

DAILY NEWSP APER ANALYSIS

DATE - 18/03/2026

**SOURCE
THE HINDU & INDIAN EXPRESS**

**CHANAKYA IAS ACADEMY
SECTOR 25 CHANDIGARH**

Afghanistan says 400 killed in Pak. airstrike on Kabul hospital

Bodies recovered from the drug rehabilitation centre as conflict between neighbours escalates: Islamabad rejects charge of targeting the hospital located beside former NATO base; it also dismisses claims of hundreds of casualties as 'propaganda'

Associated Press
KABUL

Rescuers recovered more bodies from the rubble of a drug rehabilitation hospital in Kabul on Tuesday after officials said an overnight airstrike killed more than 400 people, in a dramatic escalation of the conflict between Pakistan and Afghanistan that is now in its third week.

Pakistan rejected Afghanistan's accusation that it targeted the hospital, insisting its strikes, which were also conducted in eastern Afghanistan on Monday, were aimed at military facilities. It dismissed Afghanistan's claims of hundreds of casualties as propaganda. Crowds gathered to search for their loved ones among the injured and the dead. It was not possible to independently confirm the toll.

The conflict between Afghanistan and Pakistan has seen repeated cross-border clashes as well as airstrikes inside Afghanistan. International calls for ceasefire have gone unheeded.

'Safe haven to militants'
Pakistan accuses Afghanistan of providing safe haven for militants who carry out attacks inside Pakistan, especially for the Pakistani Taliban. The group is separate but closely allied with the Afghan Taliban who took over Afghanistan in 2021 in the wake of the chaotic withdrawal of U.S. led troops. Kabul denies the charge.

In a late-night post on X, Afghanistan's deputy government spokesperson Hamdullah Firas said the airstrike hit the Omid Addiction Treatment Hospital. Ho-



Road to the ground: Residents and volunteers at the site on Tuesday after Pakistani airstrikes hit a drug rehabilitation centre in Kabul. AP

tal, a 2,000-bed facility in Kabul, at about 9 p.m. local time and that large sections of the facility had been destroyed.

Interior Ministry spokesperson Abdul Mateen Qani said on Tuesday that 408 people had been killed and 265 injured.

Night-time local television footage showed security forces using flash lights as they carried casualties from the site while firefighters struggled to extinguish the flames.

The Omid hospital was renamed and expanded in size roughly a year ago from the Bin Sina Drug Addiction Treatment Hospital as part of government plans to stamp out drug addiction in the country.

The site, near Kabul's international airport, is located beside a former NATO military base, Camp Phoenix, where U.S. forces

used to train the Afghan National Army. After the Taliban seized power, the base was taken over by Afghanistan's new authorities. It was not immediately clear what was now housed on the site of the former base.

A reporter for the Associated Press in an area near the site at the time of the strike said he heard a military jet fly overhead, followed by a very powerful explosion.

Pakistan's Information Ministry said in an X post that the Pakistani military had "precisely targeted" Camp Phoenix, which it said was now a "military terrorist ammunition and equipment storage site."

However, it said that the hospital was "multiple kilometres" away from the former camp and accused Afghan officials of lying. Google Maps shows another

location, east of Kabul city, also labelled as Camp Phoenix.

"Another important question also lingers, as to why would an alleged drug rehabilitation facility be collocated with lethal ammunition storage site in a military camp? This also remains unanswered," the Information Ministry wrote.

'Perpetrating horrors'
Afghan government spokesperson Zabihullah Mujahid condemned the strike, accusing Pakistan of "targeting hospitals and civilian sites to perpetrate horrors". He said those killed were "innocent civilians and addicts."

"We strongly condemn this crime and consider such an act to be against all accepted principles and a crime against humanity," he said in a post on X.

Act 'barbaric', direct threat to regional peace: India

Kallol Bhattacharjee
NEW DELHI

India "unequivocally" condemned Pakistan's bombing of a hospital in Kabul, terming it "unconscionable" and "barbaric". "This heinous act of aggression by Pakistan is also a blatant assault on Afghanistan's sovereignty and a direct threat to regional peace and stability," External Affairs Ministry spokesperson Bandhir Jaiswal said on Tuesday.

FULL REPORT ON
» PAGE 4

Static Linkages

- Geneva Conventions mandate protection of civilians and medical facilities during armed conflict.
- Principle of Distinction and Proportionality in warfare.
- UN Charter: Emphasizes sovereignty and non-intervention.
- India's position: Supports peaceful resolution of disputes and non-interference.
- Concepts of state responsibility and war crimes under international law.
- Role of non-state actors in asymmetric warfare.

Critical Points

- Violation of IHL?
 - Targeting hospitals prohibited unless used for military purposes.
- Trust deficit
 - Pakistan vs Afghanistan over TTP safe havens.
- Regional instability
 - Impacts South Asia security, terrorism networks.
- Information asymmetry
 - Conflicting claims → difficulty in verification.
- Ethical dilemma
 - Counter-terror operations vs civilian protection.

Way Forward

- Independent UN-led investigation.
- Strengthening IHL compliance mechanisms.
- Diplomatic engagement & CBMs between both nations.
- Address root causes: terrorism, governance gaps.
- Promote regional cooperation frameworks (e.g., SCO).

KEY HIGHLIGHTS

Context

- Alleged airstrike in Kabul on a drug rehabilitation hospital (Omid Addiction Treatment Hospital).
- Afghanistan claims 400+ civilian deaths; Pakistan denies, stating target was a militant facility (Camp Phoenix).
- Part of ongoing cross-border tensions over presence of Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) in Afghanistan.
- Highlights escalation in regional instability and humanitarian concerns.

Key Facts

- TTP (Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan): Militant group targeting Pakistan; ideologically aligned with Afghan Taliban.
- Camp Phoenix: Former NATO base near Kabul.
- Geneva Conventions (1949):
 - Protect civilians, hospitals, and medical personnel in armed conflict.
- Principles of IHL:
 - Distinction (civilian vs combatant)
 - Proportionality
 - Military necessity
- Afghanistan-Pakistan issue: Dispute over terror safe havens and Durand Line border tensions.

West Asia conflict takes a toll on medical tourism industry in India

The Hindu Bureau
CHENNAI

India's state-of-the-art healthcare at affordable prices has attracted patients from across the world over the last few decades, but the travel disruptions caused by the ongoing conflict in West Asia are creating new challenges, both for patients unable to fly to India to avail treatment and for the medical tourism industry which is facing the slowdown of a significant market.

At Delhi's Fortis Healthcare, for instance, there has been a drop in the number of patients coming from West Asia, according to the group's chief operating officer Anil Vinayak. Since the conflict broke out, there has been a decline of more than 30% in international footfall across all Fortis hospitals,

he noted. This is especially significant in light of the fact that West Asia is a large contributor, amounting to nearly a third of all international business at Fortis, Mr. Vinayak said.

During the initial days of the conflict, the impact was minimal, as several patients had already travelled to India. Gradually, however, the numbers have dipped significantly. "If we compare the last 10 days of February with the first 10 days of March, the footfall of patients from the Middle East has dropped by 75%," he said.

Ashish Chaudhry, managing director of Aakash Healthcare in Delhi, pointed out that airspace restrictions, flight rerouting, and rising travel uncertainties are directly influencing patient mobility, both for those seeking treatment in India and for Indian patients who traditionally tra-

velled to destinations such as Dubai and other regional hubs for specialised care.

South India less hit
The disruptions have been relatively less in southern India. Chennai's Apollo Proton Cancer Centre (APCC), for instance, sees a significant footfall of overseas patients. "We get patients from SAARC nations, Europe, Middle East, and from a good number of African nations. Patients from West Asian countries account for a fair share. Among them, Oman and the UAE, account for the highest share," says Karan Puri, chief executive officer, Apollo Specialty Hospitals, Teyssampet, and APCC, Taramani, Chennai.

Mr. Puri said that while there has not been much of an impact yet, as overseas patient flow has remained the same, if the situation



Patients from Oman and the UAE make up the highest share of those visiting from West Asia for treatment in India. FILE PHOTO

turns from bad to worse, then there might be a dip. "We do get a decent number of patients for bone marrow transplantation from Oman. We haven't seen any issues yet," Mr. Puri said.

In Hyderabad too, patient numbers are down, but not by much. Sameer Agrawal, deputy general manager for international business at Apollo Hospi-

tals, said there has been a marginal decline of about 2% to 3% in the number of patients arriving from West Asia as part of its overall international patient volume. "However, this has been mitigated partly due to direct connectivity to Hyderabad via Ethiopian airlines, which is still functioning and no tickets getting cancelled. The patients who travel with

Emirates and Qatar are definitely affected," he said. Mohammed Farook, chief operating officer of Rela Hospital in Chennai, said that there has been very minimal and short-term disruptions. "Take Oman for instance. The government funds patients starting with their travel, treatment, and accommodation. A few of them were supposed to arrive when the war broke out. After this, the Oman government rescheduled their flights to another date in March," he said.

Rela Hospital receives international patients from Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, West Asia and Africa. Most of the overseas patients seek high-end cancer care and organ transplants at the hospital, he added.

"Patients from Oman are streaming through, and business has not been affected too much. The elec-

tronic treatments were minimally affected but are slowly coming up. It is the ease of travel that has been affected but we do not anticipate a long-term issue at this point in time," Mr. Farook said.

Flight disruptions
For patients, flight cancellations and restrictions have created havoc. There are currently no flights from Iraq at all, Mr. Vinayak noted. Flights from the rest of West Asia have also declined sharply due to air space issues. "Although there is no direct flight-related issue with Africa or other parts of the world, flight costs have surged and patients are fearful to travel currently," he said.

For the current month, the overall revenue impact on international medical tourism may be about 15% to 20%, Mr. Vinayak said.

However, a more significant impact may be seen in the coming months due to the decline in new patient arrivals from several key source countries, he added.

Mr. Agrawal noted that patient footfall typically declines during the month of Ramadan, thereby masking the full extent of the impact.

In the short term, there may be logistical challenges, but Dr. Chaudhry pointed out that there is also a simultaneous shift in preference. Many patients who would earlier transit through or seek treatment in West Asian medical hubs are now evaluating India as a stable, accessible, and clinically advanced alternative, he said.

(With inputs from Bindu Shajan Perappadan in Delhi, Siddharth Kumar Singh in Hyderabad, and Serena Josephine M. in Chennai)

KEY HIGHLIGHTS

Context

- Ongoing West Asia conflict has disrupted international travel (airspace closure, flight cancellations).
- India's medical tourism sector, which depends significantly on West Asian patients (~30%), is witnessing a decline.
- Hospitals report:
 - ~30% drop in international patients (Fortis).
 - Up to 75% decline in West Asian footfall (short-term trend).
- Estimated 15–20% revenue loss in medical tourism in the short term.

Key Facts

- India is among the top global medical tourism destinations.
- Major source regions: West Asia, Africa, SAARC countries.
- Key treatments sought:
 - Organ transplants
 - Cancer care
 - Cardiac surgeries
- Government initiative: Heal in India.
- Medical tourism is part of trade in services (Mode 2 – Consumption Abroad) under WTO.
- India allows 100% FDI in hospitals (automatic route).

Important Observations

- Air connectivity disruption is the primary cause (not healthcare capacity).
- North India more affected; South India relatively stable due to better connectivity.
- Ramadan seasonality also contributes to reduced patient inflow.
- Emerging trend: India seen as a stable alternative to West Asian medical hubs.

Static Linkages

- India's advantage: low-cost treatment (~20% of developed countries) + skilled doctors.
- Linked to service sector exports in Balance of Payments.
- Supports health diplomacy and soft power.
- Related schemes:
 - Ayushman Bharat (infrastructure strengthening)
 - National Health Policy 2017 (universal healthcare vision)

Critical Analysis

Positives

- India emerging as reliable healthcare hub globally
- Opportunity to expand into new markets (Africa, Central Asia)
- Enhances soft power and global outreach

Challenges

- Over-dependence on West Asia
- Geopolitical vulnerability of service exports
- Lack of integrated ecosystem (visa ease, insurance, global accreditation)
- Competition from Thailand, Turkey, UAE

Way Forward

- Diversify patient markets beyond West Asia
- Strengthen Heal in India branding globally
- Improve medical visa + digital facilitation
- Enhance air connectivity & bilateral agreements
- Promote international accreditation (NABH/JCI)
- Integrate telemedicine for pre/post treatment care

India's West Asia reset, more sinned against than sinning

During the past month, India policy towards West Asia has stirred domestic controversy. As substantive Indian interests are at stake, a professional assessment, based on two trends, is offered without wading into the domestic political blame game.



Mahesh Sachdev

is a former Indian Ambassador with an interest in West Asia and oil matters

A link to two trends

First, over the past decade, India has raised its diplomatic engagement with West Asia. Prime Minister Narendra Modi has made 15 visits to the six countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) – some after a multi-decade hiatus. He also visited Israel twice, and the Palestinian Authority and Iran each once. Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreements (CEPA) have been signed with the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Oman, and similar negotiations are underway with the GCC and Israel.

With over \$160 billion in bilateral trade and 10 million diaspora, the GCC ranks as India's largest socio-economic partner. Last decade's engagements spurred synergy, although the promised investments have lagged. India's political gains include a de-bipolarisation with Pakistan, greater strategic convergence with stronger defence and security ties up and growing acceptance of India as a responsible and friendly status quo power.

Second, the Gulf monarchies' ardour for a foreign power is normally rooted in the foreign power's potential contribution to the security and stability of their royal family, state and region – in that order. Exceptional turmoil in West Asia since October 2023, and a three-week-old war with the GCC countries under direct Iranian drone and missile attacks and the closure of the Strait of Hormuz, have accentuated their search for a better security paradigm than the eight-decade-old regional Pax Americana.

The recent reset in India's diplomacy in West Asia largely acknowledges the aforementioned two trends and attempts to harness them to serve India's national interest. To their credit, India's policymakers have finally realised which side of the bread is buttered, and have launched a qualitative upscaling of a symbiosis with key West Asian countries. Recent initiatives, such as Mr. Modi's visit to Israel and his individual phone calls to all his GCC counterparts during the early days of the hostilities, have not only assured them of India's categorical support to their security and prioritises their concerns at this critical juncture. Later, he also spoke with his Iranian counterpart, and emphasises hard diplomacy. This reset is bereft of two traditional aspects that often dampen the bilateral amity: First, India did not churn the traditional *pleas au maistras* that left all

stakeholders partially satisfied and India at the margins of the arena. There was no attempt to "balance" its public policy on controversial issues such as the "two-state solution" and Iran's quest for nuclear technology. Second, India's statements reflected its views without needless third-party citations. This demonstrates India's growing confidence as a credible and autonomous power.

Some domestic detractors have criticised the policy reset on multiple grounds. First, Mr. Modi's Israel visit (February 25-26) that concluded two days before Tel Aviv unleashed a military campaign against Iran is seen as untimely. Second, the perceived abandonment of India's traditional support for Palestinians and Iran is seen as inhumane. Third, South India is accused of surrendering India's sovereign autonomy to western dictates. Fourth, this activist reset may lead to strategic overreach with concomitant challenges such as exposure to security threats and costly defence tie-ups abroad.

The dates of the Prime Minister's visit to Israel were likely to have been set weeks in advance without any premonition of the February 28 offensive. The West Asian situation being perennially on the front burner makes any such visit risky, giving the erstwhile criticism of the timing an unfair advantage of 50:50 hindsight. At the same time, the focus of the visit being bilateral renders it in a different domain.

Where other international actors stand The perceived "immorality" of India's reset is largely misdirected and should be aimed at more worthy targets, such as China, Russia and Pakistan. Beijing siphoned off nearly 90% of the sanctioned Iranian oil exports, rendering only lip service to Tehran; Russia, which signed a 20-year Comprehensive Strategic Partnership Treaty with Iran last year, has also underdelivered. And last year, Pakistani generals promised to make Israel if it attacked Iran; they are now U.S. President Donald Trump's favourites. Similarly, even the Arabs and Muslim states were conspicuously silent during the Gaza conflict.

While the Indian reset is a long-overdue recognition of the tectonic geopolitical shifts in West Asia, the pendulum swing to the other extreme and is being gradually realigned with national interests. The regional dynamic being notoriously mercurial, India should strive to keep its options more open. The Palestine Cause cannot be wished away forever. At the end of the day, Iran would remain an important player for India as an oil supplier and as a large market for Indian products, reconstruction projects and services. Iran, which borders Pakistan and Afghanistan, could be a strategic ally. Further, if subterranean trends such as growing Arab unease with the American and Israeli Armageddon, the

Saudi-UAE rift, the Iraq-Iran estrangement, and aggressive positioning by Pakistan and Türkiye are taken on board, a more nuanced reset would have suitably underscored continuity and inclusion. In retrospect, India could have reacted faster to the developments, such as the assassination of Iran's Supreme Leader and the appointment of his successor. Political correctness should not make India taciturn, as the diplomatic double-speak offers many ways to skin the proverbial cat. India's relations with the U.S. and Israel are not so fragile as to be upended by our agreeing to disagree. Finally, India could have rendered more humanitarian relief to millions affected by the hostilities.

An opportunity for India

The ongoing reset should accommodate two incipient, but profound, regional movements with long-term positives for India. First, the long-standing "Oil for Security" compact between the Washington-led West and the moderate Arab regimes has become a collateral casualty of the ongoing U.S.-Israel war against Iran. The U.S. joined Israel in attacking Iran without prior notification to the GCC, ignoring the latter's cautionary advice. The West not only failed to protect them from Iranian realisation, but its military bases on their soil became lightning rods for the Iranian attacks. Now, they fear that the U.S. may abruptly conclude the campaign, leaving them to face Iran's wrath. Once the dust settles, the GCC states may reduce their reliance on the U.S. and diversify their security partnership options to countries such as India, which are less likely to act as a Pratorian Guard. India's response to any such proposal ought to be based on a careful SWOT analysis with clear rules of engagement.

Second, the Iranian retaliations against the GCC have disrupted business activity and supply chains, and an early return to "business as usual" appears unlikely. The GCC's appeal as an oasis of eco-political stability in the turbulent region has taken a serious long-term knock, leading to some stakeholders' clamour for a "GCC+1" strategy. India's eco-diplomacy must strive to position India as a stable and attractive alternative hub to the GCC's rhy but fragile hotspots, which thrived by weaving proxy capital and talent from India. The current conjuncture is a historic opportunity to seize what is rightfully ours.

To remain relevant and effective, a country needs a dynamic foreign policy grounded in realism and national interest. Its execution requires the right mix of consistency, agility and modulation. As India's West Asia policy matures, it is relevant to recall British Prime Minister Lord Palmerston's maxim, "We have no eternal allies, and we have no perpetual enemies. Our interests are eternal and perpetual..."

India needs balance, sensitivity and agility to leverage emerging opportunities in West Asia

- Opportunities
 - GCC diversification → India as security partner
 - "GCC+1 strategy" → India as investment destination
 - Supply chain shifts → economic gains
- Concerns
 - Risk of over-alignment with Israel/West
 - Strain on Iran relations (energy + connectivity)
 - Neglect of Palestine issue
 - Security risks for diaspora and trade routes

Static Linkages

- Strategic autonomy as core of India's foreign policy
- Evolution: Non-alignment to Multi-alignment
- Importance of West Asia for energy security (~60% oil imports)
- Strait of Hormuz: critical global oil chokepoint
- Role of diaspora diplomacy and remittances
- Trade agreements like CEPA boosting exports

Critical Analysis

Positives

- Aligns with realist foreign policy
- Enhances economic and strategic partnerships
- Improves India's global standing and credibility
- Opens space for greater role in regional security

Negatives

- Risk of strategic overreach
- Possible alienation of Iran
- Weakening of traditional pro-Palestine stance
- Exposure to regional instability

Way Forward

- Maintain balanced engagement with Israel, GCC, and Iran
- Reaffirm support for Palestinian cause diplomatically
- Avoid military entanglements; focus on economic-security cooperation
- Position India as global manufacturing and investment hub
- Enhance energy diversification and strategic reserves
- Strengthen diaspora protection mechanisms

KEY HIGHLIGHTS

Context

- Ongoing conflict in West Asia (post-October 2023 escalation; Iran–Israel tensions) has impacted regional stability, oil routes, and global geopolitics.
- India has adopted a more assertive, interest-driven diplomatic approach toward the region.
- Increased engagement with Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), Israel, and Iran amid shifting security dynamics.

Key Points

- India–GCC Significance
 - Trade: ~\$160 billion
 - Diaspora: ~10 million Indians
 - Major source of oil and remittances
- Policy Shift
 - From normative balancing to pragmatic realism
 - Reduced rhetorical emphasis on Palestine issue
 - Stronger bilateral and strategic engagement
- Geopolitical Changes
 - Weakening of U.S.-led security system in Gulf
 - Iran's attacks and Strait of Hormuz disruptions
 - GCC exploring alternative security partners
- India's Actions
 - High-level visits and direct leader-level engagement
 - CEPA with UAE; negotiations with GCC, Israel
 - Strategic signalling of support for stability

A bit of a blur over India's new carbon credit plan

A significant policy announcement in the Union Budget 2026, involving a massive ₹20,000 crore outlay for a carbon credit programme, has sparked a wave of confusion and conflicting reports, pitting a clear-cut governmental road map for heavy industry against a burgeoning narrative of a new income stream for India's farmers. At the heart of the debate is a fundamental question. Is this Budget allocation designed to fund Carbon Capture, Utilization, and Storage (CCUS) technologies for smokestack industries? Or is it a pioneering scheme to help farmers earn carbon credits through sustainable agriculture? Evidence from official documents suggests the first, but a persistent parallel narrative, echoed in several media reports, insists on the second.

The first is the CCUS for "Hard-to-Abate" Industries. The unambiguous anchor for the Budget announcement is the "R&D Roadmap for CCUS", released by the Department of Science and Technology (DST) in December 2025. This technical document, which forms the basis of the budgetary provision, leaves little room for ambiguity regarding its scope and intent. The road map explicitly identifies its target sectors, power, steel, cement, refineries, and chemicals. These are labelled as "hard-to-abate" industries where process emissions are concentrated, measurable, and technically challenging to eliminate through renewable energy alone. The proposed ₹20,000 crore over five years is earmarked for large-scale deployment of CCUS technologies, essentially capturing carbon dioxide from factory flue gases and either using it industrially or storing it underground.

Not on the list
Crucially, agriculture is conspicuously absent from this list of CCUS sectors. The road map acknowledges agriculture as a source of greenhouse gases (primarily methane and nitrous oxide) but only in an inventory context. It



Arkaagud N. Ganeshamurthy

is Fellow of the National Academy of Agricultural Sciences (NAAS), the Indian Society of Soil Science (ISSS), former Emeritus Scientist, Indian Institute of Horticultural Research (IHR), Bengaluru, and former Dean, Central Agricultural University, Imphal, Manipur

The strategy requires distinct focus on both 'smokestack' and 'soil' initiatives

explicitly excludes agriculture from CCUS strategies because agricultural emissions are diffuse, biologically mediated, and not suited to the point-source capture technology that defines CCUS. The road map draws a clear line between CCUS (preventing new industrial emissions) and Carbon Dioxide Removal or CDR (drawing down existing atmospheric CO₂), where agriculture, through soil carbon sequestration, biochar, and agroforestry, plays a starring role.

The second is the persistent counter-narrative of farmers as climate solutionists. Despite this clear industrial focus, articles and social media discourse have propagated a different story. This narrative posits that the budgetary outlay will directly enable farmers to participate in carbon markets by adopting regenerative practices, turning "farms into climate solutions".

The root of the confusion

This interpretation appears to conflate two distinct concepts. The Budget's CCUS fund (for industrial carbon capture) and the broader, evolving voluntary carbon market in India, where agriculture and forestry projects are already beginning to generate credits for global and domestic buyers. Proponents of the "farmer" narrative point to the growing global and domestic demand for nature-based carbon credits. Several private sector initiatives and State-level programmes are already piloting models where farmers are compensated for practices that enhance soil organic carbon. The confusion likely stems from the Budget's use of the term "carbon credit programme" in a broader sense, while its detailed architecture, as per the DST road map, is exclusively industrial.

Analysts say the confusion highlights a communication gap and a policy opportunity. The DST road map is a technically sound, sector-specific document, but the Budget's use of the more familiar term "carbon credit" has blurred lines. Mention of a "programme" amid

discussion of agricultural carbon credits has led some to expect a funded scheme for farmers. This expectation is plausible, as the Agriculture Ministry has been exploring soil health and climate-resilient farming for years. A structured carbon farming programme is a logical next step, but it would need separate policy, funding, and institutional frameworks distinct from the costly, tech-heavy CCUS initiative.

The government faces the task of clarifying this distinction to manage expectations. The ₹20,000 crore CCUS programme is a critical pillar for decarbonising industry, a sector vital for growth but also responsible for a quarter of India's emissions. Its success is non-negotiable for meeting net zero goals.

Simultaneously, the powerful narrative around farmers and carbon credits highlights a massive parallel opportunity. India's vast agricultural lands hold immense potential for carbon sequestration. A separate, well-designed policy to create a trusted domestic carbon market for agriculture could unlock enormous economic and environmental benefits, truly creating a "new income stream" for farmers.

A multi-sectoral approach is needed
The current debate underscores a pivotal moment in India's climate strategy. Budget 2026 has firmly placed its ₹20,000 crore bet on industrial decarbonisation through CCUS. The "farmer carbon credit" story, while not funded by this specific outlay, reflects a powerful and growing reality in the voluntary carbon space and a compelling demand for a parallel policy initiative. The path ahead requires the government to clearly demarcate these two crucial fronts in the climate fight – smokestack and soil – while advancing both with equal ambition. The confusion may be born of conflation today, but it points to the comprehensive, multi-sectoral approach India will need to forge a sustainable future.

- Source of Confusion:
 - Use of the generic term "carbon credit programme" in Budget speech.
 - Parallel rise of voluntary carbon markets in India involving farmers.
- Existing Developments:
 - India is developing a domestic carbon market (Energy Conservation Amendment Act, 2022).
 - Pilot projects already exist for nature-based carbon credits.

Static Linkages

- India's Net Zero Target: 2070 (COP26 commitments).
- Panchamrit Goals (reduce emissions intensity, increase non-fossil energy capacity).
- Energy Conservation Act, 2001 (amended 2022) – provides framework for carbon markets.
- Perform, Achieve and Trade (PAT) Scheme – market-based mechanism for energy efficiency.
- Paris Agreement – Article 6 (carbon markets).
- Types of greenhouse gases: CO₂, CH₄, N₂O.
- Difference between mitigation vs sequestration strategies.

Critical Analysis

Pros

- Targets major emission-intensive sectors.
- Supports net-zero commitments.
- Promotes clean technology.

Cons

- High cost and technological challenges.
- No direct benefit to farmers.
- Policy communication gap.
- Weak carbon market infrastructure.

Way Forward

- Clarify distinction: CCUS vs Carbon Farming.
- Develop separate agriculture carbon credit policy.
- Strengthen MRV (Measurement, Reporting, Verification).
- Promote public-private participation.

KEY HIGHLIGHTS

Context of the News

- Union Budget 2026 announced ₹20,000 crore allocation for a carbon credit programme.
- Confusion arose regarding whether it targets:
 - Industrial decarbonisation (CCUS), or
 - Farmer-based carbon credit schemes.
- Official basis: DST's CCUS R&D Roadmap (Dec 2025) → clearly industrial focus.

Key Points

- Primary Objective (as per DST Roadmap):
 - ₹20,000 crore allocated for CCUS deployment in "hard-to-abate" sectors:
 - Power
 - Steel
 - Cement
 - Refineries
 - Chemicals
- Nature of CCUS:
 - Captures CO₂ from point sources (industrial emissions).
 - Involves utilisation (e.g., chemicals, fuels) or geological storage.
- Agriculture Exclusion:
 - Agricultural emissions (methane, nitrous oxide) are:
 - Diffuse and non-point source
 - Not suitable for CCUS technologies.
- Carbon Dioxide Removal (CDR) vs CCUS:
 - CCUS → Prevents industrial emissions.
 - CDR → Removes atmospheric CO₂ (agriculture plays role here via:
 - Soil carbon sequestration
 - Agroforestry
 - Biochar).

Nothing at all

The Centre must negotiate in good faith with Ladakhi leadership

Activist Sonam Wangchuk's release on March 14 ended a months-long legal and political standoff between his allies and Ladakh's leadership on one hand and the Centre on the other. Detaining him under the National Security Act 1980, the Centre alleged that he was the "chief provocateur" of the September 2025 violent clashes in Leh that left four dead, and dubbed his presence in the region a catalyst for an "Arab Spring-like" mobilisation to force its hand on Ladakh's constitutional status. The Centre also argued that given Ladakh's borders with China and Pakistan, continued "instigation" by a high-profile figure such as Wangchuk threatened territorial stability. About six months later, the Ministry of Home Affairs modified its order, intending to create an environment of "peace, stability, and mutual trust" and resume formal talks with the Leh Apex Body (LAB) and the Kargil Democratic Alliance (KDA). But even as a judicial commission was still investigating the September violence, Wangchuk's legal team and his wife Gitanjali Angmo had successfully undermined the government's case. Foremost, the alleged evidence of incitement was a translation of a short speech padded with pages of "aspirations" – a legally dubious pattern seen in the Elgar Parishad, Delhi liquor scam, and G.N. Saibaba cases. His lawyers also pointed to Wangchuk's social media posts condemning the unrest that day.

The Supreme Court had also expressed serious concerns over Wangchuk's health in Jodhpur jail. His release came just three days before the Court's final hearing on the matter, letting the Ministry to avoid a potentially embarrassing ruling that could have deemed the detention arbitrary. But while Wangchuk's release has defused the immediate tension, the political situation remains fundamentally unresolved. Two days on, Leh saw massive rallies for the first time since September 2025, while Kargil observed a shutdown, with local leaders saying that the agitation for constitutional safeguards would continue. Talks between Ladakh bodies and the Ministry have however been inconclusive, with LAB and the KDA reiterating their demands for statehood and Sixth Schedule status – already recommended by the National Commission for Scheduled Tribes and promised in the BJP's 2020 election manifesto. Crucially, other activists, including Deldan Namgyal and Smanla Dorjee, remain in detention. In effect, what Wangchuk's detention was meant to serve is unclear, beyond allowing the Centre to brandish its heavy hand, worsening his health, and stalling negotiations. Unless the Centre can negotiate in good faith with the Ladakhi leadership and provide concrete timelines, the people of Ladakh will not get their due.

KEY HIGHLIGHTS

Context

- Activist Sonam Wangchuk released (March 2026) after detention under National Security Act (NSA), 1980.
- Detained for alleged role in September 2025 Leh violence.
- Centre cited national security concerns (Ladakh borders China & Pakistan).
- Release occurred just before Supreme Court hearing.
- Talks resumed between MHA, Leh Apex Body (LAB), and Kargil Democratic Alliance (KDA).
- Continued protests demanding:
 - Statehood
 - Sixth Schedule status

Key Points

- Preventive Detention: NSA allows detention up to 12 months without trial.
- Evidence Concerns: Allegations based on weak/translated material.
- Judicial Role: Supreme Court scrutiny influenced executive decision.
- Unresolved Demands:
 - Sixth Schedule recommended by NCST.
 - Political promise (2020 manifesto).
- Strategic Importance:
 - Ladakh's proximity to LAC (China) and LoC (Pakistan).
- Ongoing Issue: Other activists still detained; protests continue.

Static Linkages

- Article 22: Allows preventive detention with safeguards.
- NSA, 1980: Law for national security and public order.
- Sixth Schedule: Autonomous councils with legislative & judicial powers.
- Jammu & Kashmir Reorganisation Act, 2019 → Ladakh as UT.
- NCST (Article 338A): Constitutional body for tribal welfare.

Critical Analysis

Issues

- Possible misuse of NSA → affects fundamental rights.
- Delay in addressing constitutional safeguards.
- Trust deficit between Centre and Ladakh leadership.
- Continued detention of activists → selective enforcement concerns.

Significance

- Highlights balance between national security and civil liberties.
- Raises debate on federalism in Union Territories.
- Importance of inclusive governance in border regions.

Way Forward

- Time-bound dialogue with LAB & KDA.
- Consider Sixth Schedule / alternative safeguards.
- Ensure judicial oversight on preventive detention.
- Transparent probe into violence.
- Strengthen participatory governance in Ladakh.

Prison outbreak

India's overcrowded jails pose a serious health risk to inmates

The public health crisis in India's prisons is distinguished by its poorer infrastructure and a general disregard for treating ailments until they become inconvenient. A prisoner does not lose the right to health, a point courts have repeatedly stressed; yet, between August 20, 2025, and March 9, 2026, around 92 inmates at the Jalpaiguri Central Correctional Home were infected with herpes simplex virus (HSV) and seven of them died. HSV is common in the general population but experts have said that in immunocompromised or overcrowded populations with poor care, it can lead to encephalitis, which is often fatal. The Home's 171% occupancy rate rendered good hygiene and isolation a luxury. According to the 2023 Prison Statistics of India, district prisons in West Bengal have reported occupancy rates exceeding 160% and certain facilities, such as the Kandi Sub-Jail, have historically reached staggering levels of over 400%. While the State has many foreign national inmates, overcrowding is a persistent fact of India's correctional facilities. In 2023, 30% of inmates in 10 prisons in Kerala were found to have skin diseases caused by humidity and a lack of personal space. A 2023 study in *The Lancet Public Health* found prisoners in India five times more likely to develop tuberculosis (TB) than the general population. In 2025, the Home Ministry ordered prison screening camps as unventilated environments allow TB to spread rapidly. The Nagpur and Indore central jails had major COVID-19 outbreaks.

According to the India Justice Report 2025, HIV prevalence among inmates is also significantly higher than the national average due to shared equipment and inadequate screening at entry. Mandatory, comprehensive medical screening could catch many of these infections before they become injurious, which also requires facilities to have the requisite personnel. But the report also flagged a 43% vacancy rate for medical officers, resulting in the number of inmates per doctor being 2.6 times higher than recommended by the Model Prison Manual. There are also only 25 psychologists for India's 5.7 lakh inmates. Filling this gap requires integrating prisons into the National Health Mission, ensuring a sufficient number of health workers trained to manage outbreaks, and enforcing the Manual's standards uniformly across States. As West Bengal's actions in 2020 illustrate – temporarily releasing thousands of undertrials to relieve overcrowding in the South 24 Parganas District Correctional Home and the Baruaipur Central Jail – the solutions are not confined to health. The judiciary must fast-track cases involving undertrials, who constitute the majority of inmates, expand the use of bail and non-custodial alternatives for minor offences and expedite the repatriation of foreign nationals.

KEY HIGHLIGHTS

Context

- Jalpaiguri Central Correctional Home (West Bengal): 92 inmates infected with HSV, 7 deaths (2025–26).
- Overcrowding: ~171% occupancy.
- Evidence of widespread prison health crisis:
 - High TB incidence ($\approx 5\times$ general population – Lancet Public Health, 2023).
 - HIV prevalence higher than national average (India Justice Report 2025).
 - Skin diseases in Kerala prisons (~30% inmates).
- Severe shortage of healthcare staff in prisons.

Key Facts

- Prison occupancy in India: often 130%+ (Prison Statistics India 2023).
- Undertrials: ~75% of total inmates.
- Medical staff shortage:
 - 43% vacancy in medical officers.
 - Only 25 psychologists for ~5.7 lakh prisoners.
- Inmate-doctor ratio: 2.6 \times higher than prescribed norms.

- Diseases prevalent:
 - TB, HIV, skin infections, HSV
 - COVID-19 outbreaks in past (Nagpur, Indore prisons)

Static Points

- Article 21 \rightarrow Right to life includes right to health.
- Prisoners retain fundamental rights except those restricted by law.
- Model Prison Manual 2016 \rightarrow standards for health, hygiene, staffing.
- Overcrowding linked to slow judicial process and high undertrial population.
- Communicable diseases spread faster in high-density, poorly ventilated environments.

Critical Issues

- Overcrowding \rightarrow poor sanitation, rapid disease spread
- Healthcare neglect \rightarrow delayed diagnosis and treatment
- Staff shortages \rightarrow weak medical response
- Human rights concern \rightarrow violation of dignity
- Public health risk \rightarrow disease spillover outside prisons

Way Forward

- Decongestion:
 - Fast-track undertrial cases
 - Increase bail & non-custodial sentences
- Healthcare reforms:
 - Integrate prisons with public health system
 - Mandatory entry-level screening (TB, HIV etc.)
- Infrastructure:
 - Improve ventilation, hygiene, isolation facilities
- Human resources:
 - Fill vacancies; telemedicine support
- Legal measures:
 - Periodic judicial review of detention
 - Repatriation of foreign inmates

During Nowruz, Iran's Persian culture collides with regime's ideology



RAJA MANDALA
BY C RAJA MOHAN

AS IRAN prepares to welcome the Persian New Year this week, an ancient festival has become the stage for a current political contest. On the eve of Chaharshanbe Suri — the fire festival that heralds Nowruz — Reza Pahlavi's call on the Iranian people to celebrate with vigour was as much a political intervention in a fraught moment as it was a cultural invocation. Pahlavi, the son of Mohammad Reza Shah, who was ousted by the Islamic Revolution of 1979, cast the flames of Chaharshanbe Suri as a force that could dispel the darkness of what he called an "un-Iranian" regime. For nationalist critics, the Islamic Republic marks a break from Iranian civilisation and culture.

Nowruz is best understood as a fusion between Diwali, Holi, and Ugadi (or Gudhi Padwa, Vishu, Puthandu) — marking renewal, light, and the arrival of spring. Celebrated on the vernal equinox, Nowruz predates Islam by centuries and reflects the Zoroastrian worldview of ancient Persia, where fire symbolised truth, purity, and cosmic order. Chaharshanbe Suri, observed on the last Wednesday before Nowruz, is its most evocative prelude. Across Iran, people light bonfires in courtyards and streets, jumping over them in the belief that the fire absorbs sickness and misfortune and returns

vitality. Like Holi, it is exuberant and public; like Diwali, it invokes light against darkness.

The Islamic Republic was never at ease with Nowruz. The 1979 revolution, like the Taliban's later project in Afghanistan, sought to subordinate inherited cultural traditions to a universalist Islamic ideology. Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini dismissed pre-Islamic practices as relics of "fire-worshipping", and the early years of the revolution saw attempts to curtail Nowruz, including the abolition of its customary holiday period. These moves provoked resistance, forcing the regime into a more gradual strategy — restricting public celebrations, discouraging participation, and reinterpreting festivals within acceptable ideological frames.

Chaharshanbe Suri drew particular hostility. A fatwa against it, administrative curbs, and attempts to rename it in neutral terms all reflected the regime's discomfort with a ritual it could neither control nor erase. Yet, like many ancient festivals in India that have survived waves of political and religious contestation, Nowruz endured. Over time, it has acquired a sharper political edge. For many Iranians — especially those born after the revolution — the act of celebrating Nowruz has become an assertion of identity distinct from the state's ideological project. The flames of Chaharshanbe Suri now carry not just the symbolism of renewal, but also political defiance.

This year, Nowruz comes amid great turbulence in Iran. The anti-regime protests that erupted three months ago marked one of the most serious challenges to the Islamic Republic since its founding. The scale of repression that followed was unprecedented even by the Islamic Republic's standards.

At the same time, sustained American and Israeli strikes and the decapitation of Iran's leadership have left the regime under extraordinary pressure. It is into this moment of vulnerability that Reza Pahlavi has inserted his appeal. His calls for strikes and civil resistance, framed in the language of Persian civilisational revival, are part of a broader effort to position himself as the leader of a potential transition in Iran. The choice of Chaharshanbe Suri is deliberate. Festivals bring people into the streets; they offer both symbolic legitimacy and practical cover for collective action. By linking protest to ritual, Pahlavi seeks to turn cultural participation into political mobilisation.

Whether symbolism can overcome structural constraints, however, remains uncertain. Official warnings ahead of Nowruz have been explicit: Dissent will be treated not as protest but as insurrection. Nor is it easy for people to gather in public when American and Israeli bombs are raining down. Yet the deeper significance of the moment cannot be missed. Nearly five decades after the revolution, the contest between competing identities in Iran has sharpened. The Islamic Republic was founded, in part, on a rejection of nationalism and traditional culture. But in practice, the Iranian state has never escaped the gravitational pull of Persian identity. It has been compelled, repeatedly, to accommodate elements of national culture even as it seeks to subordinate them.

Even within the system, attempts have been made to leverage this civilisational heritage. Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, president from 2005 to 2013, sought to revive pre-Islamic symbols, invoking Cyrus the Great and presenting

ancient Iran as compatible with the Islamic Republic. This effort to transcend the Islamic revolution's ideology alarmed the clerical establishment. Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei pushed back, denouncing the so-called Iranian School and curbing state endorsement of such symbolism. The episode underscored the regime's unease with any narrative that might privilege Persian identity over Islamic ideology.

This tension — between an ancient civilisational inheritance and a more recent ideological state — is not unfamiliar to the Subcontinent. In Pakistan's Punjab, the spring festival of Basant has survived periodic bans. In India, cultural diversity endures despite serious attempts at homogenisation from empowered quarters. The persistence of Nowruz in Iran reflects a similar dynamic: The resilience of inherited tradition against the pressures of transient political authority.

For those advocating regime change, this tension offers a potential lever. The invocation of pre-Islamic identity aligns with broader efforts at regime change in Iran. But history counsels caution. Civilisational identities are powerful, but they are also layered and contested. Their political mobilisation rarely produces predictable outcomes, and the Islamic Republic retains significant institutional support. As Iranians gather around bonfires this week, Chaharshanbe Suri illuminates an important question: Will Iran's future be shaped more by its enduring civilisational heritage or by its repressive theocracy?

The writer is a contributing editor on international affairs for The Indian Express. He is also associated with Jindal Global University and the Council on Strategic and Defence Studies, Delhi

The Islamic Republic was founded in part on a rejection of nationalism and traditional culture. But in practice, the Iranian state has never escaped the gravitational pull of Persian identity

KEY HIGHLIGHTS

Context

- Nowruz (Persian New Year) and Chaharshanbe Suri have gained political significance amid ongoing anti-regime protests in Iran.
- Reza Pahlavi appealed to citizens to use the festival as a form of civil resistance.
- Reflects a deeper tension between Persian cultural identity and Islamic ideological state since the 1979 Iranian Revolution.

Key Points

- Nowruz
 - Celebrated on vernal equinox (~21 March).
 - Originates from ancient Persian (Zoroastrian) traditions.
 - Recognised by UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage.
- Chaharshanbe Suri
 - Fire festival before Nowruz; symbolises purification and renewal.
 - Increasingly used as a symbol of dissent.
- State vs Culture
 - Post-1979 regime attempted to restrict pre-Islamic traditions.
 - Gradual accommodation due to public resistance.
- Political Dimension
 - Festivals act as platforms for mobilisation and protest.
 - Growing assertion of cultural nationalism vs religious ideology.

Static Linkages

- Vernal Equinox → Equal day & night due to Earth's tilt.
- Zoroastrianism → Fire symbolises purity and truth.
- UNESCO ICH → Protection of cultural practices globally.
- Cultural Rights → Protection of traditions (Indian Constitution analogy: Art 29).
- Soft Power → Culture as a tool of influence.

Critical Analysis

Pros

- Preserves civilisational identity.
- Enables peaceful expression of dissent.

Cons

- Politicisation of culture may cause instability.
- State repression can escalate tensions.

Way Forward

- Promote balance between culture and governance.
- Avoid suppression of traditional practices.
- Encourage inclusive identity frameworks.

Epstein case is about the way power is structured



SANDHYA GOKHALE

SIMONE DE Beauvoir once wrote, "The world that men themselves have built, its representation tools done by them." This sentence is not just philosophical. It describes how power works. When we look at the Jeffrey Epstein case through a feminist lens, this becomes painfully clear. The stories of women are rarely told in their own voices. They pass through systems controlled by powerful men. They are delayed, reshaped, doubted, or buried.

For many years, the crimes of Epstein remained hidden. This was possible because the structures of power around him protected him. Economic power, political influence, and legal authority were concentrated in the hands of men. The silence surrounding the case was the product of a system that protects its own.

The feminist movements of the 20th century fought to establish the basic rights of women. They insisted that women's lives and experiences were worthy of recognition. In the 21st century, feminist thought expanded further, showing that private suffering reflects larger social structures. Yet even today, when women are visible in education, professions, politics, and public life, their safety, dignity, and autonomy are uncertain. The Epstein case reveals this contradiction.

Epstein targeted girls aged between 10 and 14. Sexual relations with them are clearly criminal. Still, the exploitation continued for years. Victims came forward with evidence but the legal process moved slowly and often not at all. Around Epstein stood a network of powerful men that functioned like a protective wall. This pattern reflects what feminist scholars call institutional impunity.

The structure of Epstein's network reveals another important dimension: The feminisation of poverty. Many of the girls he targeted came from economically fragile backgrounds. A payment of \$200 for a short "massage" could appear like an opportunity. Others were promised help with modelling careers or education. These promises created an illusion of choice. But feminist scholars have long argued that choice in conditions of deep inequality is not genuine freedom.

Another revealing aspect is how the system turned exploitation into something resembling a commercial transaction. Many victims were offered money in exchange for silence. Legal agreements prevented them from speaking publicly. Carole Pateman de-

scribed such arrangements as modern forms of patriarchal contracts, where exploitation is disguised as voluntary exchange. Capital also played a central role. Epstein's network operated almost like a market — girls were recruited, introduced, and consorted among powerful clients. Private planes, private islands, and international travel allowed these activities to move across borders. The system was embedded in a global economy that can commodify human bodies.

The network functioned through elite male solidarity. Powerful men often protect one another because the exposure of one can threaten the others. The media also plays a complicated role in such cases. Scandals often become sensational stories about one monstrous individual, which can distract from deeper structural questions. Another troubling element is the way responsibility is sometimes redirected. In the Epstein case, Ghislaine Maxwell received a severe sentence. Her role in recruitment was undeniable. Yet the powerful men who directly exploited underage girls have largely remained in the shadows.

At the same time, it is important to recognise the courage of survivors. Many women who were exploited eventually spoke publicly despite intimidation, shame, and long delays in justice. Their testimonies forced the world to look more closely at the truth.

The political climate also shapes these debates. In recent years, attempts have been made in some countries to weaken gender studies and feminist scholarship. When discussions of gender are reduced to biological differences, the social structures that produce inequality disappear from view. Feminist theory provides the intellectual tools to understand power, consent, and exploitation. Without these frameworks, systemic injustice can easily be dismissed as individual misfortune.

The Epstein case must be understood as a warning about how power operates. We must ask why the voices of victims are doubted, and how wealth and influence can distort justice.

Gokhale is a lawyer, writer and filmmaker

It must be understood as a warning about how power operates. We must ask why the voices of victims are doubted, and how wealth and influence can distort justice

KEY HIGHLIGHTS

Context of the News

- The Jeffrey Epstein case continues to be debated globally as a symbol of systemic sexual exploitation, elite impunity, and institutional failure.
- The case highlights how wealth, political connections, and legal structures delayed justice for victims over decades.
- Renewed discussions in media and academia focus on feminist interpretations of power, consent, and structural inequality.
- It has also brought attention to global trafficking networks, misuse of Non-Disclosure Agreements (NDAs), and failures of criminal justice systems.

Key Points

- Epstein operated a transnational sexual exploitation network, involving minors and elite clients.
- Victims were often from economically vulnerable backgrounds, reflecting the feminisation of poverty.
- Institutional impunity: Despite evidence, investigations were delayed due to political, financial, and legal influence.
- Use of legal settlements and NDAs suppressed victim testimonies.
- The conviction of Ghislaine Maxwell exposed recruitment mechanisms, but many powerful clients escaped scrutiny.
- The case shows how capital, global mobility, and elite networks can enable exploitation across jurisdictions.

- Feminist scholarship links such cases to structural patriarchy rather than isolated criminality.

Static Linkages

- Fundamental Rights: Article 14 (Equality), Article 15 (Non-discrimination), Article 21 (Right to life with dignity)
- Directive Principles: Protection of women and children from exploitation
- Concept of Rule of Law (A.V. Dicey) vs elite capture of institutions
- Human trafficking provisions under IPC & international conventions (e.g., UN Palermo Protocol)
- Preamble values: Justice—social, economic, political
- Vulnerability due to poverty and inequality (NCERT Sociology themes)
- Ethical concepts: Justice, dignity, accountability, abuse of power

Critical Analysis

Issues

- Delay in justice → weak rule of law
- Elite impunity and power nexus
- Victim silencing through legal/financial tools
- Poverty → vulnerability to exploitation

Ethical Concerns

- Abuse of power
- Violation of dignity
- Structural inequality vs real consent

Way Forward

- Strengthen fast-track courts & victim protection
- Regulate misuse of NDAs
- Improve international cooperation on trafficking
- Ensure accountability of powerful individuals
- Address poverty and vulnerability factors
- Promote gender-sensitive governance

Uncertainties over US deal & India's challenge

THE IMPLICATIONS of the US Supreme Court's ruling that struck down President Donald Trump's policy of reciprocal tariffs are unfolding across the world. A few days ago, Malaysia's investment, trade and industry minister Johari Abdul Ghani is reported to have said that the deal between the two countries was "null and void" following the US court's decision. Earlier, in the absence of any clarity on the tariff structure, the European Union had stopped working towards ratifying its trade deal with the US. This points towards a possible rethink among countries over recent trade agreements struck with the Trump administration.

In February, India agreed to a framework for an interim agreement with the US — the framework will now be signed only after "Washington puts in place a new tariff architecture which safeguards India's comparative advantage in the US market", a senior government official told this paper. Under the interim agreement, the US would impose a reciprocal tariff of 18 per cent on India's exports. While that tariff rate had then meant that India was placed favourably compared to some of its competitors, post the US court ruling, that relative advantage has disappeared. Trump has used Section 122 of the 1974 Trade Act to impose a uniform tariff rate of 10 per cent on goods imported in the US. This means that the concessions make little sense without reciprocity. Moreover, the 10 per cent tariff is for a 150-day period, which ends in July. There is little clarity on what happens after that.

Other challenges have arisen. A few days ago, the US Trade Representative launched an investigation under Section 301 of the Trade Act of 1974 for India and several other countries, citing "structural excess capacity and production in certain manufacturing sectors". Reportedly, the fast-tracked nature of the investigation could lead to new tariffs in place from May. The Tax Foundation, a US-based think tank, also says that these "investigations could pave the way to re-impose the now unlawful IIEEPA tariffs". This suggests that a return to the era of low tariffs and a stable trading regime appears unlikely. In this unpredictable environment, India must use the space available to it to negotiate for greater market access. Its approach must be guided by the objective of seeking predictable, transparent and stable trade relations.

KEY HIGHLIGHTS

Context

- US Supreme Court ruling has disrupted earlier tariff policies of the Trump administration.
- Countries like EU and Malaysia are reassessing trade agreements with the US.
- India had negotiated an interim trade deal (18% reciprocal tariff) with the US, now under reconsideration.
- The US imposed a uniform 10% tariff (Section 122, Trade Act 1974) for 150 days (till July).
- The US also initiated Section 301 investigations against India and others, raising risk of further tariffs.

Key Points

- Reciprocal Tariffs: Earlier meant matching tariffs between countries; India had a relative advantage under the 18% framework.
- Uniform Tariff Shift: The new 10% tariff reduces India's competitive edge vis-à-vis other exporters.
- Section 122 (Trade Act, 1974):
 - Allows temporary tariffs (up to 150 days) to address balance of payments issues.
- Section 301 Investigation:
 - Used to counter "unfair trade practices."
 - May lead to additional tariffs or trade sanctions.

- Global Trade Impact:
 - EU paused trade deal ratification.
 - Malaysia declared its agreement "null and void."
- Policy Uncertainty:
 - Lack of clarity beyond July increases risks for exporters and investors.
- India's Position:
 - Waiting for a predictable tariff architecture before finalizing agreements.
 - Focus on safeguarding comparative advantage in US markets.

Static Linkages

- International trade operates on principles of comparative advantage and specialization.
- Tariffs act as trade barriers, influencing import-export competitiveness.
- WTO framework promotes Most Favoured Nation (MFN) and predictable tariff bindings.
- Balance of Payments crises may justify temporary protectionist measures.
- Trade disputes are often resolved via multilateral institutions or bilateral negotiations.

Critical Analysis

Positives

- Scope for better renegotiation of trade terms.
- Push for export diversification.

Negatives

- Increased policy uncertainty.
- Weakening of rules-based global trade system.
- Possible loss of competitiveness for Indian exports.
- Risk of trade conflicts due to unilateral US actions.

Way Forward

- Diversify export markets (EU, ASEAN, Africa).
- Strengthen domestic manufacturing competitiveness.
- Promote stable and rules-based trade agreements.
- Support WTO-led multilateralism.
- Build resilient supply chains.

A case of gender injustice

IN FEBRUARY, while overturning a bail order to the accused by the Allahabad High Court in a dowry-death case, the Supreme Court had flagged its glaring inadequacy, citing the order by the single-judge bench of Justice Pankaj Bhatia as “most shocking and disappointing”. Now, an investigation by this newspaper has revealed that in three months, in 508 of 510 publicly available orders in dowry death cases passed by Justice Bhatia, bail was routinely granted, using similar logic, language and bond amounts. The near-uniformity signals a troubling lack of application of mind by the court and a dilution of due process: In cases as intimate and often difficult to prove as dowry violence, reducing judicial scrutiny to a template risks turning adjudication into a mechanical exercise, divorced from the specific facts of each case.

Bail jurisprudence, anchored in the maxim “bail, not jail”, demands a careful assessment of the severity of allegations. Especially in the case of dowry violence and death, Section 304B of the IPC (or Section 80 of the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita) creates a statutory presumption against the accused, treating the crime as heinous. Dowry-related violence tends to occur behind closed doors where evidence is sparse and witnesses vulnerable. But when judicial scrutiny seems to be brought to bear on these cases by rote, it threatens to leave women disproportionately exposed to systemic injustice. The Supreme Court has repeatedly stressed that high courts exercising powers under Section 439 CrPC (now Section 483 of the Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha Sanhita, 2023) must engage in reasoned *prima facie* assessments that reflect in the structure and language of orders.

In critical rulings such as *State of Punjab v. Iqbal Singh* (1991) and *Shanti v. State of Haryana* (1990), the apex court has expanded the understanding of dowry-related violence and strengthened the legal framework to meet its challenges. In the landmark *State of Uttar Pradesh v. Ajmal Beg Etc* (2025), the SC reiterated that dowry-related violence goes against constitutional guarantees of Articles 14, 15 and 21, and that its eradication is a “constitutional and social necessity”. These are crucial lessons to remember. If the adjudication of such crimes slips into mechanical repetition, it is not just legal standards that are eroded, but the promise of justice as well.

KEY HIGHLIGHTS

Context

- The Supreme Court recently set aside a High Court bail order in a dowry death case, calling it “shocking and disappointing”.
- A subsequent investigation revealed that 508 out of 510 bail orders in similar cases were granted using identical reasoning, language, and bond conditions.
- This pattern indicates mechanical adjudication, raising serious concerns about judicial accountability, due process, and protection of women in dowry-related crimes.

Key Points

- Legal Framework:
 - Section 304B IPC / Section 80 BNS: Dowry death (death within 7 years of marriage + cruelty for dowry).
 - Section 113B, Indian Evidence Act: Presumption of guilt against accused.
- Bail Provisions:
 - Section 439 CrPC / Section 483 BNSS, 2023 empowers High Courts to grant bail.
- Judicial Principles:
 - Bail jurisprudence based on “bail, not jail”, but requires case-specific judicial reasoning.
 - Supreme Court mandates *prima facie* evaluation of evidence in serious offences.

- Issue Identified:
 - Uniform bail orders suggest non-application of mind and template-based justice delivery.

Static Linkages

- Articles 14, 15, 21 – equality, gender justice, right to life and dignity
- Natural justice – requirement of reasoned orders
- Doctrine of fairness and non-arbitrariness
- Balance between individual liberty and societal interest
- Criminal law principle: exception to presumption of innocence in special laws

Critical Analysis

Concerns

- Mechanical justice undermines fair trial standards
- Weakens statutory safeguards in dowry death cases
- Dowry crimes occur in private domains, making judicial scrutiny crucial
- Erosion of public confidence in judiciary
- Reflects institutional gaps in oversight and accountability

Balancing Perspective

- Bail protects personal liberty (Article 21)
- Prevents pre-trial punishment
- Need to guard against misuse of dowry laws

Way Forward

- Ensure speaking and reasoned bail orders
- Develop standard judicial guidelines for heinous offences
- Strengthen gender-sensitive judicial training
- Introduce institutional audit of judicial patterns
- Leverage technology for anomaly detection in judgments
- Maintain balance between rights of accused and victim protection