

DAILY NEWSP APER ANALYSIS

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**CHANAKYA IAS ACADEMY
SECTOR 25 CHANDIGARH**

Will completely close Strait of Hormuz : Iran

Trump threatened to 'obliterate' Iran's power plants if it did not reopen the Strait in 48 hours

Tehran says critical infrastructure in West Asia could be 'irreversibly destroyed' if it is attacked

Iran said it would strike power plants in Israel, nations hosting U.S. and firms with U.S. interests

Reuters
Agence France-Presse
WASHINGTON/TEHRAN

The Iranian military on Sunday threatened to completely shut down the strategic Strait of Hormuz and attack U.S. infrastructure, including energy facilities in the Gulf, if U.S. President Donald Trump acts on threats to target the country's power plants.

Mr. Trump on Saturday threatened to "obliterate" Iran's power plants if Tehran did not fully reopen the Strait of Hormuz in 48 hours, suggesting a significant escalation barely a day after he talked about "winding down" the war, now in its fourth week.

Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent said the U.S. may need to "escalate" its attacks against Iran to be able to wind down the war. Asked if Mr. Trump was winding down or escalating



Assessing damage: People inspecting the site of an Iranian missile strike in Dimona, Israel on Sunday. AP

Modi chairs meeting to review impact of conflict

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

As tensions continue to mount in West Asia, Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Sunday chaired a meeting of the Cabinet Committee on Security (CCS) to review the

situation and suggest mitigating measures.

A government statement said that the conflict's impact over the short, long and medium term were assessed.

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U.S. bases and companies with U.S. shareholders. The Islamic Republic's power grid is deeply intertwined with its energy sector. Striking major plants could trigger blackouts, crippling everything from pumps and refineries to export terminals and military command centres.

Earlier in the day, Iranian media reports quoted Iran's representative to the U.N. maritime agency as saying that the Strait of Hormuz remains open to all shipping except vessels linked to "Iran's enemies".

All Mousavi's comments came from an interview published on Friday by the Chinese news agency Xinhua, much before Mr. Trump's ultimatum. Meanwhile, Iran's Parliament is mulling imposing tolls on shipping through the strait, with Speaker Ghalibaf saying maritime traffic would "not return to its pre-war status".

Traffic through the vital strait has been brought to a near-standstill since the

start of the war, that has so far killed over 2,000 people. A relatively small number of vessels have been able to transit it - around 5% of its pre-war volume, according to analytics firm Kpler. Iranian forces have attacked multiple vessels, saying they failed to heed "warnings" against transiting the waterway.

In recent days, Iran has allowed some vessels, while warning it would block ships from countries it says have joined the "aggression" against it.

Meanwhile, the exiled son of Iran's last shah Reza Pahlavi called on Mr. Trump and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to refrain from targeting Iran's civilian infrastructure, because it "belongs to the Iranian people and to the future of a free Iran."

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ing the war, he said: "They're not mutually exclusive. Sometimes you have to escalate to de-escalate."

The strait has been effectively closed since the start of the war, sparked by U.S.-Israeli bombardment of Iran. The conflict has since spread across West Asia, with Iran responding with attacks on Israel and

U.S. interests in the region.

"If the U.S.'s threats regarding Iran's power plants are carried out... the strait will be completely closed, and it will not be reopened until our destroyed power plants are rebuilt," military operations command Khatam Al-Anbiba said.

Iran's Parliament Speaker Mohammad Baqer Qalibaf wrote on X that critical infrastructure in West Asia could be "irreversibly destroyed" should Iranian power plants be attacked.

The military command said it would also strike Israel's "power plants, energy, and information and communications technology (ICT) infrastructure", along with power plants in regional countries hosting

U.S. bases and companies with U.S. shareholders. The Islamic Republic's power grid is deeply intertwined with its energy sector. Striking major plants could trigger blackouts, crippling everything from pumps and refineries to export terminals and military command centres.

While some Gulf desert states such as Saudi Ara-

bia, Oman and the UAE have access to more than one sea to draw water from for desalination, Qatar, Bahrain and Kuwait are crowded along the shoreline of the Gulf with no other coastline.

While some Gulf desert states such as Saudi Ara-

KEY HIGHLIGHTS

Context of the News

- Escalation of conflict in West Asia involving Iran, the U.S., and Israel.
- The U.S. threatened to target Iran's power infrastructure if the Strait of Hormuz is not reopened.
- Iran warned of complete closure of the Strait of Hormuz and retaliation against U.S. and regional energy infrastructure.
- Shipping traffic through the strait has fallen sharply (around 5% of normal levels).
- The conflict has widened, affecting regional stability and global energy supply chains.

Key Points

- Strait of Hormuz:
 - Connects Persian Gulf with Gulf of Oman → Arabian Sea.
 - One of the world's most critical oil transit chokepoints (~20% global oil trade).
- Iran's actions:
 - Threat to block shipping routes.
 - Possible targeting of energy and ICT infrastructure.
 - Considering imposition of tolls on maritime traffic.
- U.S. approach:
 - "Escalate to de-escalate" strategy.
- Regional vulnerability:
 - Gulf countries dependent on desalination and oil exports.
- Global impact:
 - Disruption in oil supply → price volatility → inflationary pressures.

Static Linkages

- World geography: Strategic chokepoints (Hormuz, Malacca, Bab-el-Mandeb).
- UNCLOS (1982): Transit passage in international straits.

- India's energy security and import dependence (~85%).
- Role of Sea Lines of Communication (SLOCs) in global trade.
- Strategic Petroleum Reserves (India).

Critical Analysis

- Strategic Concerns:
 - Closure of Hormuz can trigger global energy crisis.
 - Risk of regional war escalation.
- Economic Impact:
 - Rising crude prices → inflation → fiscal pressure on oil-importing countries like India.
- Legal/Normative Issues:
 - Threat to freedom of navigation (UNCLOS).
 - Targeting civilian infrastructure violates international humanitarian norms.
- India-specific Concerns:
 - Energy supply disruption.
 - Impact on diaspora and remittances.
 - Trade route instability.

Way Forward

- Promote diplomatic resolution via UN and multilateral forums.
- Diversify energy sources (renewables, alternate suppliers).
- Strengthen strategic petroleum reserves.
- Enhance maritime security cooperation.
- Develop alternative corridors (e.g., INSTC, Chabahar Port).

'Double engine' – cute slogan, a serious federal question

Every election season produces memorable slogans. Most fade once the votes are counted, but some linger and begin to shape how citizens think about governance itself. One such phrase is the "double-engine *sarkar*". At first hearing, it sounds harmless, even cute: two governments working in tandem to accelerate development. Yet, behind the metaphor lies a serious constitutional question about India's federal compact.

The idea is simple: if the same party governs both the Union and the State, development will move faster because the two governments will work in harmony. Taken at face value, this is unexceptionable. Of course governments at different levels should coordinate. That is indeed cooperative federalism. The real question is what happens when they do not share the same political ideology. But the "double-engine" slogan carries a deeper implication. It suggests that development flows preferentially to States governed by the same party as the Union government.

'Aligned States' benefit
During election campaigns the message is often made quite explicit: elect the party ruling at the Centre so that your State can benefit from faster development. If you do not, you will be starved of funds. This is where the constitutional difficulty begins.

India's Constitution does not envisage a system where State governments depend on the goodwill, or charity, of the ruling party at the Centre. It creates a federal structure in which the Union and the States are partners within their respective spheres. The Union government represents the Republic as a whole, not merely those States governed by the party in power in New Delhi.

Public money collected through national taxation belongs to the Union of India, not to the ruling party. Taxes are collected in the name of the Republic, from citizens of every State regardless of how they vote. The distribution of these resources cannot depend on which party governs a State. A citizen in Kerala or Tamil Nadu pays the same taxes as a citizen in Uttar Pradesh or Madhya Pradesh. The constitutional promise is that both will receive their fair share in return.

India's constitutional framers understood this danger. That is why they built institutional safeguards into the system. The most important is the Finance Commission. Under Article 280, the Finance Commission is appointed every five years to recommend how Union revenues should be shared with the States. Its purpose is vital: fiscal transfers must be rule-based, not politically negotiated. The Commission evaluates States on objective criteria – how far their incomes lag



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of India

behind the national average, their population, geographic size, and fiscal capacity – so that politics cannot determine who gets what.

Issues raised by States, federal friction
Recent debates about fiscal federalism show how sensitive this issue remains. Southern States have expressed concern that the use of more recent population data in allocation formulas may penalise them for having successfully controlled population growth. Another issue is the increasing resort of the Union government to cesses and surcharges, which fall outside the divisible pool and are not shared with States. This effectively reduces the quantum of resources available for constitutionally mandated sharing, concentrating more fiscal power in Union hands and weakening the financial autonomy of States. The Sixteenth Finance Commission, which is currently deliberating, will have to grapple seriously with these concerns if it is to restore confidence in the fairness of the fiscal federal arrangement.

Governments in Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh and Telangana have argued that States which acted early to stabilise population should not be penalised in the distribution of national resources. Senior Ministers from these States have at times remarked, in visible frustration, that they feel reduced to "beggars", pleading for funds that constitutionally belong to them. This is not the language of political theatre. It reflects a genuine structural grievance about the terms on which States participate in the Indian Union.

Federal friction is visible not only in financial matters but also in the legislative process. In recent years, Governors in some States have sat for long periods over Bills passed by elected legislatures, effectively using the constitutional office as an instrument of political sabotage. Tamil Nadu and Kerala have witnessed particularly prolonged delays. The pattern is difficult to ignore: the delays have been in States that are governed by parties opposed to the ruling dispensation at the Centre. A Governor who withholds assent to legislation passed by an elected Assembly is, in effect, a second engine running in reverse.

Such delays have drawn judicial attention. In *State of Punjab vs Principal Secretary to the Governor of Punjab (2023)*, the Supreme Court of India made it clear that a Governor cannot use inaction to stall the legislative process. The Court emphasised that the Governor's office is not meant to function as a parallel political authority over an elected legislature.

More recently, in *State of Tamil Nadu vs Governor of Tamil Nadu (2025)*, the Court observed that prolonged inaction by a Governor

in assenting to Bills is constitutionally impermissible. These rulings together signal a firm judicial commitment to protecting the legislative sovereignty of elected State assemblies.

The experience of Delhi over the past decade provides a further illustration. Many initiatives of the elected government became entangled in disputes with the Lieutenant-Governor and the Union government. Courts eventually had to intervene. The lesson is not merely about one city; it is about what happens when the machinery of federal governance is used to punish a political opponent rather than serve the public.

Seen together – fiscal transfers, gubernatorial delays, and the Delhi impasse – these developments form a coherent pattern. The "double-engine" slogan is not merely a campaign metaphor. It is a description of how governance actually functions when political alignment is absent. And that is precisely the constitutional problem. The form of federalism survives; its spirit is quietly hollowed out.

India's federal system has faced similar tensions before. In earlier decades, Article 356 was frequently misused to dismiss elected State governments. The Court's landmark judgment in *S.R. Bommai vs Union of India* placed important limits on that practice. The challenge today is subtler: governments may remain in office, yet, governance itself may become hostage to political alignment.

Structural reform needed

What is needed is not merely judicial intervention, but structural reform. The Finance Commission's recommendations could be made more binding. A fixed statutory timeline, say, three months, could be prescribed for Governors to act on Bills, failing which assent would be deemed granted. Inter-State/governmental councils, already provided for under Article 263, could be revitalised as genuine forums for cooperative federalism rather than ceremonial gatherings. These are not radical proposals; they are logical completions of the constitutional architecture that the framers intended.

Political slogans will continue to animate election campaigns. But a slogan that implicitly threatens citizens with slower development if they choose the "wrong" party at the State level does not merely distort electoral choice; it corrodes the constitutional promise of equal citizenship. Development cannot depend on political alignment. It must rest on rules and institutions that treat every State, and every citizen, with equal fairness. That constitutional balance, not the number of engines pulling the same train, is the only engine India's federal democracy truly needs.

- Important Supreme Court rulings:
 - 2023: Governor cannot stall legislative process
 - 2025: Prolonged delay in assent is unconstitutional
- Increasing Centre-State friction in:
 - Fiscal transfers
 - Legislative processes
 - Administrative control

Static Linkages

- Federalism: Division of powers (Seventh Schedule)
- Finance Commission (Article 280)
- Inter-State Council (Article 263)
- Governor's powers (Article 200)
- S.R. Bommai case (limits on Article 356 misuse)
- Concepts: Cooperative vs competitive federalism

Critical Analysis

Positives

- Better coordination in policy implementation
 - Faster execution of centrally sponsored schemes
 - Promotes competitive federalism
- ### Concerns
- Violates principle of fiscal neutrality and equity
 - Weakens cooperative federalism
 - Over-centralisation through fiscal tools
 - Governor's role may undermine State legislative autonomy
 - Perception of conditional development based on political alignment

Way Forward

- Strengthen objective and transparent devolution criteria
- Reduce reliance on cesses and surcharges
- Ensure time-bound decision-making by Governors
- Empower Inter-State Council for dispute resolution
- Promote institutional federalism over political federalism
- Balance equity with performance in resource allocation

KEY HIGHLIGHTS

Context of the News

- The idea of political alignment between Union and State governments has triggered debates on the nature of India's federal structure.
- Concerns have been raised regarding:
 - Preferential allocation of resources to politically aligned States.
 - Increasing centralisation of fiscal powers through cesses and surcharges.
- Southern States have objected to the use of population criteria in resource distribution, arguing it penalises better demographic performance.
- Judicial interventions have highlighted constitutional limits on the role of Governors in delaying State legislation.

Key Points

- India follows a quasi-federal system with a strong Centre.
- Article 280: Provides for Finance Commission (every 5 years).
- Fiscal federalism issues:
 - Shrinking divisible pool due to cesses/surcharges
 - Disputes over horizontal devolution criteria
- Governor's discretionary powers (Article 200):
 - Assent, withholding, reservation of Bills
 - No fixed timeline → scope for delays

Fairness, not
political
alignment, must
guide India's
federal balance

Digital exile

The government could be creating a system of arbitrary censorship

A decade-long trend in digital governance in India crescendoed last week when a slew of social media accounts operated by independent activists and journalists were blocked apparently for criticising the Union government and Prime Minister Narendra Modi over his government's West Asia policies and the LPG crisis. In seven years, from 2014 to 2021, the number of URLs, posts, and accounts blocked ballooned from 470 to 9,800; since then, there is evidence that entire accounts, especially if they were publishing politically unfavourable comments, were being blocked. There was a wave of censorship during the farmers' protest in 2020-21; the government restored many accounts after international outcry but this also demonstrated that it was not beyond mass censorship. Similarly, the government used emergency powers under the IT Rules to block links to a BBC documentary in 2023, which also expanded the definition of what constituted a "threat to public order". But when Twitter (now X) challenged several blocking orders, between 2021 and 2022, in the Karnataka High Court, the High Court dismissed the plea and fined Twitter, further emboldening the state to censor accounts.

In *Shreya Singhal* (2015), the Supreme Court of India upheld Section 69A of the IT Act 2000 precisely because of its procedural safeguards, including requiring reasoned orders and judicial review. In practice, however, the government has been diluting the safeguards through an expansive use of Rule 16 of the 2009 Blocking Rules, which requires blocking proceedings to be confidential. When this stipulation is invoked to withhold blocking orders or their reasons from affected parties, it undermines their ability to challenge the action in court, eroding the very safeguards that justified the constitutionality of Section 69A. The 2009 Rules also require blocking orders to be reviewed by a committee composed under the IT Rules 2009, yet this is an entirely executive body and has never overturned a government blocking order. In effect, the government is openly and systematically bypassing the right to be heard and violating the doctrine of proportionality. Rule 16 is a procedural rule, yet the government is using it to override the constitutional right to free speech while shielding itself from judicial review. A person's entire account being blocked amounts to a digital exile, removing the person from the public square, which is a hallmark of an authoritarian government rather than of a liberal democracy. The government's plan to decentralise blocking powers to multiple Ministries could effectively create a regime of arbitrary censorship, where any department can silence a critic without the specialised oversight, however flawed, of the IT Ministry.

KEY HIGHLIGHTS

Context

- Recent blocking of social media accounts of activists/journalists for criticism of government policies has raised concerns over digital censorship.
- Sharp rise in blocking orders under Section 69A of the IT Act from ~470 (2014) to ~9,800 (2021) as per government data (PRS/Parliament replies).
- Instances of mass blocking during farmers' protests (2020–21) and use of emergency powers for content blocking in 2023.
- Karnataka High Court (2022) upheld government's blocking powers in a case involving Twitter (X).
- Concerns over use of confidentiality provisions (Rule 16) and possible decentralisation of blocking powers.

Key Points

- Legal Framework Section 69A, IT Act, 2000: Allows blocking in interest of sovereignty, integrity, defence, security, public order.
- IT Blocking Rules, 2009: Provide procedure and safeguards.
- Judicial Position *Shreya Singhal* (2015): Upheld Section 69A due to procedural safeguards (reasoned orders, review mechanism).
- Issues in Implementation Rule 16 (confidentiality) used to withhold blocking orders.

- Affected parties often not informed → limited scope for judicial challenge.
- Blocking entire accounts instead of specific content.
- Institutional Mechanism Review Committee under IT Rules is executive-dominated.
- No evidence of reversal of blocking orders.
- Emerging Concerns Expansion of "public order" interpretation.
- Proposal to allow multiple ministries to issue blocking orders.

Static Linkages

- Article 19(1)(a): Freedom of speech and expression.
- Article 19(2): Reasonable restrictions.
- Doctrine of Proportionality (Modern constitutional law).
- Principles of Natural Justice (Right to be heard).
- Judicial Review (Basic Structure doctrine).
- Rule of Law and limited government.

Critical Analysis

Positives

- Enables timely control of harmful/anti-national content.
- Provides statutory backing for content regulation.
- Useful in maintaining public order and national security.

Negatives

- Lack of transparency due to confidentiality provisions.
- Weak due process (no notice/hearing).
- Disproportionate action (blocking entire accounts).
- Executive dominance in review mechanism.
- Chilling effect on free speech and dissent.
- Risk of arbitrary censorship if powers are decentralised.

Way Forward

- Ensure disclosure of blocking orders with safeguards.
- Independent review mechanism with judicial participation.
- Apply proportionality: restrict only specific content.
- Define clear standards for "public order" and "security".
- Strengthen grievance redressal for affected users.
- Periodic parliamentary oversight of digital censorship framework.

Decoding deadline, red line in Trump's new threat to Iran



Divya A

US PRESIDENT Donald Trump on Sunday threatened to "hit and obliterate" Iran's power plants if Tehran didn't fully open the Strait of Hormuz within 48 hours. In a post on Truth Social, Trump said, "If Iran doesn't fully open, without threat, the Strait of Hormuz, within 48 hours from this exact point in time, the United States of America will hit and obliterate their various power plants, starting with the biggest one first!"



Satellite image from Planet Labs shows the Bushehr Nuclear Power Plant in Bushehr, Iran, last year.

Iran responded to Trump's warning, saying it will retaliate by targeting US and Israel-linked energy and IT infrastructure, along with desalination plants in the region, if its power plants are hit.

In a recent attack, Iran fired missiles toward Israeli Dimona, which has a nuclear research centre, and hit a building, causing significant damage. Iran said this attack comes in response to Israel's earlier attack on Natanz, the site of an Iranian nuclear facility. Both sides have also attacked oil facilities.

With civilian infrastructure coming directly in the line of fire, as clearly spelt out by both sides this time, the US-Israel-Iran war has entered its most crucial and possibly the most precarious phase.

Consequences of 'obliteration'

Trump said the US would start by striking "the biggest" power plant. One of the most significant is Bushehr, a nuclear power plant around 750 km from Tehran that is also home to an Iranian navy base and a dual-use, civilian-military airport. Though it is said to contribute merely 1-2% of Iran's power requirements, it is a key strategic site.

Just three days ago, Tehran had claimed that a projectile struck the grounds of the Bushehr plant — its close proximity to the operating power unit — also raising the spectre of a radiological incident. Although no release of nuclear material was reported following the incident, it underlines a long-time worry of Iran's neighbours that if the Gulf power plant on the shores of the Persian Gulf is hit, it could spill disaster for the entire region.

In fact, an attack on Bushehr is the primary concern for the international com-

Trump said the US will 'obliterate' Iran's power plants if Hormuz isn't reopened in 48 hours. Following through will plunge region into chaos

ENERGY STRESS ALREADY

Force majeure is a clause invoked to avoid liabilities due to unforeseeable circumstances that can prevent someone from fulfilling a contract. This may involve suspension or curtailment of production. Gulf oil facilities that invoked this:

- Qatar Energy, the world's largest LNG exporter, declared force majeure for its entire LNG output after attacks on the Ras Laffan hub. It led to Petrochem LNG, India's biggest LNG importer, to also issue force majeure notices to Indian Oil Corporation and Bharat Petroleum Corporation, among others
- Bahrain's BAPCO Energy, a major diesel and jet fuel exporter, after a major earlier

collapse of the Iranian power grid could potentially trigger a blackout and subsequent political unrest in Iraq. Also, Russia has often targeted Ukraine's power plants, and while the much smaller nation's grid has been severely damaged, it has not been "obliterated".

Could lead to fierce retaliation

Iran has vowed "zero restraint" if its energy facilities are targeted. Tehran has threatened to attack energy infrastructure across West Asia, including assets belonging to US allies in the region. This could draw in neighbouring countries, escalating into a full-scale regional conflict. Iran has declared closed the Strait of Hormuz — which is the key choke point for about 20% of global daily oil supplies — for what it calls 'venomous-linked ships'.

Cascading effect

Since 2017, Iran has been exporting electricity to Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Iraq.

Iraq relies heavily on Iranian electricity. A collapse of the Iranian power grid could potentially trigger a blackout and subsequent political unrest in Iraq.

Iran's critical energy infrastructure, it is Trump's allies in the region, including Israel, who will face the brunt of Iranian retaliation.

Earlier this month, Trump had raised the idea of destroying Iran's power grid but also downplayed it. "We could take apart their electric capacity within one hour, and it would take them 25 years to rebuild," Trump had told reporters on March 11. "So ideally, we're not going to do that."

Any such action by the US on Iran's civilian infrastructure could lead this war to a point of no return, as the assassinated Ir-

anian leader, Ali Larijani, had earlier indicated. Responding to Trump's threat, he had posted a day later on X, "Well, if they do that, the whole region will go dark in less than half an hour and darkness provides ample opportunity to hunt down US servicemen running for safety."

Thus, many see the latest threat as a tactic to bring Tehran to the negotiating table again, by giving it a 48-hour deadline.

'Most serious test'

By creating disruptions in the Strait of Hormuz, Iran aims to make the aggression against it extremely expensive for the US and Israel. Iran has indicated it wants the war to stop, but not at the cost of its sovereignty or security, and it has not sought a simple ceasefire.

While the US has given a 48-hour deadline to Iran before its energy infra is targeted, reports indicate that should this gambit fail, the Trump administration is making preparations for ground invasion, possibly to occupy the South Pars gas field on the Kharg island and open up the Strait of Hormuz by force.

Asa said the Iran-Israel war is the most serious test of any American administration since the Islamic revolution in 1979. "Even though the US President has declared success in many of his actions and air strikes on Iran, with Iran's increasingly intense retaliation, the rhetoric of fiery success has come into question," he noted.

Most of Trump's allies in the region and in NATO are uncertain about Trump's war plans. The more aggressively Trump goes against Iran, the more pressure he might face from his allies at home and abroad, added Asa.

- LNG shortages affecting energy-importing countries like India
- Strategic Importance of Strait of Hormuz:
 - Handles ~20% of global oil supply
 - Key route for India's crude imports (~60% from West Asia – Economic Survey)
- India-specific Impact:
 - Increased import bill and inflationary pressures
 - Risk to energy security and refining sector
 - Impact on fertilizer, petrochemical, and transport sectors

Static Linkages

- India imports ~85% of crude oil (Economic Survey)
- Strategic Petroleum Reserves (SPR) under Indian Strategic Petroleum Reserves Ltd.
- Concepts:
 - Balance of Payments (BoP)
 - Imported inflation
 - Energy security (availability, affordability, sustainability)
- Strait of Hormuz: Narrow maritime chokepoint connecting Persian Gulf to Gulf of Oman
- OPEC and global oil pricing dynamics
- LNG vs crude oil supply chains

Critical Analysis

Positives / Opportunities

- Push for diversification of energy sources (Russia, USA, renewables)
- Strengthening of India's strategic reserves policy
- Opportunity to accelerate green energy transition

Concerns / Challenges

- Overdependence on West Asian energy imports
- Limited buffer of Strategic Petroleum Reserves
- High vulnerability to chokepoint disruptions
- Inflationary pressures impacting common citizens
- Risk of global recession due to oil shocks

Stakeholder Perspectives

- India: Seeks stable supply, price moderation
- Gulf nations: Revenue and security concerns
- Global markets: Volatility and speculation
- Consumers: Fuel price rise

Way Forward

- Diversify crude import basket (Latin America, Africa, Russia)
- Expand Strategic Petroleum Reserves capacity
- Accelerate renewable energy targets (500 GW by 2030 – Govt target)
- Promote green hydrogen and biofuels
- Strengthen diplomatic engagement in West Asia
- Improve energy efficiency and reduce import dependence
- Develop resilient supply chains and maritime security cooperation

KEY HIGHLIGHTS

Context of the News

- Geopolitical tensions in West Asia, particularly involving Iran, the U.S., and Israel, have escalated risks to global energy infrastructure.
- Threats to "obliterate" Iran's energy facilities and Iran's counter-threats to target regional infrastructure have increased uncertainty.
- Iran has effectively restricted movement in the Strait of Hormuz, a critical chokepoint for ~20% of global oil trade.
- Attacks and threats have triggered force majeure declarations by major Gulf energy companies (QatarEnergy, BAPCO, Kuwait Petroleum, Iraq oilfields).
- This has disrupted LNG, crude oil, and petrochemical supply chains, directly affecting India's energy imports.

Key Points

- Force Majeure Clause: Legal provision allowing suspension of contractual obligations due to unforeseen events (war, natural disasters, etc.).
- Affected Energy Players:
 - QatarEnergy: Halted LNG exports after Ras Laffan attack
 - BAPCO (Bahrain): Disruption in diesel/jet fuel exports
 - Kuwait Petroleum: Naphtha export risks
 - Iraq: Oilfield disruptions due to Hormuz constraints
- Global Energy Implications:
 - Oil price volatility due to supply disruptions

Heatwaves to hailstorms, how March weather has turned erratic

Anjali Marar
Bengaluru, March 22

• Week-wise rainfall departures (in %) over India

	Feb 26 - Mar 4	Mar 5 - Mar 11	Mar 12 - Mar 18
East and Northeast India	10%	10%	10%
Northwest India	10%	10%	10%
Central India	10%	10%	10%
South peninsular India	9%	-82%	3.4%
All-India	10%	10%	10%

SOURCE: IMD

THIS YEAR, sweltering temperatures in Jammu and Kashmir and Punjab, unusual heatwaves in Himachal Pradesh, and dry and hot weather across Gujarat and Maharashtra marked the beginning of March, a month that climatologically sees a slow transition from winter to summer.

Since last week, the heat has been replaced by thunderstorms, hailstorms and rain that has cooled down temperatures.

Why did such erratic weather unfold?

A combination of factors

First, we must understand Western Disturbances. Originating beyond Afghanistan and Iran, these are rain-bearing wind systems that pick up moisture from the Mediterranean Sea, the Black Sea, the Caspian Sea and the Arabian Sea as they move eastwards towards India.

Since November 2025, the Western Disturbances affecting India have been subdued in both frequency and intensity, directly affecting rainfall and snowfall. But

this trend was broken in the past fortnight, when two successive, intense Western Disturbances (March 13 and 18) crossed northwest, north and eastern India.

The severe weather — thunderstorms, lightning, hailstorms, short but intense rain spells (over 115 mm in 24 hours) and snowfall — occurred across the western Himalayas, east and northeast India and some parts of southern India.

India Meteorological Department (IMD) officials attributed this to not only Western Disturbances but also the prolonged presence of a cyclonic circulation in

Western Disturbances

• Originating beyond Iran, these are rain-bearing wind systems that pick up moisture from the Mediterranean Sea, Black Sea, Caspian Sea and Arabian Sea as they move eastwards towards India.

the lower tropospheric levels. Strong south-westerly or southerly winds pumped in moisture from the Bay of Bengal over the region, leading to a confluence of wind over central and northwest India. Experts at IMD said similar weather was reported in March 2023.

Common in March

Western Disturbances trigger rain (and snowfall in higher altitudes) in the northwest, north, northeast and some parts of eastern India in non-monsoon months. This also holds true for early March, when the effect of winter is still lingering.

March is also the most favourable for hailstorms and thunderstorms. Temperatures begin to rise after mid-March and, under the right conditions, can trigger thunder, lightning, and intense rainfall.

In eastern India, local winds known as Nor'westers can lead to the sudden development of intense storms, heavy rain, and thunder. Also, when moist winds from either the Bay of Bengal or the Arabian Sea converge with cold winds over central or northwest India, it causes severe weather,

particularly over eastern and central India.

All these weather factors resulted in hailstorms being reported across a large geographical area this year too.

Rest of March

The IMD has, for now, said that the thunderstorm activity will ease temperatures. East and northeast India will continue to receive light to moderate rainfall in the remaining days of this month.

Two more approaching Western Disturbances are set to affect India in the next few days. The first stream will bring thunderstorms accompanied by gusty winds and moderate rainfall, particularly over sub-Himalayan West Bengal and Sikkim till March 24. The second stream can cause very heavy rainfall over Sikkim and Gangetic West Bengal till early next week.

The severe weather will especially affect the western Himalayan region and northeast India. The plains of northwest, central and eastern India will see light to moderate rainfall till the end of March. Above normal rainfall is likely over Telangana, coastal Andhra Pradesh, Kerala, and Mahe.

KEY HIGHLIGHTS

Context of the News

- March 2026 witnessed abnormal weather variability across India.
- Heatwave conditions appeared unusually early in north and west India.
- This was followed by thunderstorms, hailstorms, and rainfall, cooling temperatures.
- The India Meteorological Department (IMD) attributed this to:
 - Successive Western Disturbances
 - Interaction with moisture-bearing winds
- Such variability indicates increasing climate instability and changing seasonal patterns.

Key Points

- Western Disturbances (WDs): Extra-tropical cyclones originating near the Mediterranean region.
- Travel eastward affecting north and northwest India.
- Increased frequency and intensity observed.
- Cyclonic Circulation: Developed in lower troposphere.
- Leads to convergence of winds → thunderstorms & hailstorms.
- Moisture Interaction: Moist winds from Bay of Bengal & Arabian Sea combine with cold winds.
- Results in severe convective activity.
- Rainfall Variability: East & Northeast India: Excess rainfall
- Central India: Deficit persists
- All-India pattern: Shift from deficit to surplus
- Seasonal Features: March = transition month (winter → summer)
- Associated with instability and local storms
- Eastern India: Nor'westers (Kalbaisakhi storms)
- Impacts: Damage to rabi crops (wheat, mustard)
- Rise in lightning incidents
- Disruption in agriculture and daily life

Static Linkages

- Western Disturbances linked to Subtropical Westerly Jet Stream.
- Thunderstorms formed due to convective instability.
- Hail formation in cumulonimbus clouds with strong updrafts.
- Climate variability influenced by ENSO, global warming.
- India's rainfall influenced by tropical-extratropical interactions.
- Agricultural cycles depend on seasonal predictability.

Critical Analysis

Concerns

- Agricultural vulnerability: Hailstorms damage standing crops → income loss
- Climate uncertainty: Increasing unpredictability in seasonal cycles
- Disaster risks: Lightning, storms, localized flooding
- Regional imbalance: Uneven rainfall distribution

Opportunities

- Improved short-term weather prediction
- Opportunity to shift towards climate-resilient agriculture
- Strengthening disaster preparedness systems

Challenges

- Weak last-mile weather communication
- Limited insurance coverage (PMFBY gaps)
- Inadequate urban drainage infrastructure
- Low adoption of climate-smart practices

Way Forward

- Enhance localized weather forecasting and dissemination
- Promote climate-resilient crop varieties
- Strengthen crop insurance coverage and awareness
- Expand agro-advisory services using digital platforms
- Integrate climate risk into district planning
- Improve urban flood management systems
- Implement National Action Plan on Climate Change (NAPCC) effectively

In West Asia, an unknown endgame, a distant peace, and missing statesmen

WARS ALWAYS follow a single fundamental rule. You know where to start, but you never control how they end. The ongoing conflict in the Middle East is just another. All three key protagonists — Iran, Israel, and the US — are signalling that they are “winning”. In what is supposed to be his first Nowruz — the pre-Islamic Persian New Year — message, the new Supreme Leader, Mojtaba Khamenei, claimed that Iran has dealt a “dizzying blow” to its enemies and that “the enemy has been defeated”. Israel’s Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu claimed that after 20 days of operations, “Iran today has no ability to enrich uranium and no ability to produce ballistic missiles”. US President Donald Trump, who has been claiming that the war was progressing faster than planned, signalled that the conflict is “winding down”. The Middle East, a land of prophecies and promises, has a unique quality. Nothing happens until it really happens. Three weeks since the assassination of Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, where do we stand today? At least 14 countries are directly involved in the conflict, causing significant global repercussions. The war has already shattered several taboos and unthinkables. The killings of the Supreme Leader, security chief Ali Larjani, and several other key Iranian military figures have been devastating for the regime. This has resulted in two conflicting outcomes. One, the long-anticipated collapse of the regime has not occurred, at least not yet. And two, the conflict has weakened central authority and

loosened decision-making, giving more power to local authorities — those who control resources decide the targets for attack. The long-feared closure of the Strait of Hormuz, the strategically crucial chokepoint, has occurred. It was accompanied by Iranian energy infrastructure being targeted by the US and Israel, followed by Iranian retaliations against Arab energy assets. Both actions caused a significant supply disruption, resulting in a sharp increase in oil prices, which many expect will soon hit \$200 per barrel. Although bunkers provide safety, the daily lives of ordinary Israelis have also been severely disrupted by a volley of attacks. Israel has yet to achieve, and is unlikely to develop, a foolproof firewall system against incoming Iranian projectiles. Once the dust settles, what are the likely outcomes? One, the Gulf Arab countries neighbouring Iran will need to reassess their policies and strategies, especially considering their failure to safeguard the security of their citizens and large expatriate populations. They will be forced to rethink their social contract. As shown by the Arab Spring protests, monarchies tend to be more responsive and accommodating to popular moods than republican regimes. But this time, the challenge is herculean. The GCC countries, including former allies like Oman and Qatar, will need to reevaluate their relationships with Tehran. If the US couldn’t serve as the dependable security provider the Gulf monarchies had expected, their strategy of ap-



P R KUMARASWAMY

peasement towards Iran has also failed completely. They will have to go back to the drawing board and start over. An unfortunate and unintended outcome will be the fate of Shia minorities in Gulf Arab countries. After being marginalised for a long time, especially following the Islamic Revolution, their situation had begun to improve slightly in recent years. The recent discovery of Iranian sympathisers and sleeper cells indicates that Gulf Arab countries, particularly Bahrain and Saudi Arabia, will view their Shia populations with increased suspicion and mistrust. The Arab Shias will be compelled to demonstrate their unwavering loyalty to their rulers and the state. Two, the US and Israel will have to re-evaluate their decapitation strategy aimed at triggering regime change in Iran. They will have to review the effectiveness and efficiency of their weapon systems. Although some regional countries benefit from Iran’s diminished military power, few have openly supported, let alone participated in, Operation Epic Fury. Even nations whose energy supply depends on the Strait of Hormuz are hesitant to join the US in keeping the strait open. Therefore, the US and Israel will need to reassess their regional strategy. Three, the million-dollar question revolves around Iran. While the regime has shown its survival instincts and resilience in facing and responding to aggression, its future is more uncertain now than it was a few weeks ago. The regime’s “survival” comes at a significant

cost, not only militarily but also socially. Iranian proxies are weaker than ever before. Hamas is more eager to work towards rebuilding Palestinian territories, and anger against Hezbollah has unified the Lebanese government and people towards a potential reconciliation with Israel. The weakening of domestic military capabilities has also reduced the clergy’s ability to impose its authority. The office of Velayat-e Faqih is crucial to the regime’s survival in Iran. However, dynastic succession and the appointment of someone with limited and unproven judicial expertise have greatly weakened the authority of the Supreme Leader. Four, since the current conflict began with the US-Israel killing of Khamenei, it is natural and unavoidable that Arab anger towards them will emerge, and there may even be pressure to reconSIDER the Abraham Accords. At the same time, Israel alone will not shoulder all the blame. The Arab states and the Arab street are equally angry and upset with the Islamic Republic. This will create a challenge for Iran. Although its arsenal might give it military dominance, reckless attacks on Arab infrastructure will be politically costly for Iran in the long run. While everyone, including the main leaders, wants an early resolution to the growing conflict, no country or group can get the parties to the negotiation table. Noises are often inversely related to influence, and there are fewer statements to help us progress. Therefore, there is no early end in sight to the ongoing Iran conflict.

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- India’s energy security and import dependence (Economic Survey, NITI Aayog).
- Balance of Power theory in international relations.
- Role of diaspora in India’s foreign policy (MEA data).

Critical Analysis Positives

- Weakening of hostile non-state actors may reduce proxy conflicts in the long term.
- Opportunity for diversification of global energy routes.

Negatives

- Sharp increase in oil prices → inflation, fiscal stress on India.
- Threat to Indian diaspora (~8 million in Gulf region).
- Disruption of trade routes impacting global supply chains.
- Risk of prolonged regional instability.

Stakeholders

- Iran: Regime survival but weakened authority.
- US & Israel: Tactical gains but strategic uncertainty.
- Gulf countries: Security vulnerabilities.
- India: Energy security, diaspora safety, strategic balancing.

Challenges

- Ensuring uninterrupted energy supply.
- Maintaining strategic neutrality in a polarized conflict.
- Managing inflationary pressures.
- Limited role of global institutions in conflict resolution.

Way Forward

- Diversify crude imports and strengthen strategic petroleum reserves.
- Accelerate transition to renewable energy (National Solar Mission, Green Hydrogen Mission).
- Strengthen maritime security cooperation (QUAD, IONS).
- Enhance diplomatic engagement with all stakeholders in West Asia.
- Prepare evacuation and crisis-response mechanisms for diaspora.
- Promote multilateral conflict resolution mechanisms.

KEY HIGHLIGHTS

Context of the News

- Ongoing escalation in West Asia involving Iran, Israel, and the United States with direct military confrontations and targeted strikes.
- Assassination of Iran’s top leadership and military officials has intensified instability but has not led to regime collapse.
- Closure of the Strait of Hormuz causing major disruption in global oil supply chains and sharp rise in crude prices.
- Expansion of conflict with involvement of multiple countries, indicating regional spillover.
- Weakening of Iran-backed non-state actors and shifting regional geopolitical alignments.

Key Points

- Strait of Hormuz accounts for ~20% of global petroleum trade (EIA data).
- Oil price volatility directly impacts India’s import bill (India imports ~85% of crude oil – Economic Survey).
- Decapitation strategy (targeting leadership) has limited effectiveness in regime change.
- GCC countries reassessing security dependence on external powers like the US.
- Increased sectarian polarization (Shia minorities in Gulf region).
- Possible strain on regional agreements such as normalization initiatives in West Asia.
- Shift from proxy warfare to direct interstate conflict.

Static Linkages

- Strategic importance of West Asia due to hydrocarbons and sea lanes (NCERT XII – Contemporary World Politics).
- Concept of geopolitical chokepoints (Strait of Hormuz, Bab-el-Mandeb, Suez Canal).

While everyone, including the main leaders, wants an early resolution to the growing conflict, no country or group can get the parties to the negotiation table

Youth suicides tell a grim story that society, policy must heed



VIKRAM PATEL

EARLIER THIS month, two sisters, aged 25 and 23, ended their lives at their home in a Rajasthan village, hours before their families had arranged their weddings. They were teachers at the local primary school. The two seem to have followed the footsteps of a long line of young people, especially women, who have ended their lives when faced with being married off against their wishes. Could there be a more tragic or cruel example of the waste of a human life?

Suicidal behaviour is shaped by social and economic conditions, in particular related to poverty, violence and exclusion, rather than individual psychopathology alone. Yet, this knowledge overlooks a major driver of youth suicide in India — the abyss between what young people aspire to and what society permits them to achieve. This may well be the reason for the paradox that the highest suicide rates are observed in the most developed states, notably Tamil Nadu and Kerala, while the lowest rates are reported at the other end of the development spectrum, in Bihar.

Our work in the Million Death Study and data from the National Crime Research Bureau reveal that death by suicide is a leading cause of mortality in young people, and two-thirds of all such female deaths occur before the age of 25. Youth is a phase of life particularly vulnerable to self-harm behaviours that intersect with the dramatic life transitions.

In India, this collides with dramatic social change, which pits the dreams of young people against unbending social norms. Several laws across the country limit the ability of young people to love a person of their choice.

Emile Durkheim, the French sociologist, argued that suicide is a social phenomenon. How well individuals are integrated into society and are regulated by its norms influence suicidal behaviour. Two types of deaths by suicide that he described over a century ago are particularly resonant in India today. Anomic suicides, which occur during periods of rapid social or economic change, when norms are disrupted, and desires become unbounded or frustrated. And, fatalistic suicides which occur in situations of oppressive

discipline where individuals see no hope of changing their circumstances.

What does this mean for policies that aim to reduce youth suicides? We can look across our border for a clue. Across multiple analyses, the dramatic fall in China's suicide rate since the 1990s is explained not by mental health services but by large-scale structural changes — economic development, urbanisation and social transformation in rural areas — which collectively reduced exposure to intense social strain, particularly for women. In short, death by suicide among youths will not be prevented by investing only in mental health care, as important as this is for people struggling with mental health problems, but by building a society where young people's aspirations — for high-quality education, a secure occupation with adequate income, the opportunity to love and live with the person of their choice — are respected.

These are as much societal and political choices as family and personal choices. Across history, deaths by suicide have a political context, as evidenced by deaths by suicide in colleges, in particular among Dalit youth. Oppressive social norms are driving our youth to choose death when faced with a life which is not of their choice. Preventing such deaths will need societal transformation, where social class, caste, gender and religious identities do not become drivers of othering.

Today, laws seek to prohibit live-in relationships, restrict interfaith and inter-caste marriages, and do not offer enough space for same-sex relationships. It is important to mobilise diverse voices in our communities, from faith leaders to politicians, from young people to mental health professionals, to turn these tragic deaths into a catalyst for initiatives for social change.

To choose to die because of oppression by one's family or community constitutes a form of honour suicide — it's morally abhorrent as honour killings. We must raise our voices against this travesty, which goes against not only the dreams of our young people but also the spirit of the Constitution.

The writer is Paul Farmer professor at Harvard Medical School

Death by suicide among youths will not be prevented by investing only in mental health care, as important as this is, but by building a society where young people's aspirations are respected

KEY HIGHLIGHTS

Context of the News

- A recent case in Rajasthan where two young women died by suicide before forced marriages highlights coercive social practices.
- Suicide is a leading cause of death among youth in India, particularly among women below 25 (NCRB).
- Higher suicide rates in relatively developed states indicate a link between rising aspirations and restrictive social norms.

Key Points

- Suicide among youth is influenced by social, economic and cultural factors, not just mental illness.
- Aspirational gap: mismatch between education/exposure and limited freedom in personal choices (marriage, career).
- Gendered dimension:
 - Women face forced marriages, honour-based restrictions, and lack of autonomy.
- Durkheim's classification:
 - Anomic: due to rapid social change and breakdown of norms.
 - Fatalistic: due to excessive control and oppression.
- Regional paradox:
 - Developed states show higher suicides due to greater awareness + unmet aspirations.
- Comparative insight:
 - China reduced suicide rates through structural reforms (urbanisation, economic growth, social mobility).

Static Linkages

- Right to life includes dignity, autonomy, and choice.
- Equality before law and prohibition of discrimination.
- Role of patriarchy, caste, and social institutions.
- Social change vs traditional norms conflict.
- Demographic dividend depends on youth well-being.

Critical Analysis

Key Issues

- Structural oppression (caste, gender, family control) limits individual choice.
- Laws and social norms sometimes restrict inter-caste, inter-faith, and self-choice marriages.
- Mental health approach alone is insufficient; ignores root social causes.
- Youth suicides reflect failure of inclusive development.

Stakeholders

- Youth (especially women, Dalits, minorities)
- Families and communities
- State and judiciary
- Civil society and mental health professionals

Way Forward

- Strengthen social reforms ensuring freedom of choice in marriage and life decisions.
- Promote gender equality and dismantle patriarchal norms.
- Integrate mental health with social policy interventions.
- Improve education, employment and social mobility opportunities.
- Community-level awareness involving local leaders, educators, and civil society.
- Ensure strict enforcement of laws protecting individual liberty and dignity.

Coming up, war's downstream effects

THE HEADLINE impact of the ongoing US-Israel versus Iran war in India has so far largely been limited to gas — LPG for cooking and LNG for industries. Within that, the shortages have been significant in specific segments such as commercial LPG consumers (restaurants, *dhabas*, canteens and also migrant labour households with no regular cylinder connections) and producers reliant on natural gas feedstock from fertilisers and petrochemicals to ceramics and sponge iron. On the other hand, the supply of petrol, diesel, piped and compressed natural gas for homes and vehicles has seen no major disruptions. The delivery of domestic LPG cylinders, too, has been maintained at pre-war levels, with the government claiming a reduction in panic bookings and no cases of dry-outs at any distributorships. In other words, the crisis has been managed to the extent possible — for now.

But if the war drags on, the second-order effects will start showing. The tiles and sanitaryware units in Gujarat's Morbi aren't the only ones that have shut. As gas supplies to petrochemical plants are curtailed, it would force cuts in production of polyethylene, polypropylene and polyvinyl chloride. That, in turn, will affect the manufacturers that convert these polymers, whether into bottles, buckets and pipes and fittings or virgin plastic film for milk pouches and other food and non-food packing materials. The same goes for polyester and other synthetic textile fibres, whose prices have moved up in tandem with crude. Much of the world's semiconductors come from Taiwan and South Korea. With their foundries overwhelmingly dependent on LNG and helium gas imports from West Asia, the war's downstream effects on smartphones, consumer electronics, automobiles and artificial intelligence — basically any industry powered by chips — is also a matter of time.

This war isn't just a demand shock like Covid-19 or an energy price shock that Russia's invasion of Ukraine triggered. It is rather more of a negative supply shock. Any such shock shifting the aggregate supply curve leftward can potentially both lower output and raise price levels in the economy ("stagflation"). During the pandemic, the government provided money and free food to millions, just as it slashed excise duties on transport fuels and increased the fertiliser subsidy outgo after the Russia-Ukraine war. The usual fiscal or monetary policy levers cannot work when supply chains have broken, with economic agents struggling to access both energy and shipping lanes. The only hope is that the war ends soon. Even if it does, one must prepare for more sluggish growth and structurally higher inflation in the immediate term.

KEY HIGHLIGHTS

Context of the News

- Ongoing conflict in West Asia (U.S.–Israel involvement) disrupting global energy supply chains.
- India facing localized shortages of LNG and commercial LPG.
- Impact concentrated in:
 - Commercial users (restaurants, migrant households)
 - Gas-based industries (fertilisers, petrochemicals, ceramics, sponge iron)
- No major disruption in petrol, diesel, domestic LPG, PNG, CNG so far.
- Risk of long-term economic effects if conflict continues.

Key Points

- Energy Supply Pattern Household LPG protected via prioritisation.
- Industrial gas supply curtailed.
- Industrial Impact Production cuts in petrochemicals → plastics, packaging, textiles affected.
- Shutdowns in industrial clusters (e.g., ceramics).
- Global Linkages LNG disruption → affects semiconductor hubs (East Asia).
- Downstream effect on electronics, automobiles, AI industries.

- Economic Nature of Shock Classified as negative supply shock.
- Leads to:
 - Lower output
 - Higher inflation
- Creates stagflation risk.
- Policy Limitation Fiscal/monetary tools ineffective when physical supply chains disrupted.

Static Linkages

- India imports:
 - ~85% crude oil
 - ~50% natural gas (Economic Survey)
- Stagflation: seen during 1970s oil crisis.
- Aggregate Supply concept: leftward shift → inflation + low growth.
- PAHAL Scheme (DBT for LPG subsidy).
- Strategic Petroleum Reserves (SPR) for energy security.
- Natural Gas Allocation Policy prioritizes fertiliser and CGD sector.

Critical Analysis

Positives

- Essential fuel supply remains stable.
- Government ensured prioritisation of household consumption.

Challenges

- Industrial slowdown → MSME stress, job loss.
- Rising input costs → cost-push inflation.
- High import dependence → vulnerability.
- Global supply chain interdependence amplifies risks.

Key Issue

- Emergence of stagflation:
 - Inflation ↑
 - Growth ↓

Way Forward

- Diversify energy import sources.
- Expand strategic reserves (oil & gas).
- Promote renewable energy & green hydrogen.
- Boost domestic gas production.
- Strengthen supply chain resilience (PLI, semiconductor mission).
- Provide targeted support to affected industries.

To prevent fire tragedies, address systemic failures

FIRE PREPAREDNESS is a well-developed discipline in many parts of the world. Yet, outbreak after outbreak has exposed the failure to draw from its insights while designing public places, housing colonies, shopping complexes, cinema halls and hospitals in the country. Two tragedies last week exposed the appallingly low priority accorded to basic safety measures in Indian cities. A defunct fireproofing system, a delayed call to the fire brigade and poorly designed fire exits were among the factors that snuffed out 12 lives after a blaze in the ICU unit of a hospital in Cuttack, Odisha. Less than 72 hours later, nine members of a family lost their lives after a fire gutted a commercial-cum-residential building in a congested locality in southwest Delhi. Preliminary investigations have revealed familiar violations and abdications: A large amount of combustible material stored within the premises, precious time lost because the four-storey structure had only one entry and exit, and a malfunctioning hydraulic crane that delayed firefighting operations.

The National Building Code has detailed directions on installing fire alarms, providing sprinkler systems and designing safe evacuation routes. The Code, as well as the National Disaster Management Authority, also lays down specific guidelines to shield healthcare centres from fires. The real problem, however, lies in enforcement. In most Indian cities, including Delhi, commercial entities exist cheek by jowl with residential quarters. In many cases, shops, workshops and warehouses occupy the lower floors while families live above. Ensuring safety amid such mixed land use requires exceptional vigilance from civic agencies. Yet fire audits are, at best, once-in-a-few-years exercises, and the electricity load of buildings is rarely recalibrated to reflect changing use. Building owners often alter the original design of structures, frequently eliminating fire escape routes. Factory machinery overloads ageing wiring systems, heightening their vulnerability to short circuits. Policymakers, too, appear to have learnt little from studies that underline the need to budget for a safety buffer in the initial power load of non-residential buildings — in hospitals, which have a complex environment, with vulnerable patients, hazardous chemicals and sensitive equipment, the consequences of such negligence can be catastrophic.

The Odisha government has suspended four officials and a probe into the Delhi tragedy is underway. Justice must certainly be served in these cases. But beyond fixing individual culpability, it is high time that the larger systemic failures that lead to avoidable fatalities are confronted with seriousness and urgency.

KEY HIGHLIGHTS

Context of the News

- Fire accident in an ICU of a hospital in Cuttack, Odisha led to multiple fatalities.
- Another fire in a commercial-cum-residential building in Delhi caused deaths of a family.
- Both incidents exposed:
 - Non-functional fire safety systems
 - Inadequate evacuation infrastructure
 - Delayed emergency response
- Highlights systemic failure in enforcement of fire safety norms in urban areas.

Key Points

- National Building Code (NBC), 2016:
 - Prescribes standards for fire-resistant construction, fire exits, alarms, and sprinklers.
- NDMA Guidelines on Fire Safety (2016):
 - Focus on prevention, preparedness, and mitigation, especially for hospitals and public buildings.
- Major Issues:
 - Mixed land use increasing fire vulnerability.
 - Irregular fire audits and weak compliance.
 - Illegal structural modifications removing escape routes.
 - Electrical overloading as a major cause of fires (NCRB data).
 - Inadequate capacity of fire services.
- Urban Governance Gap:
 - Poor enforcement by municipal authorities.
 - Lack of accountability mechanisms.

Static Linkages

- Right to life includes safety and protection from hazards.
- Fire services fall under State List.
- Urban Local Bodies responsible for building regulation and safety.
- Disaster management emphasizes mitigation and preparedness.
- Concept of planned urban development and zoning regulations.

Critical Analysis

Issues

- Implementation deficit despite existence of frameworks.
- Weak urban planning and unregulated constructions.
- Poor coordination among agencies.
- Lack of fire safety awareness.
- Under-equipped fire services.

Implications

- Loss of life and property.
- Increased vulnerability of hospitals and dense urban settlements.
- Erosion of public trust in governance.

Way Forward

- Strict enforcement of fire safety norms with regular audits.
- Strengthening capacity of fire services.
- Mandatory compliance linked to building approvals.
- Retrofitting of old buildings with safety infrastructure.
- Public awareness and mock drills.
- Accountability mechanisms for officials and builders.