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CHANAKYA IAS ACADEMY
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Great Nicobar draft plan projects tourism as primary growth driver

Abhinay Lakshman
NEW DELHI

The draft master plan for developing the Great Nicobar Island (GNI) under the Centre's ₹92,000-crore mega infrastructure project has proposed to focus on tourism as the "primary economic driver" of growth, noting that it also intends to get the "population to settle here", through permanent and temporary jobs expected to be created. The plan has been drafted for a projected population of 3.36 lakh by 2055. By that time, the plan is expected to achieve an annual inflow of more than a million tourists.

Of the projected 3.36 lakh, the local Nicobarese population is expected to grow to about 11,500 from the current 7,500.

The project, which received Stage-I clearance in 2022, includes an international container transshipment port, an airport, power plants, and a township. However, soon after the clearance, the local Nicobarese population withdrew its consent, alleging that their forest rights had not been settled. The Calcutta High Court is currently hearing a challenge to the project's clearances.

Under "future development", the draft hints at possible development of the Pemmaya buffer area on the western flank of Galathea Bay, where "tribal settlements" may be permitted.

However, this appears at variance with a separate draft relocation plan to shift local Nicobarese tribes further north to Pulobhabi. While the draft master plan has been notified for public consultation, suggestions, and objections for 30 days, the notification does not mention when the plan was made public.

The draft master plan has been uploaded on the Andaman and Nicobar Islands Administration's Public Works Department website.

The notified plan proposes a township divided into several clusters: an administrative and institutional cluster near Campbell Bay, a multi-modal logistic cluster (to include airport, port, freight and passenger terminals, defence area, and green development) near Galathea Bay, and tourism, entertainment, and processing clusters along the eastern coast of the island from Galathea Bay in the south to Campbell Bay in the north.

Local push: The draft notes that it intends to get "population to settle" in the Great Nicobar Island through job creation. FILE PHOTO

Future vision

Envisioning the development of the island as a "seaside destination to relax and enjoy in a pristine, unspoilt and protected environment", the draft master plan suggests several tourism models–wellness tourism (rejuvenation and lifestyle management retreats), beach tourism (around seven potential beaches identified), nature and biodiversity tourism, adventure tourism with "curated adventures", business tourism (for retreats, conferences, conventions), gaming tourism, and hubs for family entertainment which may have theme parks, water parks and amusement parks. One of the draft maps also indicates the possibility of a casino within the tourism and entertainment cluster.

According to the plan, the project is expected to span 166.10 sq. km, as notified in December 2025. Of this, about 40.8% has been set aside as "urbanisable", with the rest allocated to "special projects", which include the airport, container port, freight and passenger terminals, defence area, and a green development area where no tree-felling will be allowed. About 121.86 sq km of land is expected to come from diverted forest areas.

The development will start with "anchor projects" such as the International Container Transhipment Port (ICTP), the Great Nicobar International Airport, and the GNI gas and solar power plants from 2025 to 2029. They will include physical infrastructure like roads, water reservoirs, water treatment plants, and freight terminals.

The second part of Phase 1 (2030-2035) is expected to see growth in tourism activity and upgraded infrastructure. Phase 2 (2036-2041) envisages a "phase of consolidation and enhanced growth of tourist traffic" and the opening of opportunities for other potential economic drivers. The last phase (2042-2047) has been earmarked for "future development".

KEY HIGHLIGHTS

Context of the News

- Draft master plan released for ₹92,000-crore mega infrastructure project in Great Nicobar Island.
- Tourism proposed as the primary economic driver with projected 1 million+ annual tourists by 2055.
- Target population: 3.36 lakh (from current low density).
- Includes ICTP (transshipment port), international airport, power plants, township.
- Concerns raised by local Nicobarese tribes; case under Calcutta High Court.

Key Points

- InfrastructureInternational Container Transshipment Port at Galathea Bay.
- International airport (civil + defence use).
- Gas and solar power plants.
- Multi-modal logistics hub.
- Tourism ModelTypes: wellness, eco-tourism, beach, adventure, business tourism.
- Entertainment hubs (theme parks, possible casino).
- Land UseTotal area: 166.10 sq km.
- 40.8% urbanisable.
- 121.86 sq km forest diversion.
- PopulationProjected: 3.36 lakh by 2055.
- Indigenous population: ~7,500 → ~11,500.
- Phases2025–2035: Core infrastructure.
- 2036–2041: Expansion.
- 2042–2047: Future development.
- IssuesForest Rights Act compliance concerns.
- Tribal relocation (Pulobhabi).
- Ecological sensitivity of island ecosystem.

Static Linkages

- Location near Malacca Strait → global trade significance.
- Fragile island ecosystems → biodiversity hotspots.
- Forest Rights Act, 2006 – tribal consent mandatory.
- EIA Notification – environmental clearance process.
- CRZ norms – coastal regulation.
- Blue Economy concept (Economic Survey).
- Disaster vulnerability: tsunami-prone region.

Critical Analysis

Positives

- Enhances India's strategic presence in Indo-Pacific region.
- Development of transshipment hub reduces dependence on foreign ports (e.g., Colombo, Singapore).
- Promotes economic growth, tourism, and employment.
- Strengthens Blue Economy and maritime infrastructure.

Concerns

- Large-scale deforestation (121+ sq km) threatens biodiversity.
- Risk to endemic flora and fauna in a fragile ecosystem.
- Tribal displacement and cultural erosion.
- Questions over procedural compliance (FRA, EIA).
- Risk of over-tourism and environmental degradation.
- High disaster vulnerability (tsunami-prone zone).

Way Forward

- Ensure free, prior and informed consent of tribal communities.
- Strict implementation of Forest Rights Act and EIA norms.
- Adopt sustainable, low-impact eco-tourism model.
- Limit deforestation; strengthen biodiversity conservation measures.
- Develop disaster-resilient infrastructure.
- Continuous monitoring by independent expert bodies.
- Balance strategic, economic, and ecological priorities.

An alternative to Viksit Bharat Shiksha Adhisthan Bill

Dinesh Abrol
Faculty, Transdisciplinary Research Cluster on Sustainability Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi

The Viksit Bharat Shiksha Adhisthan (VBSA) Bill proposes to statutorily take forward the implementation of National Education Policy (NEP 2020) that the Union government adopted during the COVID period without consultation with State governments. The Bill is under examination of a Joint Parliamentary Committee (JPC), which offers an opportunity to teachers, students, State governments, and civil society to submit their amendment proposals. The Bill, as it stands, is a constitutional overreach. Entry 66 of the Union List gives limited and specific legislative power to Parliament only for coordination and determination of standards in higher education institutions (HEIs). Now, the VBSA Bill gives sole discretionary power to Union government-controlled councils to determine standards, conduct inspection, and exercise independent, unlimited powers and functions. Under the Bill, the Education Ministry has usurped the authority of allocating funds to HEIs.

The Bill does not envisage participation of higher education institutions in decision making. Bureaucratic overreach is written into each provision of it. Bureaucrats have been given the charge of transforming higher education. The Bill dilutes the University Grants Commission (UGC)'s consultative requirements. Section 13 of the UGC Act provides for inspections for the purpose of ascertaining the financial needs of a university or its standards of teaching, examination, and research. The UGC is statutorily required to undertake inspections only after consultation with the university. The VBSA Bill, which covers Central and State-funded universities as well as private universities, takes away the autonomy of the governing bodies of Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs), Indian Institutes of Management (IIMs) and Inter-University Centres.

In the name of "Bhartiya Knowledge", the Bill seeks to sow the seeds for Hindutva ideologies. It explicitly undermines the multi-cultural character of Indian knowledge. It allows bureaucratic control, centralised ways of prescriptive regulation, determination of standards, and accreditation process. The Bill seeks to promote higher education and to regulate based on outputs legitimised in global rankings. It does not seek outcomes for national innovation, self-reliance, and social justice. The Bill has been brought in to allow the Centre to withdraw from the obligation to promote education as a public-funded enterprise for common good and push dependence on loans for higher education. It does not provide for the enforcement of affirmative action and reservation to SCs/STs and OBCs. It does not seek inter-institutional, inter-State and inter-regional justice.

Justice to States

The National Research Foundation (NRF) was proposed in the NEP 2020 to provide research funds to State universities (SUs). As of now, it has no provisions to provide block grants to SUs for integrated scholarship (teaching, research, and outreach). The State Higher Education Councils (SHECs) need to be represented on the councils envisaged under the VBSA Bill. The Councils should provide for consensual decision making to pursue a jointly strategic direction. The SHECs should also have a clear mandate and space for influencing the future of HEIs. The Bill should explicitly affirm the role and contribution of associations of students, teachers, and non-teaching staff in the governance of higher education by involving HEIs' senates and academic councils in gathering feedback on planning and progress.

Under the Bill, the Regulatory Council (Viniyaman Parishad) is envisaged as the primary enforcer of governance and institutional norms. The Bill should not give the Centre a free hand and responsibility for formal recognition, authorisation, and closure of institutions. It now provides for graded financial penalties for regulatory violations. No institution should be closed without getting the consent of the State where it is located. Under the Bill, the accreditation council will outsource the task of accreditation to a network of third-party accrediting institutions to circumvent the deliberative process and sideline the desirable outcomes that the society expects the HEIs to contribute to. The Accreditation Council (Gunvatta Parishad) provides for technology-driven quality assessment. The approach to regulation should be deliberative and process-oriented; it cannot be prescriptive.

Output-based evaluation (patents and publications), focussed on assessment of institutions based on educational outputs (learning levels and employability), may not have much to do with the desirable outcomes. Evaluation should be outcome- and impact-centric. The Standards Council (Manak Parishad), sitting in Delhi, cannot be expected to define standards and attributes for all types of higher education. The standards will have to be shaped industrial sector- and State-wise.

Constitutionally speaking, education is a subject under the Concurrent List. The VBSA Bill's provisions are applicable to all State governments. The State governments should have a role in the determination of standards, accreditation, and regulations. The determination of standards, accreditation, and regulations cannot be a top-down affair. Currently, States fund their higher education systems. The Bill does not offer social and inter-regional equity. Under it, private sector higher education institutions do not provide for equity and social justice. The State governments can and should be expected to take care of priorities such as contribution to school education, environment, climate, local resources rejuvenation, and local economic development.

The amended Bill must give 50% weightage each to SHECs and the Union government's councils in the process of regulation, accreditation, and determination of standards, so as to focus on the goals of space for inter-regional equity, linguistic and cultural autonomy, social justice, innovation, fundamental science, new technologies, and global excellence. The Bill should also consider incorporating a provision for regional councils to accommodate emerging ecological and socio-technical aspects in their deliberations.

The amended Bill should provide for an alternative framework for governance of higher education as a shared responsibility to build enabling mechanisms into the structures to be developed for transformative governance. The Bill must have a separate Higher Education Grants Council (HEGC) to disburse the funds available to the Ministry of Education for the integration of teaching, research, and outreach. The HEGC will have to provide not only regular funding to Central institutions but also generous funding to laggards run by the States to bridge the historical discrimination, structural gaps and voids, and deficits arising out of lack of support for research and outreach.

SHECs' role and contribution should be legislated to realise the vision and strategy of joint implementation of standards, accreditation, and regulation through the proposed verticals in the form of three separate councils. The councils for regulation, accreditation, and standards determination should be maintained by academics and professionals and have their own separate budgets. The SHECs should be duly funded by the HEGC to enable the process to become a shared responsibility. All the cesses that are presently provided for the implementation of the shared responsibility should be at the disposal of the HEGC. Who should regulate what should be explicitly stated in the amended Bill. The public purposes of higher education should be specifically mentioned to disburse allocations for the outcomes proposed for consideration.

State Higher Education Councils should be represented on the three councils envisaged under the Bill

KEY HIGHLIGHTS

Context of the News

- The Viksit Bharat Shiksha Adhisthan (VBSA) Bill seeks to provide a statutory framework for implementing the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020.
- The Bill is currently under examination by a Joint Parliamentary Committee (JPC), inviting stakeholder feedback.
- Concerns have been raised regarding centralisation of powers, erosion of institutional autonomy, and constitutional validity.
- The Bill proposes regulatory councils with extensive powers over standards, accreditation, and governance of higher education institutions (HEIs).

Key Points

- Expands Union control beyond Entry 66 (Union List) by granting wide regulatory authority over HEIs.
- Introduces centralised councils for regulation, accreditation, and standards-setting.
- Reduces consultative role of institutions, including dilution of provisions under the UGC Act.
- Applies to Central, State, and private universities, impacting institutional autonomy.
- Promotes output-based evaluation (publications, patents, rankings) over outcome-based assessment.
- Lacks explicit provisions for affirmative action (SC/ST/OBC reservations).
- Encourages private participation and loan-based education financing, raising concerns over equity.
- Weak institutional role for State Higher Education Councils (SHECs).
- Accreditation proposed via third-party agencies, potentially bypassing deliberative processes.
- Absence of clear mechanisms for inter-regional equity and funding support to State universities.

Static Linkages

- Education in Concurrent List (Seventh Schedule) – shared responsibility of Centre and States
- Entry 66, Union List – coordination and determination of standards in higher education
- UGC Act, 1956 – regulatory framework and consultative inspection mechanism
- Concept of Cooperative Federalism
- Principles of Social Justice and Equity in Education (Articles 14, 15, 21A)
- Role of Public Funding in Welfare State
- Importance of Institutional Autonomy in Knowledge Economy

Critical Analysis

Positives

- Provides legal backing to NEP 2020 reforms
- Aims to ensure uniform standards and global competitiveness
- Introduces technology-driven accreditation mechanisms
- Attempts to streamline fragmented regulatory structure

Concerns

- Federal Overreach: Undermines State role in education (Concurrent List)
- Centralisation: Excessive power to Union-controlled bodies
- Institutional Autonomy: Reduced role of universities in decision-making
- Equity Issues: Lack of focus on reservation and inclusive access
- Commercialisation: Shift towards private funding and loans
- Bureaucratisation: Academic governance dominated by bureaucrats
- One-size-fits-all Standards: Ignores regional diversity

Way Forward

- Ensure balanced Centre-State participation (cooperative federalism)
- Strengthen role of State Higher Education Councils (SHECs)
- Create an independent Higher Education Grants Council (HEGC)
- Safeguard institutional autonomy and academic freedom
- Ensure mandatory reservation and social justice provisions
- Adopt outcome-based and impact-oriented evaluation
- Promote consultative and decentralised governance

Bolstering deterrence through submarine dominance

Harsh V. Pant
Vice-President, Observer Research Foundation, New Delhi

Sayantan Haldar
Associate Fellow, Maritime Initiative, Observer Research Foundation, New Delhi

On April 3, the word 'Aridhaman' found mention in Indian Defence Minister Rajnath Singh's cryptic post on X. This prompted widespread speculation that it signalled the quiet commissioning of INS Aridhaman, the third submarine in the Indian Navy's SSBN (nuclear ballistic missile submarine) programme. Launched in 2009, the Indian Navy commissioned its first SSBN, INS Arihant, in 2016, followed by the second submarine, INS Arighat, in 2024. Speculation about the commissioning of INS Aridhaman assumed momentum since last year after Admiral Dinesh Tripathi, Chief of Naval Staff, confirmed that the submarine was in the final stages of its trials. The next submarine in this series, which is of the Arihant class as well, is likely to be commissioned next year.

Compared to its predecessors, INS Arihant and INS Arighat, INS Aridhaman has greater firing power and marks a gradual upgrade in the series of SSBNs commissioned by the Indian Navy. It is a larger 7000-tonne vessel, which can reportedly carry up to 24 K-15 Sagarika missiles, and up to eight nuclear-tipped K-4 or K-5 missiles. In contrast, the previous submarines in this series hold the capacity for carrying 12 K-15 Sagarika missiles and four K-4 missiles.

Through the commissioning of INS Aridhaman, India appears to have further emboldened its nuclear triad, which refers to New Delhi's capability to launch strategic nuclear delivery systems from land, sea, and air. Importantly, apart from India, the P5 countries - the U.S., Russia, China, France and the U.K. - possess the nuclear triad capabilities. In addition to this, the commissioning of the submarine further enhances India's deterrence capabilities in the maritime domain. Strengthening of sea-based deterrence is seen as especially critical, given that it has rapidly emerged as a key imperative in bolstering India's nuclear capabilities. To be sure, India's nuclear outlook is anchored on its 'no first use' policy. However, the strategic environment in the Indian Ocean is continually worsening, led by increasing Chinese presence in the region by way of research and survey vessels which possess dual-use technologies and run the risk of being deployed for the purpose of intelligence gathering. Sea-based deterrence is indeed critical to forestall adversarial manoeuvres by China and even Pakistan.

Notably, the Indian Ocean has for long remained dormant due to the lack of any significant maritime security conflict. However, in today's time, the changing nature of warfare, which possesses the possibility of swift transition from one domain to the other, makes it essential to strengthen deterrence capabilities across all domains – land, air, and sea. More recently, the evolving conflict in West Asia serves as a crucial reminder of how modern warfare is not limited to a single domain anymore. What started as American and Israeli air campaigns against Iran has quickly assumed a critical maritime character, whereby the Strait of Hormuz has now emerged as the epicentre shaping much of the future of this war. Furthermore, last year, Operation Sindoor, India's measured counter-terror response against Pakistan, too demonstrated that a naval dimension to the campaign could have indeed been a possibility. Wars in this era do not belong with different domains in silos but rather remain susceptible to spilling over to other domains as well. This complexity of modern warfare underlines why possessing nuclear triad capabilities, especially boosting deterrence, will continue to remain a key priority for India's national security apparatus.

Furthermore, the SSBN project has significantly boosted India's defence establishment's quest for self-reliance in defence production. With active conflicts persisting in different strategic pockets of the world, a strain in defence supply chains appears to be on the horizon. For India, the prolonged Russia-Ukraine war has spurred momentum in strategies to work towards self-reliance in defence production given Moscow's importance for India as a traditional defence partner.

In addition to this, plans to soon induct a fourth vessel of the Arihant class is likely to guide India's SSBN programme going forward. Importantly, New Delhi also seeks to commission India's first fully indigenously designed nuclear attack submarine (SSN) by 2036, with the commissioning of the second in the programme in 2038. The rapid strides taken by the Indian Navy is building its nuclear-powered submarine programme signals that submarine dominance is fast emerging as a key component in scripting New Delhi's strategy to bolster deterrence.

Going forward, the key challenges confronting the Indian Navy in this domain are likely going to emanate from how efficiently New Delhi balances spending its resources on upgrading its submarines programme with how it inducts new technologies such as Artificial Intelligence and autonomous systems in design and production of these vessels. At a time when the roster of the Indian Navy's assets is continually compared with that of China, it will be critical for New Delhi to keep pace with Beijing.

Given the changing nature of warfare, it is essential to strengthen deterrence capabilities across land, air, and sea

KEY HIGHLIGHTS

Context of the News

- A cryptic reference by Defence Minister Rajnath Singh indicated the likely commissioning of INS Aridhaman, the third nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarine (SSBN) of India.
- It follows earlier inductions: INS Arihant (2016) and INS Arighat (2024), forming part of India's indigenous SSBN programme.
- The submarine is in advanced trial stages, as confirmed by the Chief of Naval Staff.
- The development strengthens India's nuclear triad capability and enhances maritime deterrence amid growing geopolitical tensions in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR).

Key Points

- INS Aridhaman Features:
  - ~7000-tonne displacement (larger than predecessors).
  - Capacity: up to 24 K-15 (Sagarika) missiles or 8 K-4/K-5 nuclear missiles.
- Comparison with earlier SSBNs:
  - Earlier vessels carried ~12 K-15 and 4 K-4 missiles.
- Nuclear Triad:
  - Land-based missiles, air-delivered weapons, and sea-based SSBNs.
  - India joins P5 nations (US, Russia, China, France, UK) in possessing triad capability.
- Strategic Importance:
  - Strengthens second-strike capability.
  - Enhances survivability of nuclear arsenal.
- Maritime Security Context:
  - Rising Chinese presence in the Indian Ocean via dual-use vessels.
  - Increasing relevance of multi-domain warfare (land-air-sea integration).
- Indigenisation:
  - Boost to Atmanirbhar Bharat in defence production.
  - SSBN programme largely indigenous.
- Future Plans:
  - Fourth Arihant-class SSBN in pipeline.
  - Indigenous nuclear attack submarines (SSNs) planned by 2036–38.

Static Linkages

- Concept of nuclear deterrence and second-strike capability.
- India's No First Use (NFU) nuclear doctrine.
- Role of Indian Ocean Region (IOR) in global trade and geopolitics.
- Evolution of modern warfare: multi-domain operations.
- Defence indigenisation and self-reliance in strategic sectors.
- Strategic importance of sea lanes of communication (SLOCs).

Critical Analysis

Positives

- Enhances credible minimum deterrence posture
- Improves survivability of nuclear arsenal (stealth capability)
- Strengthens India's strategic autonomy
- Boosts indigenous defence ecosystem
- Counters growing Chinese presence in IOR

Challenges

- High financial and maintenance costs
- Limited number of submarines → affects continuous deterrence patrols
- Technological gaps (stealth, detection systems)
- Potential regional arms race
- Need for robust command and control systems

Way Forward

- Expand SSBN fleet for continuous at-sea deterrence (CASD)
- Fast-track indigenous SSN programme
- Invest in advanced stealth and surveillance technologies
- Strengthen maritime infrastructure and basing
- Enhance jointness in defence forces (theatre commands)
- Maintain balance between deterrence and strategic stability

CHANAKYA IAS ACADEMY

Turning up

Voter enthusiasm is a sign of a healthy democracy

Assam and Puducherry recorded historically the highest, and Kerala close to the highest, turnout in Assembly polls held on April 9. In Assam, 85.91% of the electorate turned up to vote, while in Puducherry it was 89.97% and in Kerala, 78.27%. It is hazardous to pinpoint the reasons for high turnouts and treacherous to read meanings into them. However, some reasons are objectively identifiable and some meaningful conjectures can be made. The Special Intensive Revision (SIR) of the electoral rolls in Puducherry and Kerala culled considerable numbers of names – 7.5% and 3.2%, respectively. In Assam, given that a process for the creation of a National Register of Citizens for the State is underway, it was a Special Revision which is a less rigorous updating of the rolls that led to its shrinking by less than 1%. The smaller size of the denominator – the size of the electorate – is one reason why the turnout percentages are high. Ghost voters and duplicate entries may have been eliminated in the process. Another reason for the higher turnout is that due to intense concerns regarding potential disenfranchisement around the SIR/SR, voters may have taken a keener interest in turning up at the booth. In Assam, for instance, large numbers of migrant voters travelled home to vote. In Kerala, anecdotal reporting suggests that its migrant voters from West Asia who travel during polling season could not do so this time due to the ongoing war.

The Election Commission of India, which is facing flak on various issues, took pride in the high turnout. CEC Gyanesh Kumar termed it a "historic testimony not only for India but for the entire democratic world." Chief Ministers of all three States hailed the voter enthusiasm as a mark of popular support for the continuation of their governments, while the Opposition in all three sought to interpret it as a bugle of change. That dispute will be settled when the votes are counted on May 4, but regardless of the outcome, voter enthusiasm is the sign of a healthy democracy. That precisely is the reason why the ECI should take on board in an enabling rather than a restrictive manner all the disputes regarding the SIR. While the SIR can clean up the voter rolls, it should never become a case of throwing the baby out with the bathwater.

KEY HIGHLIGHTS

Context of the News

- Assembly elections held on April 9 recorded very high voter turnout:
  - Assam – 85.91%
  - Puducherry – 89.97%
  - Kerala – 78.27%
- Electoral roll revisions conducted before elections:
  - Special Intensive Revision (SIR) in Puducherry and Kerala
  - Special Revision (SR) in Assam
- Election Commission of India highlighted turnout as a sign of strong democratic participation.

Key Points

- Electoral Roll CleaningSIR removed 7.5% (Puducherry) and 3.2% (Kerala) voters.
- SR in Assam reduced rolls marginally (<1%).
- Removal of duplicate/ghost voters → higher turnout percentage (denominator effect).
- Participation DriversFear of disenfranchisement increased voter turnout.
- Increased political awareness and mobilisation.
- Migration patterns influenced turnout (return migration in Assam, absence in Kerala).
- Democratic SignificanceHigh turnout = active citizen participation, not necessarily political preference.
- Reflects credibility of electoral process, but requires caution in interpretation.

Static Linkages

- Article 324 – Powers and functions of Election Commission.
- Article 326 – Universal Adult Suffrage.
- Representation of the People Act, 1950 – Electoral rolls.
- Representation of the People Act, 1951 – Conduct of elections.
- Free and fair elections – Part of Basic Structure doctrine (SC judgments).
- Concept of political participation in democracy.

Critical Analysis

Positives

- Strengthens legitimacy of democratic process.
- Improved electoral rolls enhance accuracy and transparency.
- Indicates increased civic engagement.

Concerns

- Risk of exclusion of genuine voters during SIR/SR.
- Turnout influenced by fear → trust deficit in institutions.
- Political misinterpretation of turnout data.

Way Forward

- Ensure inclusive electoral roll revision with due safeguards.
- Strengthen appeal and correction mechanisms.
- Use technology with privacy safeguards for roll purification.
- Enhance voter awareness and confidence-building measures.
- Improve institutional transparency of ECI.

Rebuilding ties

India must approach foreign relations with more pragmatism, less emotion

New Delhi's recent moves to re-engage diplomatically and hold Foreign Office Consultations with diplomats in Turkiye and Azerbaijan is a considerable shift in the government's policy, especially over the past year. Since the India-Pakistan conflict and Operation Sindoor in May 2025, the government had expressed its anger not just at Pakistan, but at countries that were seen as supportive of Pakistan, diplomatically or militarily during the conflict. In particular, the Ministry of External Affairs had expressed its disappointment with statements made by Turkiye, Azerbaijan and Malaysia, that questioned the government's decision to launch strikes on terror sites in Pakistan after the Pahalgam terror attacks. During briefings about Operation Sindoor, as the 96-hour military conflict from May 7-10 was named, the government left out envoys from countries that it felt had not expressed solidarity with India. In a military briefing in July, the deputy chief of army staff said India had had to contend with at least three adversaries on its border with Pakistan, including Turkiye. Azerbaijan too was believed to have helped Pakistan with technological support. Trade and tourism to Turkiye and Azerbaijan dropped significantly for several months, as calls to boycott them went out from influential accounts. During its evacuation of Indians from Iran after U.S.-Israel airstrikes on nuclear installations in June 2025, the MEA pointedly told those heading out by land routes to use Armenia and Turkmenistan, not either Turkiye or Azerbaijan. In addition, foreign policy commentary suggested that India was building an alliance of India, Armenia, and Greece as a counter to their age-old rivals - Pakistan, Azerbaijan and Turkiye - who had already formed a strong trilateral grouping. Given the heated rhetoric, and the freeze in diplomatic ties, the decision to send Secretary West in the MEA, Sibi George, to Baku to revive Foreign Office Consultations with Azerbaijani counterparts last week, and to invite the Turkish Deputy Foreign Minister to Delhi this week, are significant diplomatic moves that indicate that Baku and Ankara too feel that better bilateral relations are in their interests.

In a world more fraught with conflicts that fast spiral out of control, it is necessary for New Delhi to pick its diplomatic battles more carefully. The quick escalation from government demarches to online outrage and calls for boycotts have in the past few years had a detrimental impact on bilateral ties with close friends as well as neighbours. With countries that are adversaries, as both Turkiye and Azerbaijan have been, given their closeness to Pakistan and positions on the Kashmir dispute, New Delhi must consider its options with less emotion and more pragmatism. India has traditionally managed relations between rivals without allowing itself to be hyphenated with Pakistan, or by falling into multilateral "camps".

KEY HIGHLIGHTS

Context of the News

- India has recently resumed Foreign Office Consultations with Azerbaijan and invited officials from Turkey, marking a shift in diplomatic posture.
- Relations had deteriorated after the India-Pakistan conflict (May 2025) and Operation Sindoor following the Pahalgam terror attacks.
- Countries like Turkey, Azerbaijan, and Malaysia had criticized India's strikes on terror camps in Pakistan.
- India responded with diplomatic distancing, exclusion from briefings, and implicit economic disengagement (tourism/trade decline).
- Recent outreach indicates a shift from reactive diplomacy to pragmatic engagement amid evolving geopolitical realities.

Key Points

- Operation Sindoor (May 7–10, 2025): 96-hour conflict with Pakistan; diplomatic tensions extended to third-party countries.
  - Strategic Alignments:Turkey–Azerbaijan–Pakistan trilateral cooperation (military/diplomatic).
  - Emerging counter-alignment: India–Armenia–Greece (informal balancing).
  - Diplomatic Freeze Indicators:Exclusion of certain envoys during official briefings.
  - Public calls for economic boycotts (tourism/trade decline).
  - Advisory during evacuation from Iran to avoid Turkey/Azerbaijan routes.
  - Recent Developments:MEA re-engagement via high-level diplomatic visits.
  - Signals mutual interest in stabilizing bilateral ties.
- Core Shift: From emotion-driven response → interest-based diplomacy.

Static Linkages

- India's tradition of strategic autonomy / non-alignment (evolved as multi-alignment).
- Principle of Panchsheel (peaceful coexistence, non-interference).
- Role of diplomacy in safeguarding national interest vs ideological positioning.
- Importance of balance of power in international relations.
- Economic diplomacy: trade, connectivity, and diaspora considerations.
- Use of soft power and restraint in foreign policy.

Critical Analysis

Positives

- Reinforces India's image as a responsible global actor.
- Prevents formation of rigid anti-India blocs.
- Preserves strategic space in West Asia and Eurasia.
- Enables cooperation in trade, connectivity, and energy sectors.

Concerns

- Turkey and Azerbaijan's continued alignment with Pakistan on Kashmir.
- Risk of perceived inconsistency in India's foreign policy stance.
- Domestic pressure due to nationalist sentiment and boycott calls.
- Strategic competition in sensitive regions like the Caucasus.

Way Forward

- Follow calibrated engagement with clear red lines on sovereignty and terrorism.
- Strengthen multi-alignment strategy without entering rigid blocs.
- Enhance economic and cultural diplomacy to rebuild trust.
- Maintain consistency between strategic signaling and actions.
- Promote measured public discourse to avoid reactionary diplomacy.

Govt. examining compliance burden on MSMEs due to war

MSME exporters don't have the resources to keep on top of constantly changing tariffs, penalties, and procedures brought on by shipping disruptions and delays, say exporters, industry bodies

T.C.A. Sharad Raghavan
NEW DELHI

The government on Friday announced that it had held two inter-ministerial meetings to discuss the various issues being faced by exporters in light of the West Asia crisis.

According to exporters, Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) in India are especially struggling under not just the financial impact of the war in West Asia, but also due to a significant increase in their compliance burden and paperwork due to shipments being rerouted or returned to India.

"The situation that is arising in the Middle East, there's a lot of chaos in the system right now because you are not getting clarity on a number of things," Imtiyaz Khatib, Vice-President of Product Management at Avalara India, a compliance solutions provider lamented.

One of the government's meetings was under the chairmanship of the Commerce Secretary and another was co-chaired by the Secretary in the Ministry of Ports, Shipping and Waterways (MoPSW) and the Commerce Secretary.

Both were attended by senior officials, port authorities, shipping agencies, export promotion councils (EPCs), industry representatives, and other stakeholders. "If routes are getting deviated and shipments delayed, then what kind of excise duties, tariffs, and penalties do you have to pay," Mr. Khatib asked. "So, you're not getting a complete idea of what your total landed cost would be and that's where there's a lot of complications and challenges, which our MSMEs are trying to overcome to stay compliant within the system."

A large part of the problem is that MSMEs don't have the resources to hire large compliance teams or use specialised software.

"Unlike large companies, MSMEs do not have dedicated compliance teams," K.E. Raghunathan, National Chairman of the Association of Indian Entrepreneurs, explained.

"The entrepreneur is now burdened with navigating regulatory uncertainty, leading to higher costs, delayed shipments, and severe working capital stress."

"If this continues, India risks losing export competitiveness at the MSME level, where agility should have been our biggest strength," Mr. Raghunathan added.

Mr. Khatib further explained that most MSMEs use Microsoft Excel spreadsheets for their work because they cannot invest in systems that have everything inbuilt, including invoice and HS code management, master lists of all the duties and taxes, etc. "MSMEs mostly rely on fragmented systems that they're managing in different places," he said. This, he added, makes tracking changes and making corrections a time-consuming, error-prone, and tedious affair.

Pankaj Chadha, the chairman of the Engineering Exports Promotion Council of India (EEPC India) and an affected exporter himself, explained that there are three different types of disruptions MSMEs are facing due to the war in West Asia.

"The first kind of issue is when the cargo is diverted back to India. It has to then either be stored in a warehouse or the exporter has to then begin the 'back-to-town' procedure and take it back to their factory.

"Now, that procedure itself can be quite challenging and imposes quite a compliance burden," Mr. Chadha said. "Remember, also, for back-to-town cargo, you get nothing under the RELIEF scheme [announced by the government]."

The second kind of issue exporters are facing is when their shipments get routed to a different port due to safety concerns.

"The shipping company says its job is done, and that it is for the exporter to figure out how to take the cargo from there to the destination," Mr. Chadha said. The third factor is that many destinations, especially in Europe, have tariff quotas for particular products, such as steel.

These quotas open once every quarter, such as on April 1, July 1, October 1, and January 1. Those quotas get filled within the first day itself, Mr. Chadha said.

"So, if a shipment reaches those ports even a few days late, then they have to wait nearly 90 days before the quota is opened again," he explained.

"All of this again means warehousing, which is not only a huge economic cost, but is also a compliance burden."

Triple whammy

There are three different types of disruptions MSMEs face due to the West Asia conflict

- When a cargo is diverted back, it has to be stored in a warehouse or taken back to the factory
- When shipments get routed to a different port, it is left to the exporter to figure out the next step
- Many destinations have tariff quotas for particular products which get filled within the first day itself

KEY HIGHLIGHTS

Context of the News

- The Government of India held two inter-ministerial meetings involving the Ministry of Commerce and the Ministry of Ports, Shipping and Waterways to assess export disruptions.
- The crisis in West Asia (Middle East) has led to shipping route deviations, delays, and cargo returns.
- Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) are disproportionately affected due to:
  - Limited financial buffers
  - Lack of compliance infrastructure
- Exporters are facing uncertainty in tariffs, duties, and logistics costs, impacting competitiveness.

Key Points

- Logistical disruptionsRerouting of shipments due to unsafe maritime routes.
- Increased transit time and freight costs.
- Compliance burdenComplex procedures like "back-to-town" (return of export cargo to factory).
- No adequate relief under existing schemes for returned cargo.
- Working capital stressDelayed payments and increased warehousing costs.
- MSMEs lack capacity to absorb shocks compared to large firms.
- Tariff quota challengesEU and other markets operate quarterly tariff quotas (e.g., steel).
- Delayed shipments miss quota windows → additional duties.
- Technological constraintsMSMEs rely on fragmented systems (Excel-based) rather than integrated compliance tools.
- Institutional responseGovernment engaging with Export Promotion Councils (EPCs) and industry stakeholders.

Static Linkages

- MSMEs contribute about 30% to India's GDP and ~45% of exports (Ministry of MSME).
- Foreign Trade Policy (FTP) 2023 emphasizes export promotion and ease of doing business.
- Logistics Performance Index (World Bank) highlights efficiency of customs and shipping.
- WTO rules on tariffs, quotas, and trade facilitation (Trade Facilitation Agreement).
- Supply chain disruptions as studied in Economic Survey (post-COVID global shocks).
- Concepts:
  - Balance of Payments (BoP)
  - Trade elasticity & competitiveness
  - Non-tariff barriers and quotas

Critical Analysis

Issues / Challenges

- High compliance burden on MSMEs
- Rising logistics costs → loss of export competitiveness
- Policy gaps in handling returned/rerouted cargo
- Lack of technological adoption in MSMEs
- Global supply chain vulnerabilities

Implications

- Potential decline in exports
- Pressure on Balance of Payments (BoP)
- Weakening of MSME-led employment and growth

Way Forward

- Develop single-window digital compliance system for exporters
- Extend government relief to returned and rerouted cargo
- Promote technology adoption via subsidies for MSMEs
- Diversify trade routes (e.g., alternative corridors)
- Strengthen export credit and insurance (ECGC)
- Improve coordination with Export Promotion Councils (EPCs)

A modest plea for constitutional morality

PRATAP BHANU MEHTA

THERE IS a wry joke that the jurist Edward S Corwin once told: A doctor, an engineer and a politician were debating which of their callings was the most ancient. The doctor claimed that the removal of the rib from Adam's side was clearly a surgical operation. The engineer replied that even before Adam, the world had to be created out of chaos, surely an engineering feat. "Very true," said the politician, "but who do you think created the chaos?" Today, one might plausibly rewrite the joke: What might be called the "judicial complex" — that peculiar combination of Supreme Court judges and lawyers — could give politicians a run for their money as originators of chaos. The latest salvo in this vein is the debate over the term "constitutional morality."

According to reports, the solicitor general, in submissions before the Supreme Court in the Sabarimala case, has expressed scepticism about the judicial use of the term in recent judgments. There is, to be sure, a legitimate criticism to be made of some of its uses. For many, including this columnist, the term is not a judicial standard of adjudication. In an earlier formulation ("What is Constitutional Morality", Seminar 615, November 2010), I had suggested that constitutional morality refers, instead, to the formal virtues of a constitutional sensibility: Self-restraint, respect for plurality, deference to processes, scepticism towards authoritative claims of popular sovereignty, and a commitment to an open culture of criticism that lies at the heart of constitutionalism. There is also a case, often made in this column, against judicial overreach, against excessive deference to the judiciary, and for restoring greater space for parliamentary sovereignty.

But the context of the present attack matters. It should be clear that the critique of "constitutional morality" is not offered in service of the Constitution. It is, rather, part of a broader attempt to hollow it out.

There are at least two reasons to think so. One way of dismissing a term is to label it, what the philosopher J L Austin once called a "trouser term". A concept so indeterminate that it derives its meaning only in opposition to something else. The charge, then, is that "constitutional morality" is vague, defined merely against "societal morality". On this telling, it appears as a top-down, catch-all category. Its function is essentially to displace an organic, historically evolved, bottom-up set of norms. It becomes a judicial ruse, a means by which courts extend authority against society.

But this is a critique in bad faith. "Societal morality" is more of a trouser term, indeed, arguably, an even more vacuous one. One may concede that "constitutional morality" is indeterminate and that it cannot, by itself, yield a standard of adjudication. Yet it has at least this virtue: It gestures towards the kinds of reasons that ought to be in play in adjudication. In a case like Sabarimala, it invites us to ask: How are liberty and equality to be reconciled with the autonomy of institutions? When does a practice so burden the standing of members that their civic equality is compromised? These are difficult questions, but they are the right questions.

By contrast, invoking "societal morality" in this context does not advance an argument; it forecloses one. It is less a reason than a refusal of reason, a device to insulate social practices from scrutiny. It is no accident that the objection to "constitutional morality" has been most strenuously voiced in cases like *Navtej Singh Johar v Union of India*, where entrenched social prohibitions were tested against the constitutional commitments to freedom and equality. Whatever its vagueness, "constitutional morality" at least orients us toward those values. It is their substance that matters, not the label. "Societal morality", in this usage, is an attempt to immobilise reason, and that, precisely, is what makes it attractive.

The second reason for scepticism is more troubling. Even if "constitutional morality" does not furnish a rule of decision, it does provide a standpoint from which to judge the Court itself. The anxiety it provokes is not about vagueness. It is, rather, that the term casts an unflattering light on the Court's own trajectory, its drift, at times, toward a kind of judicial nihilism. The moral substance, procedural discipline, and predictive stability of law appear increasingly eroded, replaced by arbitrariness in process and uncertainty in outcome. It is not that plaintiffs cannot get relief. But which ones do, and on what grounds, appears increasingly random and contingent.

> In a case like Sabarimala, it invites us to ask: How are liberty and equality to be reconciled with the autonomy of institutions? When does a practice so burden the standing of members that their civic equality is compromised?

No one who takes the Constitution seriously can now say, with confidence, what it requires, or when the Court will choose to uphold its discipline. In recent weeks alone, several Rubicons seem to have been crossed. How, for instance, is one to assess the Court's prickly and disproportionate handling of a minor episode involving an NCERT textbook, an episode in which segments of the Bar seemed more eager to appease judicial sensitivities than to defend principle, turning the proceedings into a theatre of the absurd? More gravely, how is one to come to terms with a situation in which the Court appears untroubled by the disenfranchisement of lakhs of voters in West Bengal without full due process, suggesting, in effect, that no serious constitutional injury occurs even when eligible citizens are unable to vote because the Court has endorsed a flawed process?

"Constitutional morality" may not tell us what the right answer is in Sabarimala, how textbooks ought to be written, or which voters possess valid documentation. But it can still serve as a diagnostic. It alerts us to the presence of arbitrariness and unaccountable power; to moments when freedom and equality are treated with suspicion; to instances where a court ceases to enable reason and instead begins to immobilise it.

Question constitutional morality by all means. But a reactionary assault on constitutional morality is a misunderstanding of its character. It is, in effect, to sow the seeds of moral and judicial chaos, an outcome to which our judiciary now seems, regrettably, determined to contribute.

The writer is contributing editor, The Indian Express

Constitutional morality prioritizes fundamental rights over majoritarian views.
Concerns RaisedJudicial inconsistency and unpredictability.
Risk of undermining parliamentary sovereignty.
Potential erosion of procedural discipline in law.

KEY HIGHLIGHTS

Context of the News

- Recent debates have emerged regarding the judicial use of "constitutional morality" in court rulings.
- The Solicitor General expressed scepticism about its application before the Supreme Court of India in the context of the Sabarimala case (Indian Young Lawyers Association v. State of Kerala).
- The concept has been widely invoked in landmark judgments such as Navtej Singh Johar v. Union of India.
- Critics argue that the term is vague and enables judicial overreach, while proponents view it as essential to uphold constitutional values like liberty and equality.
- The debate reflects tensions between judicial interpretation and societal norms.

Key Points

- Constitutional MoralityRefers to adherence to core constitutional values: liberty, equality, fraternity, and rule of law.
- Emphasizes restraint, respect for diversity, and institutional balance.
- Judicial UseUsed as a guiding principle in adjudication, especially in rights-based cases.
- Helps courts test laws and practices against constitutional ideals rather than popular sentiment.
- CriticismConsidered vague and lacking precise legal definition.
- Seen as enabling judicial activism and expansion of judicial power.
- Societal Morality vs Constitutional MoralitySocietal morality reflects prevailing social norms.

Static Linkages

- Concept of Rule of Law (A.V. Dicey)
- Fundamental Rights – Articles 14, 19, 21
- Doctrine of Basic Structure
- Separation of Powers
- Judicial Review
- Constitutional Supremacy
- Liberty, Equality, Fraternity (Preamble)
- Social Reform vs Tradition debates (NCERT Polity)

Critical Analysis

Advantages

- Protects Fundamental Rights against discriminatory practices.
- Acts as a check on majoritarianism.
- Facilitates progressive social reform.
- Strengthens constitutional supremacy.

Disadvantages

- Conceptual vagueness → subjective interpretation.
- Risk of judicial overreach into legislative domain.
- Weakens predictability of law.
- May undermine democratic decision-making.

Challenges

- Balancing judicial activism vs restraint.
- Harmonising individual rights and institutional autonomy.
- Ensuring consistency in judgments.

Way Forward

- Clearly define scope and limits of constitutional morality.
- Strengthen reasoned judgments and judicial discipline.
- Promote institutional balance among organs of government.
- Encourage constitutional literacy and awareness.
- Use the concept sparingly with objective standards.

CHANAKYA IAS ACADEMY

LPG shock could impact nutrition outcomes

DIPA SINHA AND KALYANI RAGHUNATHAN

THE ONGOING war in West Asia has resulted in an LPG crisis in India. The disruption in supplies has led to higher prices, panic buying, long queues and black-marketing. Reports have also indicated a reduction in output of small industries reliant on LPG, and of migrant workers in cities like Delhi, Mumbai and Surat starting to return to their villages, reminiscent of the Covid lockdown. Sensibly, the government has prioritised domestic supply over industrial (and restaurant) use and has sought alternative imports.

What are the implications of this supply reduction on access to and preparation of a diet that meets India's nutritional guidelines? There are both direct and indirect effects. The rising cost of cooking fuel immediately raises the costs of preparing meals. This is not insignificant; according to the nationally representative Household Consumption Expenditure Survey (HCES) data from 2023-24, fuel and light constitute 6.1 per cent and 5.6 per cent of total monthly per capita expenditure in rural and urban areas respectively, close to the amount spent on medical expenses or education.

There are also several knock-on effects. India is heavily dependent on imports for both finished fertilisers and raw materials. The disruption to fertiliser supply chains — combined with rising costs of mechanisation and transportation — is likely to increase the costs of cultivation substantially, leading to the risk of food inflation.

These could erode access to a healthy diet. Even prior to this crisis, healthy diets were unaffordable for many. We use the HCES 2023-24 to estimate the Cost of a Healthy Diet (CoHD), which is the minimum daily rupee amount one would need to spend to meet the ICMR's food-based dietary guidelines. We estimate the national average CoHD for a non-vegetarian diet at Rs 73.1 per person per day in 2023-24, suggesting that between 25 to 49 per cent of the population could not afford the raw cost of the foods that would make up a healthy diet, depending on which threshold one used.

However, preparing a meal includes other costs beyond the raw food costs, such as the cost of spices and, more importantly, of fuel. When these costs are accounted for, the CoHD increases by about Rs 9.5, of which Rs 6.5 comes from the cost of the fuel used to prepare the meal. This means that the proportion of the population who cannot afford a healthy diet increases to 32-62 per cent, depending on the affordability threshold used. With this war, the contribution of cooking fuel costs to the overall cost of meal preparation is likely to rise substantially; along with the possible rise in food prices, this will further reduce the affordability of a healthy diet.

What should be the way forward? Our research highlights the importance of expanding the focus to include dietary diversity as well as other accompanying factors, such as access to and costs of cooking fuel, the reach and coverage of social safety nets, and the division of labour within the home – all of which come together to determine what people ultimately eat. In the immediate term, expanding the scope of social safety net programmes to subsidise the cost of nutritious foods like pulses, vegetables, eggs and flesh foods, and nuts and seeds would help buffer rising food prices for these perishable and semi-perishable items, and raise consumption to the levels recommended by the ICMR. Continued support through schemes like the PMUY is critical, as is the inclusion of migrant populations within its ambit, even if only temporarily. In the longer term, the availability of nutritious foods could be enhanced through agriculture policies.

The current situation of increasing fuel costs and the prospect of a global food price surge underscores the relevance of a food systems approach to food policy. In a country with a high and stubborn level of malnutrition, such shocks could have immediate effects on people's health and nutrition outcomes. We must not lose sight of the need for nutrition security if we are to weather this storm.

Sinha is at Centre for the Study of the Indian Economy, Azim Premji University and Raghunathan is an independent researcher. Views are personal

With this war, the contribution of cooking fuel costs to the overall cost of meal preparation is likely to rise substantially; along with the possible rise in food prices, this will further reduce the affordability of a healthy diet

KEY HIGHLIGHTS

Context of the News

- The ongoing West Asia crisis has disrupted global supply chains of LPG, fertilisers, and energy resources.
- India, with high import dependence on energy and fertiliser inputs, is facing rising cooking fuel prices and supply constraints.
- Reports indicate panic buying, black-marketing, and stress on LPG-dependent MSMEs.
- Early signs of reverse migration similar to COVID-19 lockdown in India are visible.
- Government has prioritised domestic LPG supply over commercial use and is exploring alternative import sources.

Key Points

- Rising Cost of Cooking FuelAs per HCES 2023–24:
  - Fuel & light constitute ~6% of monthly per capita expenditure.
- Increase in LPG prices → higher cost of meal preparation.
- Cost of Healthy Diet (CoHD)Based on Indian Council of Medical Research dietary guidelines:
  - ₹73/day (minimum food cost).
- Including cooking costs → increases by ~₹9.5/day.
- 32–62% population unable to afford a healthy diet.
- Food Inflation MechanismDependence on fertiliser imports → supply disruption.
- Rising transportation & mechanisation costs.
- Leads to cost-push inflation in agriculture.
- Impact on NutritionDecline in consumption of:
  - Pulses, vegetables, protein-rich foods
- Shift towards cheaper, calorie-dense cereals → nutritional imbalance.
- Economic ImpactLPG-dependent MSMEs face production decline.
- Migrant labour returning → urban economic slowdown.

Static Linkages

- Engel's Law – relationship between income and food expenditure.
- Food security vs nutrition security distinction.
- Cost-push inflation (input-driven price rise).
- India's energy import dependence (~85% crude oil).
- Limitations of cereal-based PDS.
- Link between agricultural input costs and food inflation.

Critical Analysis

- PositivesPrioritisation of household LPG supply safeguards basic welfare.
- Existing schemes like Pradhan Mantri Ujjwala Yojana ensure clean cooking access.
- ChallengesDual burden of fuel inflation + food inflation.
- Rising unaffordability of nutritious diets.
- MSME slowdown and migrant distress.
- PDS remains calorie-centric, not nutrition-sensitive.
- Core IssueRisk of transition from nutrition security to subsistence-level food consumption.

Way Forward

- Expand food subsidy basket to include pulses, proteins, and vegetables.
- Strengthen PMUY with targeted refill subsidies and migrant inclusion.
- Promote alternative cooking energy (biogas, solar).
- Enhance fertiliser self-reliance and diversify imports.
- Adopt a food systems approach integrating agriculture, nutrition, and energy policies.

A war lesson: Think big, be bold, at home

THE FIRST wave of globalisation from the 1870s, after the opening of Suez Canal and laying of a permanent trans-atlantic cable connecting Europe and North America, resulted in the US becoming the world's economic superpower. It maintained that position even during the war and depression years (1914-45), when global trade collapsed and recovered gradually over the next three to four decades. The second wave, following the disintegration of the Soviet Bloc in 1989 and lasting till the 2010s, led to China's emergence as the "world's factory" and "mega-trader". This decade ought to have been India's, given its favourable youth demographics (like China's during the 1980s to the 2010s) and policy initiatives spurring digitisation (through Jan Dhan-Aadhaar-Mobile), formalisation (GST and demonetisation) and investments in physical infrastructure, from ports and airports to highways and renewable energy. Sadly, the demographic dividend from a labour force "bulge" hasn't materialised due to successive disruptions — Covid, wars in Ukraine and Iran, and US President Donald Trump's unilateral tariffs.

The basis of globalisation — founded on the free movement of goods, services, capital, people and ideas across borders — has been upended. Today, the assumption of wars being a near-impossibility in an age of hyper-economic interdependence between countries lies in tatters. The current decade has seen two major episodes of migrant workers in big cities and industrial centres leaving for their villages and hometowns, the first exodus during the Covid lockdown and the second on account of cooking gas shortages triggered by the Iran war. In short, while China rode the second wave of globalisation to realise the economic growth potential from its high working age-to-dependent population ratio, India has been relatively unlucky on that score.

Whether these setbacks are temporary or not, Indian policymakers and firms will have to factor geopolitical risks into their growth strategies. It would mean diversifying energy and raw material supply chains, and building buffers (fiscal and physical) against unexpected shocks. No less important is staying the course on reforms and macroeconomic stability, which are the best possible insurance against market volatility and a guarantee of investors returning once the panic has subsided. The energy supply and price shocks from the war, reverberating across sectors, call for policy actions beyond picking low-hanging fruit. Reforming the fertiliser subsidy regime that promotes imbalanced nutrient use — especially over-application of urea — and fixing the losses of state discoms can wait no longer. The war has shrunk the economic and political space for easy solutions.

KEY HIGHLIGHTS

Context of the News

- Globalisation is undergoing stress due to COVID-19, Russia-Ukraine conflict, and West Asia tensions (Iran-related disruptions).
- Historically:
  - First wave (1870–1914): Rise of the United States as an economic power.
  - Second wave (post-1991): Rise of China as "world's factory".
- India entered the current decade with:
  - Favourable demographic dividend.
  - Structural reforms: JAM (Jan Dhan–Aadhaar–Mobile), GST, infrastructure push.
- However, repeated global disruptions have slowed India's ability to capitalise on this opportunity.

Key Points

- Globalisation Under StrainRise of protectionism, tariffs, and geopolitical conflicts.
- Weakening of free movement of goods, capital, labour.
- India's Growth ConstraintsPandemic and wars disrupted supply chains and labour markets.
- Reverse migration exposed weaknesses in urban employment.
- Demographic Dividend ChallengeHigh working-age population not translating into employment gains.
- Energy and Supply Chain RisksHeavy reliance on imports (oil, gas, fertilisers).
- Global price shocks impacting inflation and industry.
- Structural IssuesFertiliser subsidy distortion → excessive urea usage.
- Loss-making DISCOMs affecting power sector efficiency.
- Macroeconomic ConcernsInflationary pressures.
- Uncertainty affecting private investment.

Static Linkages

- Demographic Dividend – Economic Survey; NCERT (Indian Economic Development).
- Globalisation phases – NCERT (Contemporary World Politics).
- Subsidy and fiscal burden – Budget & Economic Survey.
- Balance of Payments & trade shocks – NCERT Macroeconomics.
- Power sector reforms – UDAY Scheme, Electricity Act.
- Food security & fertiliser imbalance – Soil Health Card Scheme.

Critical Analysis

Positives

- Infrastructure and digital reforms provide long-term growth base.
- Opportunity for supply chain diversification (China+1 strategy).
- Policy push towards self-reliance.

Negatives / Challenges

- Demographic dividend not translating into jobs.
- External shocks increasing vulnerability.
- Persistent informal sector instability.
- Distorted subsidies harming agriculture sustainability.
- Weak power sector finances.

Way Forward

- Promote labour-intensive manufacturing (MSMEs, textiles).
- Diversify energy imports and expand renewables.
- Reform fertiliser subsidy (nutrient-based approach).
- Strengthen DISCOM reforms and reduce losses.
- Build urban employment safety nets for migrants.
- Maintain macroeconomic stability (inflation + fiscal discipline).
- Enhance trade integration via FTAs.

A new measure reframes heat crisis

THE ONSET of climate change has fundamentally transformed the understanding of heat stress on humans. People in most parts of the world are not only experiencing warmer weather, but the rise in temperatures is also accompanied by changing moisture patterns. Humans are resilient to high temperatures, provided sweat can evaporate. However, when the air is saturated with moisture, sweat lingers on the skin, and the body's thermoregulatory system is put under duress. The combined effect of the two variables on human health is not totally unknown to medical science. The wet bulb approach, for instance, attempts to recalibrate temperatures by accounting for heat and humidity. A 35°C wet-bulb temperature is generally considered the theoretical upper limit of human endurance. A new study published in *Nature Communications* draws on recent episodes of intense heat and humidity to conclude that this safe limit could be much lower. A 31°C wet-bulb temperature can be unforgiving for the elderly and people who work outdoors.

The new understanding reframes India's climate challenge. Several cities routinely report heat indices that push human tolerance to its limits, even when wet-bulb temperatures remain below 35°C. The tragedy in Navi Mumbai, three years ago, when sun stroke claimed 13 lives even when the temperature, according to the Met department, was about 35°C, underlined the need to redraw the metrics of well-being during summer. However, planning has been slow to factor in the new imperatives. Concrete-dense neighbourhoods, sparse tree cover, and inadequate ventilation create "urban heat islands" where temperatures can be several degrees higher than surrounding rural areas. In such environments, nighttime offers little space to recover from the heat stress of the day. Heat thresholds are also shaped by social conditions. For construction workers, farm labourers, street vendors, and those who work in the gig economy, heat and humidity are occupational hazards.

In recent years, Indian cities have tried to draw up heat action plans. However, these plans are often based on dry-heat thresholds, and not the more dangerous combination of heat and humidity. Most of them are also not attuned to local idiosyncrasies. Protecting people from heat, humidity and rainfall requires granular knowledge. Dealing with a new form of heat will require joining several dots. India's cities do not have time to lose.

KEY HIGHLIGHTS

Context

- A recent study published in Nature Communications highlights that human tolerance to heat is significantly lower when humidity is considered.
- The earlier theoretical survival limit of 35°C wet-bulb temperature is being revised, with evidence suggesting ~31°C can already be dangerous, especially for vulnerable populations.
- In India, rising heat + humidity conditions along with rapid urbanisation are intensifying heat stress.
- Existing Heat Action Plans (HAPs) remain largely focused on dry heat, making them inadequate for emerging climate realities.

Key Points

- Wet-bulb temperature:
  - Indicates combined effect of temperature + humidity.
  - High humidity reduces sweat evaporation → impairs body cooling.
- New scientific finding:
  - Dangerous threshold may be ~31°C wet-bulb, not 35°C.
- Urban Heat Island Effect:
  - Concrete structures, low vegetation → higher temperatures than rural areas.
  - Elevated night-time temperatures prevent recovery from daytime heat stress.
- Vulnerable sections:
  - Elderly, children
  - Outdoor workers (construction, agriculture, street vendors, gig workers)
- India's policy gaps:
  - Heat Action Plans based on dry temperature thresholds.
  - Lack of localised micro-climate data.
  - Weak occupational heat safety regulations.

Static Linkages

- Wet-bulb temperature – concept in climatology (NCERT Geography).
- Urban Heat Island effect – urban geography & environment.
- NDMA Heatwave Guidelines (2016) – preparedness, awareness, early warning.
- Disaster Management Act, 2005 – legal framework for disaster response.
- IPCC Reports – highlight rise in compound climate extremes.
- Article 21 – Right to life includes health and safe environment.

Critical Analysis

Positives

- Improved scientific understanding of heat stress using wet-bulb temperature.
- Expansion of Heat Action Plans across Indian cities.
- Better early warning systems by IMD.

Challenges

- Continued reliance on dry heat metrics → underestimation of risk.
- Urban planning deficits leading to heat islands.
- Socio-economic inequality increases vulnerability.
- Lack of granular and local climate data.
- Absence of legal safeguards for outdoor workers.

Implications

- Increased heat-related mortality and illness.
- Reduced labour productivity and economic output.
- Growing public health burden.

Way Forward

- Integrate wet-bulb temperature thresholds into Heat Action Plans.
- Develop city-specific climate and heat vulnerability mapping.
- Promote urban cooling strategies:
  - Green cover, cool roofs, reflective materials.
- Enforce occupational heat safety standards (rest, hydration, timing shifts).
- Establish public cooling centres and water access points.
- Strengthen last-mile dissemination of heat alerts.
- Align policies with climate-resilient urban planning (NITI Aayog recommendations).