

# DAILY NEWSP APER ANALYSIS

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**CHANAKYA IAS ACADEMY  
SECTOR 25 CHANDIGARH**

# SC status 'only for Hindus, Buddhists, Sikhs'

Top court says conversion to any other religion will lead to loss of Scheduled Caste status

Petitioner filed an appeal under the SC Act of 1989, alleging he suffered repeated attacks and caste slurs

HC had held that the petitioner could not claim protection under SC Act as he is a Christian now

Krishnadhas Rajagopal  
NEW DELHI

The Supreme Court on Tuesday held in a judgment that a person professing any religion other than Hinduism, Buddhism, or Sikhism should not be considered a member of a Scheduled Caste community.

The court concluded that conversion to any other religion would result in "immediate and complete loss of Scheduled Caste status from the moment of conversion, regardless of birth".

A Bench of Justices Prashant Kumar Mishra and Manoj Kumar Mishra invoked Clause 3 of the Constitution (Scheduled Castes) Order, 1950, which mandates that "no person who professes a religion different from Hinduism shall be deemed to be a member of a Scheduled Caste".

Sikh religion was added to the ambit of Clause 3 in 1956. The provision was further amended in 1990 to include persons professing Buddhism.

"This bar under Clause 3 of the Constitution (Scheduled Castes) Order, 1950 is categorical and absolute," Justice Mishra, who authored the judgment, interpreted the 1950 Order.

## Appeal by convert

The court was hearing an appeal filed by Chintada Anand, who was born a Hindu-Madiga (Scheduled Caste) but converted to Christianity to become a pastor.

Mr. Anand had filed a case under the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act of 1989 after he alleged that he had suffered repeated attacks and caste slurs.

The Andhra Pradesh

## Identity question

The top court said that a person professing a religion other than those mentioned in Clause 3 cannot be part of a scheduled caste

- Clause 3 of the Constitution (Scheduled Castes) Order, 1950, mandates that "no person who professes a religion different from Hinduism shall be deemed to be a member of a Scheduled Caste"
- The Sikh religion was added to the ambit of Clause 3 in 1956
- The provision was further amended in 1990 to include persons professing Buddhism
- The top court observed that the "bar in Clause 3 is categorical and absolute"



High Court, in a decision in April last year, quashed the criminal proceedings on the ground that Mr. Anand could no longer claim protection under the 1989 Act as he professed Christianity.

The top court drew attention to the term "profess" in Clause 3 of the 1950 Order.

"The term 'profess' connotes to publicly declare or practice a religion. Its essence lies in the open avowal of one's religious beliefs in a manner discernible to the public at large. It is not merely a question of personal belief or private conviction, but requires an outward manifestation of one's faith. Christianity, by its very theological foundation, does not recognise or incorporate the institution of caste," Justice Mishra agreed with the High Court.

The top court said a convert who did not profess any of the three religions – Hinduism, Buddhism, and Sikhism – in Clause 3 of the 1950 Order could not claim any "statutory benefit, protection, reservation or entitlement" of a Scheduled Caste (SC) member. Justice Mishra said the bar admitted no exceptions.

"A person who professes and practices such religion for personal, social and spiritual purposes cannot, in law, assert membership of a Scheduled Caste for the purpose of securing statutory benefits. The two positions are mutually exclusive and contrary to the Constitutional scheme,"

Justice Mishra observed. A person claiming to have "re-converted" to Hinduism, Sikhism, or Buddhism must "cumulatively and conclusively establish" clear proof of his earlier caste, provide credible and unimpeachable evidence of bona fide re-conversion to the original religion; and show satisfactory evidence that members of his original caste have accepted and assimilated him into the community.

The court said renunciation of the new religion by the convert should translate to the actual adoption and observance of the customs, usages, practices, rituals, and religious obligations of the original caste.

**Scheduled Tribes Order**  
The judgment also dealt with the Constitution (Scheduled Tribes) Order, 1950, which did not pre-

scribe religion-based exclusion as in the case of the Scheduled Caste community. Justice Mishra said a person could claim benefits under the Constitution (ST) Order, 1950, only if he or she continued to belong to that particular tribe "in substance".

"If, due to conversion or long-term abandonment of tribal customs, his/her tribal identity is in doubt, that question becomes a factual matter to be determined at trial. If it is proved that the person in question has completely renounced himself from the customs, rituals and other traits of his tribe, and has assimilated into the converted religion following the practices and customs of that particular religion, a reasonable inference can be drawn that such a person shall not be considered a part of the tribe," the court held.

The court said renunciation of the new religion by the convert should translate to the actual adoption and observance of the customs, usages, practices, rituals, and religious obligations of the original caste.

## KEY HIGHLIGHTS

### Context of the News

- The Supreme Court held that conversion to religions other than Hinduism, Sikhism, or Buddhism leads to loss of Scheduled Caste (SC) status.
- Judgment based on Clause 3 of the Constitution (Scheduled Castes) Order, 1950.
- Case involved a Dalit individual who converted to Christianity and sought protection under the SC/ST Act, 1989.
- Court upheld that SC benefits are not available post-conversion to non-recognized religions.

### Key Points

- Legal Basis:
  - Clause 3 restricts SC status to Hindus (1950), Sikhs (1956), Buddhists (1990).
- Conversion Effect:
  - Immediate and complete loss of SC status upon conversion.
- Interpretation of "Profess":
  - Requires public declaration and practice of religion.
- No Exception Rule:
  - SC benefits (reservation, protection laws) cannot coexist with non-recognized religious identity.
- Reconversion Conditions:
  - Proof of:
    - Original caste
    - Genuine reconversion
    - Acceptance by caste community
- ST Distinction:
  - No religion-based restriction for STs
  - Focus on tribal identity, customs, and continuity

### Static Linkages

- Article 341 – Identification of Scheduled Castes

- Article 342 – Identification of Scheduled Tribes
- Articles 15(4), 16(4) – Affirmative action
- SC/ST (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989
- Protection of Civil Rights Act, 1955
- Concept of caste-based disability (NCERT Sociology)
- Indra Sawhney Case (1992) – Reservation jurisprudence
- Presidential Orders vs Parliamentary amendment

### Critical Analysis

#### Positives

- Ensures clarity and uniformity in SC eligibility
- Prevents misuse of reservation benefits
- Aligns with existing constitutional framework

#### Concerns

- Overlooks continuing caste discrimination after conversion
- Tension with freedom of religion (Article 25)
- Exclusion of Dalit converts from legal protections
- Raises questions on secularism vs religion-linked benefits

### Way Forward

- Revisit Constitution (SC) Order, 1950 through Parliament
- Use data-driven approach (NSSO, SECC) to assess discrimination
- Debate religion-neutral affirmative action criteria
- Strengthen anti-discrimination framework beyond religion
- Balance social justice with constitutional morality

# Trump discusses Strait of Hormuz, conflict in West Asia during call with Modi

Kallol Bhattacharjee  
NEW DELHI

U.S. President Donald Trump on Tuesday spoke with Prime Minister Narendra Modi for the first time since the conflict erupted in West Asia and discussed the war that has killed at least six Indians in the region and impacted free movement of energy resources through the Strait of Hormuz.

"Received a call from President Trump and had a useful exchange of views on the situation in West Asia. India supports de-escalation and restoration of peace at the earliest. Ensuring that the Strait of Hormuz remains open, secure and accessible is essential for the whole world," said Mr. Modi in a post on X.

**'Agreed to stay in touch'**  
Tuesday saw the first conversation between the two leaders since the conflict in West Asia began on February 28. "We agreed to stay in touch regarding efforts towards peace and stability," Mr. Modi wrote.

The PM has been in contact with several leading interlocutors over the past four weeks as the U.S. and Israel hit Iran's energy hubs, prompting Iran to strike energy targets across the region. The attacks have disrupted the global energy market pushing prices of crude high and triggering uncertainty about availability of LPG in India and other energy-hungry economies.

U.S. Ambassador to India Sergio Gora also posted online about the conversation between the two lead-



## Rahul says India's foreign policy is 'compromised'

The Hindu Bureau  
NEW DELHI

India's foreign policy is Prime Minister Narendra Modi's personal policy and is being considered as a universal joke," Leader of the Opposition in the Lok Sabha Rahul Gandhi said on Tuesday, even as he targeted Mr. Modi for comparing the conflict in

West Asia and its fallout with the COVID-19 pandemic.

Mr. Gandhi, interacting with presspersons on the Parliament premises, said the country's foreign policy becomes compromised if the Prime Minister is compromised.

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ers saying that "they discussed the ongoing situation in the Middle East, including the importance of keeping the Strait of Hormuz open".

Officials here had been tracking the reported exchanges on a possible U.S.-Israel and Iran ceasefire through mediation conducted by several countries, including Pakistan. However, Iran has denied talks have been held with the Trump administration.

Russian oil  
The U.S. and India had been engaging on a bilateral trade pact before the war broke out. The trade

talks had advanced in February, months after Mr. Trump resorted to imposing punitive tariffs on India last year for purchasing Russian oil. India has paused the trade deal with the U.S. against the backdrop of the latest war.

However, as the global energy crisis deepened after the beginning of U.S.-Israel attacks on Iran and Iran's retaliation, the U.S. has relaxed the sanctions on purchase of Russian energy prompting India to purchase Russian crude once again.

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- India has engaged diplomatically with multiple stakeholders to ensure energy security and diaspora safety.
- India's stance:
  - Supports peaceful resolution.
  - Advocates freedom of navigation and global energy stability.

## Static Linkages

- India's energy imports and current account deficit linkage (Economic Survey).
- Concept of strategic chokepoints in global trade (NCERT Geography).
- Freedom of navigation under UNCLOS (United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea).
- Role of diaspora protection under Indian foreign policy.
- Impact of crude oil prices on inflation (CPI/WPI) and fiscal stability.
- India's strategic petroleum reserves (SPR) policy.
- Basics of sanctions and global trade regimes (WTO principles).

## Critical Analysis

### Advantages

- Reinforces India's strategic autonomy.
- Opportunity to secure discounted energy imports.
- Diplomatic engagement enhances India's global role.

### Challenges

- Overdependence on imports → economic vulnerability.
- Strait disruption → supply shock risk.
- Trade relations with U.S. may face friction.
- Safety of Indian diaspora in conflict zones.

## Way Forward

- Diversify crude import sources.
- Expand Strategic Petroleum Reserves.
- Accelerate renewable energy transition.
- Strengthen maritime security cooperation.
- Enhance crisis evacuation mechanisms for diaspora.

## KEY HIGHLIGHTS

### Context of the News

- Narendra Modi held a telephonic conversation with Donald Trump amid escalating conflict in West Asia.
- The conflict began on February 28, involving U.S.-Israel strikes on Iran's energy infrastructure and Iran's retaliatory attacks.
- The crisis has led to:
  - Death of at least six Indian nationals in the region.
  - Disruption of global energy supply chains, especially through the Strait of Hormuz.
- India emphasized de-escalation, peace restoration, and ensuring uninterrupted maritime energy routes.
- Ongoing geopolitical tensions have also impacted India-U.S. trade negotiations and global crude oil prices.

### Key Points

- The Strait of Hormuz handles ~20% of global petroleum liquids trade (as per U.S. EIA estimates).
- India imports ~85% of its crude oil requirement (Economic Survey data), making it highly vulnerable.
- The conflict has:
  - Increased crude oil price volatility.
  - Created uncertainty in LPG availability and domestic inflation.
- The U.S. has relaxed sanctions on Russian oil, allowing India to resume imports.

# Iran, Israel trade strikes despite Trump's claims of talks with leadership in Tehran

Associated Press  
DUBAI

Air strikes battered Iran, and Iranian missiles and drones targeted Israel's Tel Aviv and sites across West Asia on Tuesday, even as President Donald Trump said the United States was in talks with the Islamic Republic to end the war.

With thousands more U.S. Marines on their way to the Gulf, both sides firing barrages and Iran denying any negotiations are taking place, the war's tempo remained high a day after Mr. Trump delayed his self-imposed deadline for Iran to reopen the Strait of Hormuz. Tehran's chokehold on that crucial waterway has snarled international shipping, sent fuel prices skyrocketing, and threatened the world economy. Pakistan offered to host diplomatic talks, but Iran remained defiant,

vowing to fight "until complete victory".

Any talks between the U.S. and Iran would face monumental challenges. Many of Washington's shifting list of objectives – particularly over Iran's ballistic missile and nuclear programs – remain difficult to achieve. Meanwhile, it's not clear who in Iran's government would have the authority to negotiate as Israel has vowed to continue taking out leaders after killing several.

Israel's army on Tuesday said it had conducted a "large wave" of air strikes across several areas of Iran, which had earlier launched a "direct hit" on a building in an upscale area of Tel Aviv. It added that it carried out an extensive series of strikes on Iranian "production sites".

Iranian media reported that Israeli-U.S. strikes targeted two gas facilities and

a pipeline. "As part of the ongoing attacks carried out by the Zionist and American enemy, the gas administration building and the gas pressure regulation station on Kaveh Street in Isfahan were targeted," the Pars news agency said. It added that an attack also targeted the gas pipeline of the Khorramshahr power plant. Iran's death toll has surpassed 1,500, its Health Ministry has said.

## Tel Aviv hit

Iran also fired multiple waves of missiles at Israel. In Tel Aviv, a missile with a 100 kg warhead slammed into the city centre, blowing out windows of an apartment building. Four persons suffered minor wounds, rescue service workers said. Late on Tuesday, Israeli emergency services said a woman was killed in the north of the country following rocket

fire from Lebanon.

"It feels like you're a (sitting) duck, waiting for the missiles to hit you, or someone next to you," said Amir Hasid, emerging from a shelter.

In Kuwait, power lines were hit by air defence shrapnel, causing partial electricity outages for several hours. Bahrain said it was attacked with missiles and drones, the United Arab Emirates said air defence systems responded to similar attacks, and Saudi Arabia said it destroyed Iranian drones targeting its oil-rich Eastern Province.

In Israel, 15 people have been killed. At least 13 U.S. military members have been killed, along with more than a dozen civilians in the occupied West Bank and Gulf Arab states.

Iran has threatened to mine the Gulf if the U.S. appears to be on the verge of landing troops.

## KEY HIGHLIGHTS

### Context of the News

- Large-scale escalation between Iran and Israel involving air strikes, missile attacks, and drone warfare.
- Donald Trump indicated possible negotiations, though Iran denied talks.
- Closure/threat to Strait of Hormuz disrupted global oil supply chains.
- U.S. military buildup in the Gulf; rising involvement of regional players like Saudi Arabia, UAE, Bahrain.
- Civilian and military casualties rising across multiple countries in West Asia.

### Key Points

- Strategic chokepoint: Strait of Hormuz handles ~20% of global oil trade (IEA, EIA estimates).
- Energy shock: Supply disruptions led to sharp rise in crude oil prices → global inflation risks.
- Regional spillover: Missile/drone attacks reported in Kuwait, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, UAE.
- Military escalation: Israel targeting Iranian infrastructure; Iran retaliating with long-range missiles.
- Diplomatic deadlock: Conflicting positions on Iran's nuclear and missile programmes.
- Humanitarian impact:
  - Iran death toll >1500 (official estimates).
  - Casualties reported in Israel, Gulf countries, and U.S. forces.
- Threat of mining Gulf waters: Could paralyze maritime trade and violate international law.

### Static Linkages

- Strait of Hormuz: Narrow waterway between Persian Gulf and Gulf of Oman; critical for global energy security.
- India imports ~85% of crude oil; West Asia contributes ~60% (Economic Survey).

- UNCLOS (1982): Guarantees right of transit passage through international straits.
- OPEC nations dominate global oil supply; Iran is a key member.
- Concept of "Chokepoints" in geography: Hormuz, Malacca, Bab-el-Mandeb.
- Balance of Power theory in international relations.
- Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) framework and Iran's contested compliance.

### Critical Analysis

#### Implications for India

- Increase in oil import bill → Current Account Deficit (CAD) pressure
- Risk to Indian diaspora in West Asia
- Supply chain disruptions (energy, trade routes)

#### Global Concerns

- Threat to global energy security
- Risk of regional war turning into global conflict
- Disruption of maritime trade routes

#### Strategic Issues

- U.S.–Iran rivalry vs Israel's security concerns
- Weak global governance and ineffective diplomacy
- Increasing use of drones and missiles in warfare

### Way Forward

- Promote diplomatic resolution through multilateral forums
- Ensure freedom of navigation under UNCLOS
- Diversify India's energy sources and suppliers
- Strengthen Strategic Petroleum Reserves (SPR)
- Enhance evacuation and diaspora protection mechanisms
- Accelerate renewable energy transition

# SC flags long-term bias against women in the armed forces

The Bench headed by Chief Justice of India Surya Kant upheld permanent commission and pensionary benefits for batches of women officers in the Army, the Air Force and the Navy

Krishnadas Rajagopal  
NEW DELHI

The Supreme Court of India on Tuesday declared that systemic and long-held presumption that women officers had no substantive or long-term career in the armed forces led to an uneven playing field, crippling their chances for permanent commission.

A three-judge Bench headed by Chief Justice of India (CJI) Surya Kant upheld permanent commission and consequent pensionary benefits for batches of women officers in the Army, the Air Force, and the Navy. The court upheld the women officers' right to equal opportunity and treatment and dignity in three separate judgments, all authored by the Chief Justice.

**The judgment**  
The appellant-women officers were represented by senior advocates Rekha Palli, V. Mohana, and Meena Guruswamy, and advocates Pooja Dhar, Abhinav Shrestha, Anshuman Ashok and Sudhanshu S. Pandey. Additional Solicitor-General Aishwarya Bhati represented the Centre. The judgment found that the Annual Confidential Reports (ACRs) of Short Service Commission Women Officers (SSCWOs) were routinely assigned "average or



The SC upheld SSCWOs' right to equal career progression and permanent commission. PTI

an unequal playing field," Chief Justice Kant observed. He agreed with the SSCWOs that they were neither incentivised nor recommended for various career-enhancing courses during their service. The result was a diminished service profile. The court found they were victims of "the consequences of unequal opportunity structures" within the Armed Forces.

**SSCWO's Inclusion**  
"The inclusion of SSCWOs in the zone of consideration for PC is not a matter of discretion, but of Constitutional obligation. Any expectation to the contrary is inherently illegitimate. The claim made by the male SSCOs that they ought not to be considered alongside SSCWOs is liable to be outrightly and decisively rejected," the Supreme Court held. "In the instant case, when SSCWOs have been found to suffer the cumulative effects of an unfair evaluative regime, the invocation of the vacancy cap as a shield against remedial action would be unfair to sustain. Owing to this, the respondents' plea regarding the sanctity of the ceiling on vacancies falls flat," CJI Kant noted. It said the Armed Forces not hold any annual cap on PC vacancies "neither sacrosanct nor immutable".

ers (SSCWOs) were graded casually for years, without adjudging their suitability for career progression, affecting their overall comparative merit with their male counterparts. "Since they [SSCWOs] had no scope for career progression, the assessing officers graded their ACRs casually and gave them lower scores. This assumption resulted in a casual approach towards assessment, with higher grades being informally reserved for male SSCOs who were eligible for permanent commission (PC) and for whom such grades would materially affect their future prospects," Chief Justice Kant observed.

**Opportunities in past**  
The Supreme Court said women officers were routinely assigned "average or

middling scores". The cumulative consequence of the systemic low grading given to them, owing to no fault of theirs, found them in dire straits when events led to Supreme Court's multiple interventions and judgments upholding SSCWOs' right to equal career progress and PC in the Armed Forces. "This phenomenon (low grading) came back to haunt the SSCWOs as they were subsequently and quite abruptly placed in a competition for PC with their male counterparts, who did not undergo such hindrances in grading over the course of their decade-long service. It is, therefore, not surprising to us that the differential treatment meted out to officers 'with a future' in the Army and those deemed to be without one has resulted in

- Career Impact:
  - Women lacked access to training, incentives, and promotions, leading to weaker service profiles.
- Zone of Consideration:
  - Inclusion of SSCWOs for PC is a constitutional obligation, not discretion.
- Vacancy Cap Issue:
  - Court rejected the argument that vacancy ceilings limit granting PC.
  - Declared such caps not sacrosanct or immutable.
- Recognition of Structural Inequality:
  - Court acknowledged women were victims of "unequal opportunity structures".
- Outcome:
  - Directed fair consideration for PC and grant of pensionary benefits.

## KEY HIGHLIGHTS

### Context of the News

- The Supreme Court of India upheld Permanent Commission (PC) and pensionary benefits for women officers in the Army, Navy, and Air Force.
- A Bench led by CJI Surya Kant ruled that systemic discrimination and flawed evaluation practices created an unequal playing field.
- The case addressed grievances of Short Service Commission Women Officers (SSCWOs) regarding denial of career progression and unfair assessment.
- The judgment reinforces earlier rulings (e.g., 2020 SC judgment on women in Army command roles) on gender equality in armed forces.

### Key Points

- Violation of Equality: Court held that denial of fair opportunity violates Articles 14, 15, and 16 of the Constitution.
- Flawed Evaluation System:
  - ACRs (Annual Confidential Reports) of SSCWOs were casually graded.
  - Lower scores due to assumption of no long-term career prospects.
- Systemic Bias Identified:
  - Women officers received "average/middling" ratings.
  - Male officers were informally prioritized for higher grades and career-enhancing courses.

### Static Linkages

- Equality before law and equal protection of laws
- Prohibition of discrimination on grounds of sex
- Equality of opportunity in public employment
- Doctrine of substantive equality vs formal equality
- Role of judiciary in enforcing Fundamental Rights
- Civil-military relations and constitutional supremacy
- Evolution of women's participation in armed forces (global and Indian context)

### Critical Analysis

#### Pros

- Advances gender justice in uniformed services
- Corrects structural bias in institutions
- Improves representation & morale

#### Concerns

- Implementation gap due to military hierarchy resistance
- Operational preparedness debate (combat roles, standards)
- Need for objective evaluation reforms

### Way Forward

- Standardize transparent ACR system
- Ensure equal access to training & command roles
- Periodic institutional audits for bias
- Clear policy on women in combat roles

# Looking back at the lockdown, lessons in leadership

There are moments in public life when the familiar rhythms of governance are suddenly replaced by the need to pivot, make crucial decisions in the absence of precedent, and think on one's feet – without losing focus or compassion. The announcement of a nationwide lockdown on March 25, 2020, was one such moment. As the Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu, I found myself confronting a crisis unlike any we had experienced before, one that demanded swift decisions, constant vigilance, and, above all, a deep sense of responsibility towards every citizen.

## Getting the priorities right

In those early days, as I recall, the scale of the challenge was still unfolding. We did not fully understand what we were dealing with. COVID-19 was not merely a public health emergency; it was a disruption that touched every aspect of life – health care, livelihoods, supply chains and social stability. The State had to move quickly, even as information evolved and the path ahead remained uncertain. I often say that during that period, I was a crisis manager first and a Chief Minister later. Every decision had immediate consequences, and there was little room for error.

One of the first priorities was to ensure that the health-care system was ready to meet the long-pressed need for a strong public health infrastructure, but the pandemic tested its limits. We expanded hospital capacity, established dedicated COVID-19 care centres, and ensured the availability of essential equipment. Doctors, nurses, sanitation workers and frontline staff became the backbone of our response. I continue to recall their courage and commitment, often in the face of personal risk, as extraordinary. This is especially relevant now, as these same workers are protesting for their basic rights and the fulfilment of promises made to them by the present ruling party.

Equally critical was the management of the lockdown itself. The sudden halt of movement posed a complex challenge: how to contain the spread of the virus while ensuring that essential goods and services remained accessible. We worked closely with district administrations to maintain supply chains, regulate markets and prevent panic. This is where being hands-on and in constant touch with administrators at the district level proved invaluable. The public distribution system played a vital role in ensuring that no family went without basic necessities. Free rations, financial assistance and targeted



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welfare measures were introduced to support those most affected.

What remains with me from that time is the discipline and the resilience shown by the people of Tamil Nadu. Compliance with restrictions was not always easy, particularly for daily wage earners and small business owners. Yet, there was a collective understanding that these measures were necessary. Communication became a key tool – we made it a point to provide regular updates, address concerns transparently, and build trust during a time of fear and uncertainty.

## Localised decision making

Another important lesson was the value of decentralised governance. While policies were framed at the State level, their success depended on effective implementation at the district and local levels. District Collectors, police officials, health officers, and local bodies worked tirelessly, often under immense pressure. Their ability to adapt to changing circumstances ensured that the response remained agile and responsive.

At the same time, the lockdown revealed the vulnerabilities within our society. Migrant workers, informal sector labourers and small entrepreneurs were among the hardest hit. The experience reinforced the need for stronger social safety nets and more inclusive economic planning. A crisis of this magnitude does not affect all sections equally, and good governance must account for these disparities.

I am often asked what the toughest decisions were during that period. The most difficult choices involved balancing public health with economic activity. Prolonged restrictions could not be sustained indefinitely, yet premature relaxation carried its own risks. We had to calibrate our approach carefully, guided by data and expert advice. It is worth noting that when uniformed critics and detractors highlight past data to showcase their achievements, they often overlook those crucial COVID-19 years, when the phased reopening of the economy was undertaken with caution, always keeping in mind the need to protect lives while restoring livelihoods.

Technology played an important role during this period. From tracking cases to disseminating information, digital tools helped improve coordination and efficiency. However, the pandemic also highlighted the digital divide, reminding us that access to technology is not uniform and that governance must remain inclusive.

Looking back, one of the most significant

lessons is the importance of preparedness. While no state could have fully anticipated a crisis of this scale, the experience underscores the need for robust contingency planning, sustained investment in health care, and the ability to respond quickly to emerging threats. Public health must remain a priority, not only during emergencies but also as a continuous commitment.

Another lesson is the value of cooperation between governments, institutions and communities. A crisis of this nature cannot be managed in isolation. It requires coordination at multiple levels and a willingness to work together towards a common goal. Differences in political perspective must give way to a shared sense of purpose when the well-being of the people is at stake.

For me, personally, the lockdown was a period of intense responsibility and reflection. Leadership, in such times, is not about visibility but about decision-making, which is often difficult, sometimes unpopular, but always guided by the larger public interest. It is about remaining calm under pressure, listening to experts, and staying connected to realities on the ground.

The management of the lockdown in Tamil Nadu may not always have been widely spoken about, but it was marked by quiet efficiency and a collective effort that deserves recognition. It was not the work of any one individual, but of an entire system that came together in the face of an unprecedented challenge.

## Upon reflection

Today marks six years since the lockdown was imposed in India. We have, in many ways, left those difficult days behind. Masking is now largely a thing of the past, and the economy is on an upward trajectory. Yet, as we move forward, it is important not to lose sight of these lessons. The pandemic has left an enduring impact, but it has also provided an opportunity to strengthen our systems, rethink our priorities, and build a more resilient future.

History will remember this period not only for the challenges it posed, but also for the way we responded to them. Crisis comes unannounced, and when it does, it is experience, a calm head, and deep compassion for people that guide our decisions.

In Tamil Nadu, that response was defined by determination, coordination, and a shared commitment to protect lives.

And that, perhaps, is the most important lesson of all.

- Informal sector disruption
- Digital divide

## Static Linkages

- Disaster Management Act, 2005 – NDMA, SDMA roles
- Epidemic Diseases Act, 1897 – public health regulation
- Directive Principles – public health responsibility of State
- Federal structure – Centre-State coordination in emergencies
- Public Distribution System – food security mechanism
- 73rd & 74th Amendments – role of local bodies
- Concept of welfare state and social safety nets

## Critical Analysis

Positives:

- Early containment strategy slowed spread
- Strengthened public health infrastructure
- Effective use of welfare schemes
- Demonstrated cooperative federalism
- Boost to digital governance

Negatives:

- Sudden lockdown → migrant crisis
- Economic contraction, especially informal sector
- Inequality and digital divide widened
- Implementation gaps at local levels
- Over-centralization concerns

## Way Forward

- Strengthen public health systems
- Institutionalize pandemic preparedness plans
- Ensure portable social security (e.g., ONORC)
- Formalize informal workforce
- Reduce digital divide
- Enhance local governance capacity
- Promote data-driven policymaking
- Strengthen cooperative federalism

## KEY HIGHLIGHTS

### Context of the News

- India completed six years of the nationwide lockdown imposed on 25 March 2020 to contain COVID-19.
- It was an unprecedented administrative and public health response affecting all sectors – health, economy, and governance.
- The period highlighted challenges of crisis governance, federal coordination, and social protection.

### Key Points

- Legal basis:
  - Disaster Management Act, 2005 (nationwide lockdown enforcement)
  - Epidemic Diseases Act, 1897 (disease control measures)
- Governance response:
  - Rapid expansion of health infrastructure (ICU beds, oxygen, isolation centres)
  - Coordination between Centre, States, and District Administration
- Welfare measures:
  - Free food grains via PDS (PMGKAY)
  - Direct Benefit Transfers (DBT)
- Administrative features:
  - Decentralized implementation (District Collectors, local bodies)
  - Data-driven and phased reopening strategy
- Technology use:
  - Contact tracing, telemedicine, digital monitoring
- Key issues:
  - Migrant workers crisis

# Deepening global corruption as a pointer for India

The Corruption Perceptions Index 2025 (CPI) published by Transparency International delivers an unmistakable message. Corruption is not receding. It is deepening in ways that erode democratic accountability and hollow out public institutions. For the first time in over a decade, the global average score has dropped to 42 out of 100, with 122 of 182 countries scoring below 50. Only five countries now score above 80, compared with 12 a decade ago. The direction is clear and troubling. Where oversight weakens and civic freedoms narrow, corruption perceptions worsen.



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**What the data show**  
India's position must be assessed within this global decline. With a score of 39 and a rank of 91 out of 182 countries in the 2025 index, India remains in the lower half of the table. Over the past decade, India's score has fluctuated narrowly between 38 and 41. In 2014, it stood at 38. A decade later, it remains broadly similar. For a country that has emerged as the world's fourth-largest economy and aspires to achieve developed nation status by 2047, this stagnation is revealing. While the economic scale has expanded dramatically over time, the governance perception has not kept pace.

Global comparisons sharpen the picture. China scores 42. Sri Lanka stands close to India's level, while Bangladesh and Pakistan score lower. India performs better than some of its neighbours, yet it trails several upper-middle-income democracies and many East Asian and European countries that once operated at comparable development levels. Those countries strengthened institutional independence, transparency frameworks and regulatory predictability over time. Their CPI trajectories reflect sustained reform.

Why does India's CPI score matter? First, the index measures perceived public sector integrity rather than recorded incidents. It draws on 13 independent data sources that assess public procurement, regulatory enforcement, judicial effectiveness and institutional safeguards. A score of 39 signals persistent weaknesses in

transparency, oversight and accountability. Perceptions influence investment decisions, sovereign risk assessments and long-term capital allocation. Governance credibility has now become a competitive economic variable.

Second, corruption carries measurable economic costs. It increases transaction uncertainty, raises compliance expenses and diverts entrepreneurial energy toward navigating rent-seeking systems rather than creating value. These distortions reduce productivity and discourage investment. A widely cited global estimate suggests that corruption costs at least 5% of global GDP annually, equivalent to more than \$2.6 trillion in lost output each year. This figure includes bribes, illicit financial flows and inefficiencies in public spending. While precise quantification varies across studies, the scale of the drag is undeniable.

For developing economies such as India, the impact is significant. Research linked to multilateral institutions suggests that corruption may cost India roughly 0.5% of GDP annually in direct terms, with broader estimates placing total losses between 1% and 1.5% of GDP once indirect growth effects are included. At current output levels, this represents tens of billions of dollars each year. These are resources that could finance infrastructure, health, education or industrial upgrading.

**Hurdles in compliance architecture**  
A third structural concern lies in the complexity of India's compliance architecture. A recent report indicates that entrepreneurs operate under the shadow of 26,134 imprisonment provisions embedded across India's business regulations. The scale of the burden becomes clearer at the industry level. Even as the Union Budget 2025-27 proposes the Biopharma Strategy for Healthcare Advancement through Knowledge, Technology and Innovation (SHAHTI) initiative with an allocation of ₹10,000 crore over five years, a pharmaceutical start-up with a single manufacturing unit is required to navigate 998 separate compliance obligations before commencing operations, with nearly 49% bearing potential criminal liability. Such extensive

criminalisation within regulatory frameworks not only raises the cost of doing business but also expands discretionary power in ways that can inadvertently create conditions for rent-seeking.

## Encouraging trends

Yet, the picture is not uniformly bleak, as there are also positive counter-currents. India's digital public infrastructure has reduced leakages in certain welfare schemes through direct benefit transfers linked to bank accounts and digital identity. The Reserve Bank of India's Digital Payments Index (RBI DPI), with March 2018 as the base, has been tracking the extent of digitalisation of payments across the country since January 1, 2021. The index for September 2025 stands at 516.76 as against 493.22 for March 2025. The Goods and Services Tax network has increased formalisation and traceability in indirect taxation.

E-procurement portals and digital payment systems have reduced opportunities for some forms of rent-seeking. These reforms demonstrate that institutional design and the use of technology can reduce discretion. Corruption, therefore, is not merely a moral or legal problem. It is an economic constraint and a strategic vulnerability. It weakens fiscal efficiency, undermines regulatory credibility and reduces social trust. For a country that emissions are becoming a \$10 trillion+ economy within the next decade, governance quality cannot remain static. Rapid economic expansion without parallel institutional strengthening creates an imbalance.

The 2025 index should be read as a benchmark rather than a verdict. India possesses strong constitutional foundations, competitive elections, a capable judiciary and growing digital capacity. Even modest but sustained improvements in transparency, judicial efficiency, regulatory simplification and institutional independence could materially improve perceptions over time. Countries that climbed the CPI rankings did so through cumulative reform, not episodic crackdowns.

India's economic ascent has been decisive. Its governance evolution must now match that ambition with equal resolve.

- Positive developments:
  - Digital Public Infrastructure (DPI) and Direct Benefit Transfers (DBT) reducing leakages.
  - GST system improving tax transparency.
  - RBI's Digital Payments Index (516.76 in Sept 2025) shows rapid formalisation.

## Static Linkages

- Corruption undermines Rule of Law, Equality before Law, and Accountability mechanisms.
- Role of institutions like CAG, CVC, Lokpal, Judiciary in ensuring transparency.
- Concepts of Good Governance: Transparency, Accountability, Efficiency (2nd ARC).
- Impact of corruption on economic development, fiscal deficit, and public expenditure efficiency.
- Ease of Doing Business linked to regulatory simplification and reduced discretion.

## Critical Analysis

### Positives

- Expansion of digital governance reduces discretion.
- Institutional framework for accountability exists.
- Increasing formalisation of economy.

### Negatives

- Stagnant CPI score reflects slow governance reforms.
- Complex regulations increase rent-seeking opportunities.
- Weak enforcement and judicial delays.
- Adverse impact on investment climate and public trust.

## Way Forward

- Decriminalise minor economic offences and simplify compliance.
- Strengthen institutional independence and accountability mechanisms.
- Improve judicial efficiency and contract enforcement.
- Expand e-governance and data-driven monitoring systems.
- Ensure transparency in public procurement and political funding.

## KEY HIGHLIGHTS

### Context of the News

- Transparency International released the Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) 2025, indicating a worsening global trend in public sector corruption.
- The global average score declined to 42/100, with 122 out of 182 countries scoring below 50, reflecting weak accountability systems.
- India scored 39/100 and ranked 91st, showing stagnation over the past decade despite rapid economic growth.
- The report highlights that weak oversight, shrinking civic freedoms, and institutional inefficiencies worsen corruption perceptions globally.

### Key Points

- CPI measures perceived public sector corruption, not actual incidents, based on 13 independent data sources.
- India's score has remained in the 38–41 range over a decade, indicating limited governance improvement.
- Corruption imposes significant economic costs:
  - Globally: ~5% of GDP (~\$2.6 trillion annually).
  - India: estimated 0.5%–1.5% of GDP loss annually.
- India faces a complex compliance framework:
  - Over 26,000 imprisonment provisions in business laws.
  - A pharma startup may face ~998 compliance requirements, nearly half with criminal liability.

## Cowardly bully

### Trump should end the war and ask Israel to leave Iran alone

Donald Trump's decision to postpone attacks on Iran's power plants, 36 hours after issuing a 48-hour ultimatum to Tehran to reopen the Strait of Hormuz, is the clearest sign yet that the war is not going according to his plan. Over the past week, Mr. Trump has declared victory, claiming that U.S. and Israeli strikes had destroyed Iran's defence capabilities. Yet, Iran continues to launch missiles at Persian Gulf countries and Israel, while maintaining control over the Strait of Hormuz, which prevents Mr. Trump from extricating himself from a conflict whose economic costs are mounting globally. Since the war began on February 28, Iran has largely ignored Mr. Trump's threats, responding to escalation with counter-escalation. When the U.S. bombed Kharg Island, Iran struck American bases in the region. When Israel targeted South Pars, Iran hit energy facilities across Qatar, the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Israel. After the Natanz nuclear facility was struck, Tehran targeted Dimona, the Israeli town hosting its nuclear facilities. When Mr. Trump threatened strikes on Iran's power plants, Tehran warned of attacks on Gulf and Israeli energy assets and U.S. financial interests, forcing him to make a U-turn.

Before the war began, the U.S. and Israel had set ambitious objectives: force Tehran to shut down its nuclear programme and ship out the highly enriched uranium, cut off Iran's support for non-state militias in West Asia and dismantle its missile capabilities. Twenty-five days later, one of Mr. Trump's key priorities is to open the Strait of Hormuz, which was closed only after the war broke out. He does not have easy options to do so – he has to either talk to Tehran and make a deal or authorise a ground operation; reports suggest the U.S. has already despatched thousands of marines. Yet, Mr. Trump's U-turn on strikes on power plants indicates that he may be seriously weighing talks. Iran has dismissed Mr. Trump's claims that negotiations are underway. But President Masoud Pezeshkian has outlined conditions for ending the war: guarantees against future aggression; reparations for infrastructure damage; and recognition of Iran's 'legitimate rights' (which can be interpreted as sanctions relief). Mr. Trump, whose administration has already eased some sanctions on Iran's oil, could be looking for a deal, and Tehran could reciprocate if common ground is found. But for any diplomatic effort to progress, Mr. Trump must first rein in his ally Israel, which continues to pound Iran and Lebanon like an unhinged bully. The military path that he has embraced is showing clear limits. The least damaging way out for Mr. Trump is to strike a deal with Iran and get out of this war.

## KEY HIGHLIGHTS

### Context of the News

- U.S. President Donald Trump postponed planned strikes on Iran's power plants despite earlier issuing a 48-hour ultimatum to reopen the Strait of Hormuz.
- The ongoing conflict (since February 28) between the U.S.-Israel bloc and Iran has escalated with reciprocal attacks on military and energy infrastructure.
- Iran has maintained control over the Strait of Hormuz, disrupting global energy supply chains.
- Despite U.S. claims of weakening Iran's defence capabilities, Iran continues missile and drone strikes across West Asia.
- Diplomatic signals have emerged, with Iran outlining conditions for de-escalation, including sanctions relief and security guarantees.

### Key Points

- Strategic Importance of Strait of Hormuz:
  - Handles ~20–25% of global oil trade (Energy Information Administration estimates).

- Critical chokepoint for global energy security.
- Escalation Pattern:
  - U.S./Israel strikes → Iran retaliatory strikes on regional energy and military assets.
  - Conflict has spread to Gulf countries (Qatar, UAE, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait).
- Economic Impact:
  - Rising crude oil prices affecting global inflation.
  - Supply disruptions impacting energy-import dependent countries like India.
- Military Limitations:
  - Airstrikes alone insufficient to achieve strategic objectives.
  - Ground intervention risks prolonged conflict (Vietnam/Afghanistan parallels).
- Diplomatic Developments:
  - Iran demands:
    - Security guarantees
    - Reparations
    - Recognition of nuclear rights (linked to NPT debates)
  - U.S. exploring negotiations alongside limited sanctions easing.

### Static Linkages

- Strait of Hormuz as a major maritime chokepoint connecting the Persian Gulf to the Gulf of Oman.
- Freedom of navigation as part of customary international law and UNCLOS principles.
- Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT): rights of peaceful nuclear use vs non-proliferation obligations.
- Role of OPEC and West Asian geopolitics in determining global oil prices.
- India's energy security dependence: ~85% crude oil imports (Economic Survey).
- Concept of balance of power in international relations.

### Critical Analysis

#### Pros

- Scope for diplomatic resolution
- Highlights need for diversified energy sources
- Strengthens importance of strategic reserves

#### Cons / Challenges

- Threat to global energy supply
- Inflationary pressures worldwide
- Risk of wider regional war
- Disruption of maritime trade routes

#### India's Concerns

- Energy imports
- Indian diaspora in Gulf
- Trade routes and economic stability

### Way Forward

- Promote diplomatic dialogue and de-escalation
- Strengthen strategic petroleum reserves
- Diversify energy sources (renewables, alternative suppliers)
- Support freedom of navigation
- Enhance regional cooperation and stability initiatives

# Gulf's geopolitical predicament cannot be solved. It can only be managed



**RAJA MANDALA**  
BY C. RAJA MOHAN

**T**HE FIVE-day pause on attacking Iran's electricity plants announced Monday by US President Donald Trump has been widely welcomed. But a permanent settlement — "the complete and total resolution" in Trump's words — will remain elusive. It is hard to square the circle of power asymmetry between Iran and its Arab neighbours that lies at the root of Gulf insecurity. Iran is simply too large, and its Arab neighbours too small, for the region to find a stable equilibrium on its own. The Gulf Arabs have therefore long looked to external powers to balance Iran. That reliance — principally on the United States — has made Gulf security hostage to political mood swings in Washington.

The numbers tell the story. Iran's 90 million people dwarf the 27 million citizens of the GCC states. Persia is a unified state; the Arab Gulf is divided among several kingdoms. Iran's ambition to dominate the Gulf has endured regardless of whether Tehran was governed by a monarchy or a theocracy. For nearly 150 years, that ambition was constrained by Great Britain, the world's pre-eminent power from the early 19th to the mid-20th century, operating from the Indian Subcontinent. The Raj protected the

weaker Gulf states while maintaining a working relationship with Tehran. The decline of Britain, its withdrawal from the east of Suez, the independence granted to Gulf kingdoms in 1971, and the Islamic Revolution of 1979 together marked the demise of the old regional order.

The Islamic Republic did not invent Iranian assertiveness — it inherited it from the Shah and intensified it. Mohammad Reza Shah had already demonstrated his hegemonic instincts before the revolution. He seized the islands of Abu Musa and the Tunbs from the nascent UAE on the eve of the British withdrawal in 1971. He claimed Bahrain as Iran's 14th province until international pressure forced a tactical retreat. He deployed thousands of troops to Oman's Dhofar province to crush a left-wing insurgency — not out of altruism, but to establish Iran as the Gulf's indispensable security arbiter. He built the most powerful military force in the developing world, positioning Tehran as a regional gendarme with American blessing.

The Islamic theocracy has been even more vigorous in pursuing regional hegemony, but in opposition to Washington rather than in partnership with it. Both monarchy and theocracy make similar mistakes: focusing on external adventures, they exacerbated domestic unrest.

A popular slogan from Iran's recent protests captures the contradiction: "No to Gaza, No to Lebanon... my life is for Iran."

When Iran transitioned from a monarchy to the Islamic republic, the underlying logic of Iranian hegemonic ambition did not change. Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini re-

placed Persian nationalism with Shia revolutionary ideology, but the instruments — proxy forces, interference in neighbours' affairs, projection of military power — differed little from the Shah's playbook. The difference lay in ferocity and religious fervour.

The conservative Gulf Arabs responded by establishing the Gulf Cooperation Council in 1981 to pool resources against the Islamic Republic. The GCC has barely limped along, hobbled by internal divisions. In a telling paradox, the Gulf Arabs turned to Iraq's secular dictator, Saddam Hussein, to contain revolutionary Iran. Eight years of the Iran-Iraq War kept Iran at bay, but at great cost. And the counterweight proved double-edged: The same army that bled Iran rolled into Kuwait in 1990. The Arab shield had turned on those it was meant to protect. American intervention expelled Iraq from Kuwait in 1991 but did not resolve the underlying structural imbalance. It merely replaced Iraqi protection with a direct American military presence on the Arabian Peninsula. A brief debate about a "Gulf NATO" never took off.

The Arabs also encouraged radical Sunni forces to fend off the Shia threat from Tehran. That strategy backfired spectacularly on September 11, 2001. After 9/11, the United States made the fateful decision to destroy the Iraqi state, disband the Ba'athist military, and hand Tehran the geopolitical windfall it had spent eight years fighting to prevent. Iran's Shia allies now ruled in Baghdad. The land route from Tehran to Beirut became a physical reality. Iranian proxies straddled across the region. The Gulf Arabs were left staring at an Iranian sphere of influence stretching from

the Zagros mountains to the Mediterranean. The rise of Iranian power also drove a quiet rapprochement between Israel and the Gulf Arabs, adding a new strategic wrinkle.

Where does the regional balance go from here? The US, Israel, and the Gulf Arabs want credible detangling of Iran's missile and nuclear capabilities. They want Iran to relinquish its proxy forces and stop meddling in Arab internal affairs. They also seek the internationalisation of the Strait of Hormuz to guarantee freedom of navigation. Iran has its own demands. It insists on its right to develop nuclear and missile technologies. It wants guarantees against future American military action, an end to US bases in Arab states, compensation for wartime damages, and a veto over governance of the Hormuz.

This brings us back to the central problem. Iran is too strong to be ignored, but not strong enough to exercise unilateral dominance. The Gulf Arabs cannot balance Iran on their own and will continue to depend on the US for security. No other power — not Russia, not China, let alone Europe or India — can replace Washington as the ultimate security guarantor of the Gulf Arabs. Notwithstanding the flicker of hope offered by Trump's pause, the tragic cycle of the impossible balancing between Arabia and Persia is likely to continue. The Gulf's geopolitical predicament is not one that can be solved. It can only be managed — just barely, and with a great deal of luck.

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- The Strait of Hormuz handles ~20% of global oil trade, making it strategically vital.
- Recent developments show:
  - U.S., Israel, and Gulf states seek curbs on Iran's nuclear & missile programmes.
  - Iran demands security guarantees, sanctions relief, and regional influence recognition.

## Static Linkages

- Strait of Hormuz: chokepoint connecting Persian Gulf to Arabian Sea; critical for global energy security.
- Balance of Power theory in international relations.
- Shia-Sunni divide and its geopolitical implications.
- Role of external powers in regional security (Cold War and post-Cold War).
- Concept of proxy warfare.
- Freedom of navigation under UNCLOS.
- West Asia's importance in India's energy security (imports ~60%+ crude from region).

## Critical Analysis

### Positives

- Temporary pauses reduce chances of full-scale war.
- U.S. presence ensures deterrence and stability.

### Negatives

- Structural imbalance makes lasting peace difficult.
- Overdependence on U.S. → strategic vulnerability.
- Proxy conflicts increase instability.
- Threat to global oil supply and trade routes.

### Challenges

- Nuclear proliferation risk.
- Lack of regional consensus.
- Militarisation of strategic chokepoints.

## Way Forward

- Develop inclusive Gulf security architecture (including Iran).
- Revive nuclear diplomacy frameworks.
- Ensure freedom of navigation via international law.
- Promote regional dialogue & CBMs.
- Diversify energy sources (for India & world).
- Strengthen maritime security cooperation.

## KEY HIGHLIGHTS

### Context of the News

- U.S. President Donald Trump announced a temporary pause in attacks on Iran, raising hopes for de-escalation in West Asia.
- However, a permanent resolution remains elusive due to deep-rooted geopolitical tensions in the Gulf region.
- The crisis is linked to Iran's strategic ambitions, Arab Gulf security concerns, and external power involvement, particularly the U.S.
- The Strait of Hormuz, a critical global energy chokepoint, remains central to the conflict dynamics.
- Structural imbalance persists: Iran's large population (~90 million) and unified state vs. fragmented Gulf monarchies (~27 million combined citizens).

### Key Points

- Iran has historically pursued regional dominance, irrespective of regime type (monarchy or theocracy).
- The 1979 Islamic Revolution intensified ideological and geopolitical rivalry in the region.
- Formation of the Gulf Cooperation Council (1981) aimed to counter Iran but has been weakened by internal divisions.
- The Iran-Iraq War (1980-88) and later the U.S. invasion of Iraq (2003) reshaped regional power, ultimately strengthening Iran's influence.
- Iran's influence now extends via proxy networks across Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Yemen.
- Gulf countries rely heavily on external balancing (primarily the U.S.) for security.

# Against cervical cancer, vaccine is a new beginning



GAURAVI MISHRA

**O**N FEBRUARY 28, India took a decisive and historic step in public health with the nationwide launch of Human Papillomavirus (HPV) vaccination for adolescent girls. This signals India's commitment to eliminating cervical cancer, a disease that is easily preventable, yet continues to claim thousands of lives every year.

Globally, cervical cancer is the fourth most common cancer among women, with approximately 6,60,000 new cases and 3,50,000 deaths occurring each year. While many high-income countries have controlled cervical cancer rates through screening and vaccination programmes, it still remains high in India.

India bears one of the heaviest burdens globally. Cervical cancer is the second most common cancer among Indian women and third most common cancer, overall, in the country. Each year, India reports more than 78,000 new cases and almost 43,000 deaths.

Most cervical cancers are caused by an infection of the genital tract, with the Human Papillomavirus (HPV). Hence, unlike many other cancers, the risk of developing cervical cancer can be modified and reduced. The risks for this include early age of marriage, early initiation of sexual activity, multiple pregnancies, tobacco use, poor genital hygiene, all of which are related to increased chances of infection. Most of these risk factors can be addressed through awareness, screening, and vaccination.

The WHO has declared cervical cancer as the first cancer to be eliminated globally. It has set a clear elimination target: Reducing the cancer rate to fewer than 4 new cases per 1,00,000 women per year. The WHO's global elimination efforts outline the "90-70-90" strategy: 90 per cent of girls to be fully vaccinated with HPV vaccine by age 15; 70 per cent of women to be screened with a high-performance test at ages 30 and above, and 90 per cent of women identified with disease to receive appropriate treatment. India's vaccination launch is a crucial step towards achieving these targets.

HPV vaccines have a strong global safety record. The most commonly seen side effects are mild pain, redness or swelling in the arm where the shot is given. Very rarely the vaccinated girl may feel dizzy for a short

time, just like with other vaccines.

The cervical cancer vaccine was first licensed 20 years ago and has undergone rigorous scrutiny and evaluation post its licensure. Over 140 countries around the world have implemented vaccination against HPV infections. The data from millions of doses administered worldwide has confirmed its safety and effectiveness.

The most significant evidence over the past decade came from studies that demonstrated that even a single dose of HPV vaccine provides long-term protection. There are over 15 year-long clinical trials, and follow-up studies, of which the Tata Memorial Centre has also been a part of, have proven that a single dose of HPV vaccine ensures safe, effective and long-term protection in Indian populations against cervical cancer. This research strengthens the confidence in successfully implementing this large-scale vaccination programme.

Around the world, cervical cancer rates have been declining due to improved awareness, screening and vaccination. However, progress is not uniform. In India, urban areas have shown some decline due to factors such as improved hygiene, yet large rural and underserved populations continue to be present with advanced cervical cancer disease.

Global experience teaches us that progress in cervical cancer control can stall if vaccination coverage is not ensured. In some countries that had significantly reduced cervical cancer burden, gaps in immunisation or disruptions in public health programmes have shown resurgence of cervical cancer cases. Elimination requires sustained efforts and ensuring widespread coverage of HPV vaccination.

India's decision to introduce HPV vaccination is scientifically sound, cost-effective, and an ethical-moral imperative.

The writer is professor and deputy director, Centre for Cancer Epidemiology, Tata Memorial Centre, Mumbai. Views are personal

India's decision to introduce HPV vaccination is scientifically sound, cost-effective, and an ethical-moral imperative

## KEY HIGHLIGHTS

### Context of the News

- India launched a nationwide Human Papillomavirus (HPV) vaccination programme for adolescent girls on February 28.
- The initiative marks a major step towards eliminating cervical cancer, a preventable yet high-burden disease in India.
- India contributes significantly to global cervical cancer burden with ~78,000 new cases and ~43,000 deaths annually (as per WHO estimates).
- The move aligns with the WHO global strategy for cervical cancer elimination (90-70-90 targets).
- Evidence from institutions like Tata Memorial Centre supports single-dose HPV vaccine efficacy for long-term protection.

### Key Points

- Causative Agent: Cervical cancer is primarily caused by Human Papillomavirus (HPV) infection (sexually transmitted).
- Global Burden:
  - ~6.6 lakh new cases and ~3.5 lakh deaths annually worldwide.
- India's Scenario:
  - Second most common cancer among women; third overall.
- Risk Factors:
  - Early marriage, early sexual activity, multiple pregnancies
  - Tobacco use, poor hygiene
- WHO Elimination Targets (90-70-90):
  - 90% girls vaccinated by age 15

- 70% women screened by age 30+
- 90% diagnosed cases treated
- Vaccine Safety:
  - Globally tested for over 20 years
  - Minor side effects (pain, swelling); rare dizziness
- Scientific Evidence:
  - Studies confirm single-dose vaccine provides long-term protection
- Global Experience:
  - Over 140 countries have implemented HPV vaccination
  - Decline in cervical cancer where coverage is high
- Equity Concern:
  - Rural and underserved populations in India still show high disease burden

### Static Linkages

- Fundamental duty to promote public health and scientific temper (Article 51A)
- Right to Health as part of Article 21 (Right to Life) – Supreme Court interpretations
- National Health Mission (NHM) – preventive healthcare framework
- Universal Immunization Programme (UIP) – expansion to include new vaccines
- Reproductive health and demographic transition (NCERT – Population & Health)
- Women's health indicators in Economic Survey and NFHS data
- Preventive vs Curative healthcare (basic public health principle)

### Critical Issues

- Low awareness & vaccine hesitancy
- Weak screening infrastructure
- Rural-urban disparity
- Cultural barriers around sexual health
- Need for sustained funding & coverage

### Way Forward

- IEC campaigns for awareness
- Integration with school health programmes
- Strengthen screening + early diagnosis
- Use ASHA/ANM network for last-mile delivery
- Ensure universal coverage & monitoring

# Two crises and a familiar helplessness



SUNANDA MEHTA

**Y**OU WAKE up with a sense of uncertainty, not knowing what to expect of the day. Will there be a let-up, a sudden breakthrough, light at the end of the tunnel? Or will this be yet another day of depressing news, from the economy plummeting to innocent lives lost. Things are looking bleak, supplies have got tighter, travel plans are at a standstill. Everyone is waiting and watching.

These lines were written in March 2020.

If the current US-Iran war feels like Covid-19, it's not without reason. Both events crept up suddenly, catching the world unawares, forcing a shift in life and perspective. The signs had been there, yet no one quite believed that the lockdown of March 2020 or the airstrikes on February 28, 2026 would actually happen. One day it seemed inconceivable that we would be in the midst of something scary and unknown and the next day we were in its vice-like grip. Initial optimism prevailed, only to be quickly crushed as both catastrophes escalated rapidly, giving way to daily obsessive tracking of the unfolding tragedy. War anxiety mirrors pandemic panic; the blocking of Hormuz took one back to empty shelves in stores when supply chains were disrupted. We stockpiled essentials and anxiety then — many are doing the same now.

The economic whiplash is familiar — markets plunging, small businesses packing up, daily wagers hit hard, get-togethers restricted and people away from their homes scrambling to get back and stay put. Donald Trump's Truth Social updates leave the people oscillating between hope and helplessness.

And then there is the scourge of misinformation moving faster than a virus or a missile. If the lab-leak theories eroded trust during Covid, doctored or AI generated clips of explosions are threatening to dent news credibility now. If Covid taught us helplessness against an invisible enemy, this war replays that feeling as we watch distant explosions in real time. Most haunting, perhaps, is the insidious psychological toll.

This brings us to the uncomfortable point this comparison is trying to make — human beings have a remarkable ability to swiftly forget even the most profound lessons once the immediate crisis fades. As soon as Covid receded, there was an outpouring of reflections on the lessons the virus had seemingly taught us. On a personal level, we spoke of our realisation of being able to live with much less, the rediscovery of self-reliance and reevaluation of priorities. Inter-connected vulnerabilities led to an unspoken bond across humanity. On a universal scale, the lessons ran deeper — the value of human life, the pricelessness of freedom, the need for economic resilience and the indispensability of global solidarity. The phrase that best captured this hard-won wisdom: "Until every country is safe, no country is safe."

Yet here we are six years later, and while the calendar says March 2026, the weather feels like March 2020.

There is just one difference — there was a debate, then, about whether Covid-19 was a natural or human-made calamity. This time round we do not even have the comfort of that debate.

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Donald Trump's Truth Social updates leave the people oscillating between hope and helplessness

## KEY HIGHLIGHTS

### Context of the News

- Sudden escalation of conflict involving the United States and Iran, including airstrikes (February 2026) and disruption in West Asia.
- Strategic chokepoint Strait of Hormuz witnessing tensions affecting global oil supply chains.
- Parallels drawn with COVID-19 (March 2020) in terms of uncertainty, global panic, and economic disruption.
- Rising concerns over misinformation (AI-generated war visuals) and psychological stress globally.
- Impact on global markets, supply chains, diaspora safety, and geopolitical stability.

### Key Points

- Strait of Hormuz handles ~20% of global petroleum trade (Energy Information Administration).
- India imports ~85% of crude oil; ~60% of this passes through West Asia.
- Conflict impacts:
  - Oil prices → inflationary pressures (Economic Survey link).
  - Supply chain disruptions → reminiscent of pandemic shocks.
  - Indian diaspora (~9 million in Gulf region) faces vulnerability (MEA data).

- Hybrid warfare dimension:
  - Information warfare via fake news, AI-generated content.
- Psychological dimension:
  - Similar to pandemic anxiety—uncertainty, fear, economic insecurity.
- Global governance challenge:
  - Weak multilateral response (UNSC divisions).

### Static Linkages

- India's energy security and import dependence (Class XII Economics).
- Role of chokepoints in geopolitics (NCERT Geography – Transport & Communication).
- Inflation: Cost-push inflation due to rise in crude oil prices.
- Disaster vs Conflict:
  - Natural vs Man-made disasters (NDMA framework).
- Information disorder:
  - Fake news, cyber threats (Internal Security – 2nd ARC Report).
- Globalisation vulnerabilities:
  - Interdependence of economies (NCERT Sociology/Economics).
- Psychological impact of crises:
  - Behavioural responses in disasters (Ethics – Emotional Intelligence).

### Critical Analysis

#### Pros

- Push for renewable energy and diversification.
- Strengthening of India's strategic autonomy.
- Recognition of misinformation threats.

#### Cons

- Inflation, fiscal pressure, CAD widening.
- Threat to diaspora and remittances.
- Supply chain disruptions.
- Weak global governance.
- Psychological stress similar to pandemic.

### Way Forward

- Diversify energy sources (renewables, hydrogen).
- Expand Strategic Petroleum Reserves.
- Strengthen West Asia diplomacy.
- Build resilient supply chains.
- Counter misinformation (regulation + awareness).
- Reform global institutions.
- Strengthen crisis preparedness and mental health systems.

## New campaign against old scourge is welcome

**E**IGHT YEARS ago, the government announced its intent to eliminate tuberculosis in the country by 2025. Though India could not meet the deadline, it has taken appreciable strides in slowing the incidence of this bacterial disease. Today its healthcare system diagnoses more than 80 per cent of the estimated cases, a far cry from 2015 when close to 50 per cent of those infected by TB fell outside the radar. However, the disease continues to present a formidable challenge. Close to a lakh cases go undetected in the country, and chances of the infection spreading remain high. That's why the Centre's 100-day campaign against TB, which began on Tuesday, is a step in the right direction. Public health programmes against difficult contagions require periodic bursts of urgency focused on high-risk areas, because national figures can often mask deeply localised epidemics. Chhattisgarh's 100-day anti-TB project recognised this imperative — it eliminated the disease in more than 4,000 gram panchayats between December 2024 and March 2025.

Over the next 100 days, healthcare workers will screen those living in 1.58 lakh villages. They will also reach out to vulnerable people such as those living with HIV, diabetes and residents of high-density areas. The government has also pushed for expediting its Rs 1,000 monetary support for nutrition to TB patients. The thrust on timely payments is a recognition of one of the shortcomings of the anti-TB programme. Reports have shown that delays in processing the payment have rendered the nutritional support ineffective in several parts of the country. In contrast, the success of the anti-TB programme in Chhattisgarh and Puducherry owes much to timely cash transfers to the undernourished.

The government would do well to treat its latest drive as a catalyst for improved diagnostics, regular follow-ups and better community engagement. Institutionalising the learnings of the 100-day campaign could go a long way in addressing the most difficult TB-related challenge — the disease's multidrug-resistant version. This virulent form of TB occurs largely because of the mismanagement of the disease. TB care is exacting for patients as well as caregivers — that's why patients continue to drop therapy mid-course or do not take the correct dosage. The 100-day anti-TB campaign needs to lay the ground for improved support systems.

### KEY HIGHLIGHTS

#### Context of the News

- India has been pursuing the goal of eliminating Tuberculosis (TB) under the National Tuberculosis Elimination Programme (NTEP), with an earlier target year of 2025 (ahead of global SDG target 2030).
- Over the last decade, diagnostic coverage has improved significantly—from ~50% case detection in 2015 to over 80% today.
- Despite progress, India still has a high TB burden, with nearly 1 lakh “missing cases” (undiagnosed/unreported).
- The Union Government recently launched a 100-day intensified TB elimination campaign focusing on high-risk districts and vulnerable populations.
- Successful pilot interventions (e.g., Chhattisgarh eliminating TB in ~4,000 Gram Panchayats) highlight the role of targeted, localised strategies.

#### Key Points

- Focused Screening Drive Coverage: ~1.58 lakh villages.
- Target groups: People with HIV, diabetes, malnutrition, and those in high-density areas.
- Improved Diagnostics Expansion of molecular diagnostic tools (e.g., CBNAAT, TrueNat).
- Early detection to reduce transmission and mortality.
- Nutritional Support ₹1000/month under Nikshay Poshan Yojana.
- Recognises malnutrition as a key determinant of TB vulnerability.

- Challenges in Implementation Delays in Direct Benefit Transfer (DBT) reduce effectiveness.
- Regional disparities in programme outcomes.
- Multidrug-Resistant TB (MDR-TB) Emerges due to incomplete or improper treatment.
- Requires longer, costlier, and more complex therapy.
- Community Engagement Importance of ASHA workers, local governance, and awareness campaigns.

#### Static Linkages

- TB is caused by Mycobacterium tuberculosis; spreads via airborne droplets (NCERT Biology).
- Social determinants: Poverty, overcrowding, malnutrition (Economic Survey, WHO reports).
- Public health is a State subject (7th Schedule), but coordinated via centrally sponsored schemes.
- Direct Benefit Transfer (DBT) mechanism improves welfare delivery (Indian Economy – subsidies reform).
- WHO's End TB Strategy targets reduction in TB incidence by 80% by 2030.

#### Critical Analysis

##### Positives

- Targeted, time-bound campaign improves detection.
- Focus on vulnerable groups → inclusive approach.
- Nutritional support addresses root causes.

##### Challenges

- Undetected cases → continued transmission.
- DBT delays reduce effectiveness.
- MDR-TB → major public health threat.
- Social stigma + weak follow-up systems.

#### Way Forward

- Strengthen active case finding & surveillance.
- Ensure timely DBT payments.
- Improve treatment adherence via digital tracking (Nikshay).
- Scale up community participation (ASHA workers).
- Focus on MDR-TB management protocols.
- Integrate with nutrition & primary healthcare systems.