would die when the head was removed. It did not.

Israel has always understood this. For Benjamin Netanyahu, the survival doctrine of the Islamic Republic is not an abstraction; it is the organising premise of three decades of Iranian policy toward Israel, expressed through Hezbollah, Hamas, the ballistic missile programme, and the relentless pursuit of nuclear capability. Netanyahu has spent those decades arguing, with increasing urgency, that Iran's regime is an existential threat that cannot be managed or contained, only eliminated. Netanyahu's stated aim in this war is regime change: Not a degraded Iran, not a denuclearised Iran under new management, but the end of the Islamic Republic as a governing system. He addressed the Iranian people directly after the first strikes, calling on them to overthrow what he called "the regime of fear". For Israel, this war is, at its core, a war about whether the Islamic Republic can be made to cease to exist. That is a coherent position, one that at least begins from an accurate reading of what the regime is and how it operates.

> A campaign premised on regime change, and one premised on nuclear disarmament are not the same, and the gap between them is one the Islamic Republic is well-positioned to exploit

The Trump administration's position has been something quite different and considerably less coherent. The President's war aims have shifted repeatedly since the first strikes, oscillating between demands for unconditional surrender, offers of immunity to IRGC commanders willing to defect, suggestions that Trump himself would select Iran's next leader, and signals that a nuclear deal with the new Supreme Leader might yet be possible. Secretary of State Marco Rubio has acknowledged to Western counterparts that while the two allies are aligned on military objectives, there are "different nuances" on the question of regime change. That is a diplomatic understatement. Netanyahu wants the war to lay the foundation for the end of the Islamic Republic. The Trump administration, by the evidence of its own public statements, is less certain what it wants, and has shown signs of a desire to exit the conflict on terms it can describe as a victory, whether or not those terms constitute one.

This divergence is not a secondary tension within the alliance; it is the central strategic problem of the war. A campaign premised on regime change and one premised on nuclear disarmament are not the same, and the gap between them is one the Islamic Republic is well positioned to exploit. If Trump concludes that destroying Iran's nuclear and missile infrastructure is sufficient for him to declare victory and disengage, the regime survives, the IRGC remains in place, and Iran retains the institutional capacity to reconstitute its programme over time. If, on the other hand, the alliance commits to regime change without a credible plan for what follows, it risks the kind of open-ended entanglement that neither country's political circumstances can sustain.

Iran's own conduct reflects this clarity. Rather than limiting its retaliation, Tehran has widened the circle of the war, launching missiles and drones at all six Gulf Cooperation Council states, restricting traffic through the Strait of Hormuz, and driving oil prices to their highest levels in years. These are the actions of a regime deploying the leverage it has accumulated over decades, not the desperate thrashing of a system on the verge of collapse. The Islamic Republic is not trying to win the war in any conventional sense. It is trying to raise the cost of the war high enough that its enemies conclude that removal of the regime is more expensive than its continued existence. In this, its strategy and its survival doctrine are one and the same. It will not be dissolved by a military campaign whose two principals cannot agree on what they are trying to achieve.

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KEY HIGHLIGHTS

Context of the News

- War began on 28 February 2026 between Iran, Israel, and the United States.
- Israel launched strikes targeting Iran's nuclear and military infrastructure.
- The U.S. supported militarily but lacked clarity on long-term objectives.
- Iran retaliated by expanding conflict to the Gulf region and Strait of Hormuz.
- Leadership transition: Mojtaba Khamenei appointed Supreme Leader after the death of Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.

Key Points

- Iran's Core Strategy: Regime survival is the top priority since 1979 Revolution.
- IRGC Role:
  - Parallel force to regular army
  - Protects ideological regime, not just borders
- Israel's Objective: Regime change in Iran (eliminate Islamic Republic).
- U.S. Objective: Unclear; oscillates between:
  - Nuclear disarmament
  - Regime change
  - Negotiated settlement
- Strategic Divergence:
  - Israel → Regime change
  - U.S. → Limited military + diplomatic flexibility
- Iran's Response Strategy:
  - Expand war geographically
  - Target Gulf states
  - Disrupt Strait of Hormuz (≈20% global oil trade)
- Outcome Dynamics:
  - Limited war → Iran rebuilds capacity
  - Regime change attempt → prolonged instability

Static Linkages

- Balance of Power in West Asia
- Deterrence & Asymmetric Warfare
- Strategic importance of Strait of Hormuz
- Proxy warfare (Hezbollah, Hamas)
- Energy security & global oil supply chains
- Sovereignty vs external intervention

Critical Analysis

Positives (Iran Strategy)

- Clear doctrine: survival-first
- Strong institutional backing (IRGC)
- Strategic use of geography

Concerns

- Economic strain due to sanctions
- Escalation risk → regional war
- Internal instability

Israel

- Clear objective (regime change)
- Risk of prolonged conflict

U.S.

- Policy inconsistency
- Weak strategic clarity

Way Forward

- Diplomatic resolution via multilateral platforms
- Revival of nuclear negotiations (JCPOA-type framework)
- De-escalation in Gulf region
- Ensuring stability of energy supply chains
- India: maintain strategic neutrality + energy diversification

For persons with disabilities, doors to theatres now open

RAHUL BAJAJ

MANY OF us grew up watching and discussing iconic scenes from our favourite Bollywood movies. The reunion in *Kabhi Khushi Kabhie Gham*, the farewell in *Kal Ho Na Ho*, the romance and friendship that defined *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai* are cultural touchstones for a generation. They are scenes friends quote, families revisit, and social media celebrates. Yet, as a blind person, I was largely deprived of those shared experiences. I could not independently engage with these films. That exclusion was not merely about entertainment; it was about being cut off from a cultural conversation. All that is set to change now.

From March 15, every new film released in India must carry audio description for persons with visual impairment and same-language captions for persons with hearing impairment. This historic moment is the culmination of a long and hard-won struggle for accessibility in the entertainment ecosystem.

The legal foundation was laid nearly a decade ago. Section 42 of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (RPwD) Act, enacted in 2017, obligates the government to ensure that content in electronic media is accompanied by accessibility features such as audio description and captions. For years, this remained largely on paper. In 2023, four petitioners in the Delhi HC complained about the lack of accessibility features in the film *Pathaan*. Three of the petitioners were blind, and one had a hearing impairment. I had the privilege of representing them in court. Their grievance was simple: In an age when technology makes access easy, why should people with disabilities remain excluded? The court directed that *Pathaan* include accessibility features in its OTT release, and also instructed the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting to formulate guidelines to enforce accessibility standards across the film industry.

The ministry complied. On March 15, 2024, it released the "Guidelines of Accessibility Standards in the Public Exhibition of Feature Films in Cinema Theatres for Persons with Hearing and Visual Impairment." Clause 6.1 created a clear, time-bound mandate: All new films must include audio description and same-language captions by March 15, 2026. For multilingual films and those seeking eligibility for National Awards, the requirement already applied. Now, the mandate becomes universal.

> In an age when technology makes access easy, why should people with disabilities remain excluded from one of the most powerful forms of storytelling?

This is no small feat. Practically speaking, accessibility in cinemas is enabled through mobile technology. Specialised applications synchronise with the audio track of a film playing in the theatre. These apps deliver audio descriptions and captions in the pauses between dialogues as well as a textual depiction of the dialogues and other auditory developments.

Yet, gaps remain. The recently released Guidelines for Accessibility of Content on platforms of Publishers of Online Curated Content (OTT platforms) provide a far longer compliance timeline. Under these rules, new OTT content must be born accessible only in a phased manner, three years after the guidelines come into force. This makes neither logical nor commercial sense.

Nevertheless, the broader shift is undeniable. For millions of Indians with disabilities, cinema has long been a closed door. March 15 marks the day that the door begins to open.

The writer is co-founder, Mission Accessibility

KEY HIGHLIGHTS

Context

- Government mandated that from March 15, 2026, all films released in India must include:
  - Audio Description (AD) for visually impaired
  - Same Language Subtitles (SLS) for hearing impaired
- Based on Guidelines of Accessibility Standards (2024) by Ministry of Information & Broadcasting.
- Legal basis: Section 42, RPwD Act, 2016.
- Triggered by Delhi High Court (2023) case on lack of accessibility in films.

Key Points

- Mandatory accessibility for all new films from 2026.
- Already required for:
  - National Award eligibility
  - Multilingual films
- Technology:
  - Mobile apps sync with movie audio to deliver AD & captions.
- OTT platforms:
  - Given phased compliance (up to 3 years).
- Beneficiaries:
  - ~2.68 crore PwDs (Census 2011).
- Ministry of I&B responsible for implementation.

Static Linkages

- Article 14 – Equality before law
- Article 21 – Right to dignity
- Article 41 – Assistance to disabled
- UNCRPD – Rights of persons with disabilities
- Inclusive development & social justice
- Role of assistive technology

Critical Analysis

Positives

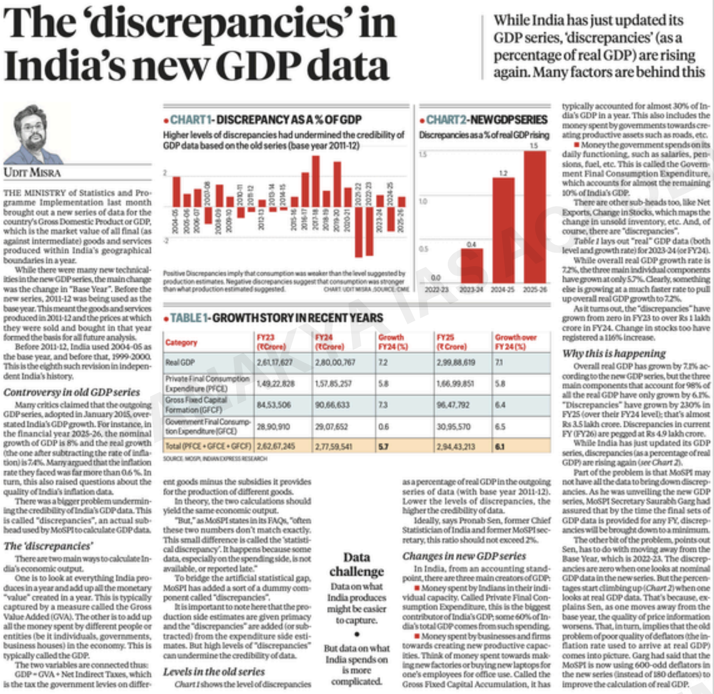
- Promotes inclusive access to culture
- Strengthens rights-based framework
- Aligns with global conventions (UNCRPD)
- Encourages assistive tech innovation

Challenges

- Compliance cost for film industry
- Lack of trained professionals
- Weak enforcement mechanism
- OTT delay reduces effectiveness
- Digital divide (smartphone dependency)

Way Forward

- Subsidies/incentives for accessible filmmaking
- Standardisation of accessibility norms
- Faster OTT compliance
- Skill development in accessibility services
- Strong monitoring & enforcement
- Awareness among stakeholders



The 'discrepancies' in India's new GDP data

While India has just updated its GDP series, 'discrepancies' (as a percentage of real GDP) are rising again. Many factors are behind this

Udit Misra

THE MINISTRY of Statistics and Programme Implementation last month brought out a new series of data for the country's Gross Domestic Product or GDP, which is the market value of all final (as against intermediate) goods and services produced within India's geographical boundaries in a year.

While there were many new technicalities in the new GDP series, the main change was the change in "Base Year". Before the new series, 2011-12 was being used as the base year. This meant the goods and services produced in 2011-12 and the prices at which they were sold and bought in that year formed the basis for all future analysis.

Before 2011-12, India used 2004-05 as the base year, and before that, 1999-2000. This is the eighth such revision in independent India's history.

Controversy in old GDP series

Many critics claimed that the outgoing GDP series, adopted in January 2015, overstated India's GDP growth. For instance, in the financial year 2025-26, the nominal growth of GDP is 8% and the real growth (the one after subtracting the rate of inflation) is 7.4%. Many argued that the inflation rate they faced was far more than 0.6 %. In turn, this also raised questions about the quality of India's inflation data.

There was a bigger problem undermining the credibility of India's GDP data. This is called "discrepancies", an actual sub-head used by MoSPI to calculate GDP data.

The 'discrepancies'

There are two main ways to calculate India's economic output.

One is to look at everything India produces in a year and add up all the monetary "value" created in a year. This is typically captured by a measure called the Gross Value Added (GVA). The other is to add up all the money spent by different people or entities (be it individuals, governments, business houses) in the economy. This is typically called the GDP.

The two variables are connected thus: GDP = GVA + Net Indirect Taxes, which is the tax the government levies on different goods minus the subsidies it provides for the production of different goods.

In theory, the two calculations should yield the same economic output.

"But," as MoSPI states in its FAQs, "often these two numbers don't match exactly. This small difference is called the 'statistical discrepancy'. It happens because some data, especially on the spending side, is not available, or reported late."

To bridge the artificial statistical gap, MoSPI has added a sort of a dummy component called "discrepancies".

It is important to note here that the production side estimates are given primacy and the "discrepancies" are added (or subtracted) from the expenditure side estimates. But high levels of "discrepancies" can undermine the credibility of data.

Levels in the old series

Chart 1 shows the level of discrepancies as a percentage of real GDP in the outgoing series of data (with base year 2011-12). Lower the levels of discrepancies, the higher the credibility of data.

Ideally, says Pronab Sen, former Chief Statistician of India and former MoSPI secretary, this ratio should not exceed 2%.

Changes in new GDP series

In India, from an accounting standpoint, there are three main creators of GDP:

- Money spent by Indians in their individual capacity. Called Private Final Consumption Expenditure, this is the biggest contributor of India's GDP; some 60% of India's total GDP comes from such spending.
- Money spent by businesses and firms towards creating new productive capacities. Think of money spent towards making new factories or buying new laptops for one's employees for office use. Called the Gross Fixed Capital Accumulation, it has typically accounted for almost 30% of India's GDP in a year. This also includes the money spent by governments towards creating productive assets such as roads, etc.
- Money the government spends on its daily functioning, such as salaries, pensions, fuel, etc. This is called the Government Final Consumption Expenditure, which accounts for almost the remaining 10% of India's GDP.

There are other sub-heads too, like Net Exports, Change in Stocks, which maps the change in unsold inventory, etc. And, of course, there are "discrepancies".

Table 1 lays out "real" GDP data (both level and growth rate) for 2023-24 (or FY24).

While overall real GDP growth rate is 7.2%, the three main individual components have grown at only 5.7%. Clearly, something else is growing at a much faster rate to pull up overall real GDP growth to 7.2%.

As it turns out, the "discrepancies" have grown from zero in FY23 to over Rs 1 lakh crore in FY24. Change in stocks too have registered a 116% increase.

Why this is happening

Overall real GDP has grown by 7.1% according to the new GDP series, but the three main components that account for 98% of all the real GDP have only grown by 6.1%. "Discrepancies" have grown by 230% in FY25 (over their FY24 level); that's almost Rs 3.5 lakh crore. Discrepancies in current FY (FY26) are pegged at Rs 4.9 lakh crore.

While India has just updated its GDP series, discrepancies (as a percentage of real GDP) are rising again (*see Chart 2*).

Part of the problem is that MoSPI may not have all the data to bring down discrepancies. As he was unveiling the new GDP series, MoSPI Secretary Saurabh Garg had assured that by the time the final sets of GDP data is provided for any FY, discrepancies will be brought down to a minimum.

The other bit of the problem, points out Sen, has to do with moving away from the Base Year, which is 2022-23. The discrepancies are zero when one looks at nominal GDP data in the new series. But the percentages start climbing up (*Chart 2*) when one looks at real GDP data. That's because, explains Sen, as one moves away from the base year, the quality of price information worsens. That, in turn, implies that the old problem of poor quality of deflators (the inflation rate used to arrive at real GDP) comes into picture. Garg had said that the MoSPI is now using 600-odd deflators in the new series (instead of 180 deflators) to improve the calculation of real GDP.

Data challenge

Data on what India produces might be easier to capture.

•

But data on what India spends on is more complicated.

TABLE 1 - GROWTH STORY IN RECENT YEARS

Category	FY23 (₹Crore)	FY24 (₹Crore)	Growth FY24 (%)	FY25 (₹ Crore)	Growth over FY 24 (%)
Real GDP	2,61,17,627	2,80,00,767	7.2	2,99,88,619	7.1
Private Final Consumption Expenditure (PFCE)	1,49,22,828	1,57,85,257	5.8	1,66,99,851	5.8
Gross Fixed Capital Formation (GFCF)	84,53,506	90,66,633	7.3	96,47,792	6.4
Government Final Consumption Expenditure (GFCE)	28,90,910	29,07,652	0.6	30,95,570	6.5
Total (PFCE + GFCE + GFCF)	2,62,67,245	2,77,59,541	**5.7**	2,94,43,213	**6.1**

SOURCE: MOSPI, INDIAN EXPRESS RESEARCH

KEY HIGHLIGHTS

Context of the News

- The Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation released a new GDP series with a revised base year (2022–23).
- India periodically revises GDP base years (earlier: 2011–12, 2004–05, 1999–2000).
- Concerns have emerged over rising "statistical discrepancies" in GDP estimates.
- Despite overall GDP growth (~7%), core components (consumption, investment, government spending) show lower growth.
- Discrepancies have surged to ₹4.9 lakh crore (FY26), raising questions on data reliability.

Key Points

- GDP Definition: Total market value of all final goods and services produced within a country.
- Base Year Revision:
  - Reflects structural economic changes.
  - Updates price indices, sector weights, and methodologies.
- Two Approaches to GDP:
  - Production (GVA): Measures value added across sectors.
  - Expenditure (GDP): Sum of consumption, investment, government spending, net exports.
- Identity:
- GDP = GVA + Net Indirect Taxes
- Discrepancies:
  - Arise due to data gaps, especially in expenditure estimates.
  - Ideally should be <2% of GDP (as per experts like Pronab Sen).
- Current Trend:
  - Discrepancies sharply rising in recent years.
  - Increase more visible in real GDP (inflation-adjusted) than nominal GDP.
- Deflator Issue:
  - Real GDP depends on price deflators.
  - Poor-quality inflation data leads to measurement errors.
  - MoSPI increased deflators from 180 → 600+ to improve accuracy.

Static Linkages

- National income accounting uses three methods: production, income, expenditure.
- Base year revision ensures constant price comparisons and removes distortions.
- Private Final Consumption Expenditure (PFCE) ≈ largest GDP component (~60%).
- Gross Fixed Capital Formation (GFCF) reflects investment and economic capacity.
- Inflation measurement via GDP deflator vs CPI/WPI differences.
- Statistical systems guided by UN System of National Accounts (SNA).

Critical Analysis

Positives

- Base year revision improves accuracy and relevance.
- Use of more deflators (600+) enhances sectoral precision.
- Aligns with international statistical standards (SNA).

Concerns

- Rising discrepancies undermine credibility of GDP data.
- Weak expenditure data (especially informal sector) creates measurement gaps.
- Divergence between real and nominal GDP raises inflation doubts.
- Over-reliance on production-side estimates biases results.

Stakeholder Perspective

- Government: Emphasizes improved methodology and future revisions.
- Economists: Concerned about data transparency and reliability.
- Investors/Markets: Depend on accurate GDP for policy and investment decisions.

Key Challenges

- Capturing informal sector activity.
- Improving timeliness and quality of data collection.
- Ensuring robust inflation measurement (deflators).

Way Forward

- Strengthen real-time data collection systems (GST, digital payments integration).
- Improve survey coverage of informal sector.
- Enhance transparency in methodology and revisions.
- Regular audit of statistical systems by independent bodies.
- Better coordination between MoSPI, RBI, and other agencies.
- Invest in data infrastructure and statistical capacity building.