

DAILY NEWSP APER ANALYSIS

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South's share of seats will not be cut, PM and Shah tell Lok Sabha

Home Minister slams those spreading misconceptions; he says LS seats of South will rise from 129 to 195, and reassures TN that its 'power is increasing'; Priyanka says if the Constitution Amendment Bill is passed, 'democracy will be finished'

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Union Home Minister Amit Shah on Thursday told the Lok Sabha that the bills to amend the women's reservation law and carry out a fresh delimitation exercise will keep current proportional representation of southern States intact while increasing the absolute number of seats for each State approximately by 50%.

While the Prime Minister gave an assurance that the proportional distribution of seats among States will be maintained, it was the Home Minister who gave a detailed scenario for each southern State after the three Bills become law. The debate followed the introduction of three Bills: the Constitution (131st Amendment) Bill, 2026, to enable implementation of the women's reservation by the 2029 Lok Sabha polls; the Delimitation Bill, 2026, to adjust parliamentary and Assembly constituencies through a Delimitation Commission;



and the Union Territories Laws (Amendment) Bill, 2026, to extend the reservation to the legislatures of Delhi, Puducherry, and Jammu & Kashmir. Mr. Shah said that as the Minister piloting the Bill, he was placing this interpretation before the House officially. "I understand my responsibility. Those who are spreading misconceptions perhaps do not understand," he said.

Shah's illustration
The Minister showed how the representation of the southern States would not go down. The Lok Sabha will have 816 seats after de-

Proposed figures

The table shows the estimated number of seats for southern States as announced by Union Home Minister Amit Shah

State	Current seats	As a share of current 543 seats	50% increase (approx.)	New seats for states of 816 seats
Karnataka	28	5.15%	42	5.14%
Andhra Pradesh	25	4.60%	38	4.65%
Telangana	17	3.13%	26	3.18%
Tamil Nadu	30	5.53%	45	5.52%
Kerala	20	3.68%	30	3.67%
Total	129	23.76%	195	23.87%

limitation. He said that in a House of existing 543 members, Karnataka has 28 seats, or 5.15% of MPs. After the Bill is passed, Karnataka's share will become 42, and its percentage of seats in a Lok Sabha of 816 members will be 5.14%. Andhra Pradesh, with its 25 seats (4.60%), will have 38 MPs (4.65%). Likewise, Telangana's 17 seats (3.13%) will become 26 (3.18%), Kerala's 20 seats (3.68%) will touch 30 (3.67%), and Tamil Nadu's 30 seats (5.53%) will become 45 (5.52%). Mr. Shah said many MPs from Tamil Nadu have come wearing black clothes, but he reassured

the people of the State that "your power is not decreasing, it is increasing." He said the number of Lok Sabha seats in the five southern States will go up from the existing 129 to 195, with the percentage share increasing from 23.76% to 23.87%. Participating in the debate, Congress leader Priyanka Gandhi Vadra slammed the delimitation and said that "if the Constitution Amendment Bill is passed in Parliament, democracy will be finished in India." Samajwadi Party chief Akhlesh Yadav, while expressing support for wo-

men's reservation law, said it should be implemented only after the ongoing Census is complete.

The Home Minister said he would give his detailed reply in the Lok Sabha on Friday.

"I will explain, provided they sit to listen and do not walk out. I will explain it with such simplicity that even a child in KG (kindergarten) would understand," Mr. Shah said. The government will need the support from parties outside the National Democratic Alliance to pass the Constitution Amendment Bill since it requires two-thirds majority. In the current Lok Sabha strength of 540 members, the government needs the support of 360 members but is falling short by over 60 MPs.

Responding to Ms. Vadra's accusation that the government will put its own people in the Delimitation Commission, he said: "We have not made any changes to the Delimitation Commission Act. We have repeated your Delimitation Commission Act down to the full stops and commas."

- Core Issue:
 - Balancing demographic representation vs federal equity.

Static Linkages

- Article 81 – Composition of Lok Sabha
- Article 82 – Readjustment of seats after every Census
- Delimitation Commission:
 - Appointed by the President
 - Orders have force of law and are not subject to judicial review
- Delimitation Acts: 1952, 1962, 1972, 2002
- Freeze on Seat Allocation:
 - Based on 1971 Census
 - Extended till 2026 (42nd Amendment, 84th Amendment)
- Principle: "One person, one vote, one value" vs federal balance

Critical Analysis

Positives

- Enhances representative democracy by adjusting to population growth.
- Enables long-pending women's political reservation.
- Attempts to maintain inter-state balance through proportional stability.

Concerns

- Southern States may lose relative influence due to population-based redistribution.
- Penalizes States that succeeded in population control.
- Census delay raises concerns over data accuracy.
- Risk of politicization of delimitation process.
- Potential strain on cooperative federalism.

Key Constitutional Debate

- Equity based on population (democratic principle)
- vs
- Equity based on federal fairness and performance

Way Forward

- Conduct credible and updated Census before delimitation.
- Build political consensus, especially with southern States.
- Consider balanced criteria (population + development indicators).
- Ensure independent, neutral Delimitation Commission.
- Provide clear timeline for women's reservation implementation.
- Strengthen federal dialogue mechanisms (Inter-State Council).

KEY HIGHLIGHTS

Context of the News

- The Union Government introduced three key Bills in Lok Sabha:
 - Constitution (131st Amendment) Bill, 2026 – to operationalize women's reservation.
 - Delimitation Bill, 2026 – to enable fresh delimitation of constituencies.
 - Union Territories Laws (Amendment) Bill, 2026 – to extend reservation to UT legislatures.
- Proposal to increase Lok Sabha strength from 543 to ~816 seats after delimitation.
- Government assured that proportional representation of States will remain unchanged, addressing concerns of southern States.
- Debate triggered due to concerns over federal balance, population-based representation, and timing before Census.

Key Points

- Increase in Seats: Approximately 50% rise in Lok Sabha seats across all States.
- Southern States' Share:
 - Absolute seats increase, but percentage share remains nearly constant (~23.7% → ~23.8%).
- Women's Reservation:
 - लागू after Census + delimitation exercise.
 - Covers Lok Sabha, State Assemblies, and select UTs.
- Delimitation Commission:
 - Will redraw constituencies based on latest data.
- Political Requirement:
 - Constitutional Amendment requires special majority (2/3rd present & voting + majority of total strength).

Lebanon and Israel have agreed to 10-day ceasefire, says U.S. President Trump

Stanly Johny

U.S. President Donald Trump on Thursday announced a 10-day ceasefire between Israel and Lebanon, effective from midnight.

"I just had excellent conversations with the Highly Respected President Joseph Aoun, of Lebanon, and Prime Minister Bibi Netanyahu, of Israel. These two Leaders have agreed that in order to achieve PEACE between their Countries, they will formally begin a 10-day ceasefire at 5 P.M. EST," Mr. Trump wrote in a social media post.

The ceasefire, if comes into effect, could strengthen the two-week U.S.-Iran ceasefire which was announced on April 8. Extending the truce to Lebanon has been one of the key demands of Iran. When Mr. Trump announced the Iran truce, Israel said Lebanon was not part of it and stepped up strikes on the country.

Hezbollah part of deal Mr. Trump said the ceasefire would include Iran-backed Hezbollah. "Today they're going to be having a ceasefire, and that'll include Hezbollah," Mr. Trump told presspersons at the White House. Mr. Netanyahu said that



Lebanese army soldiers secure the site of an Israeli drone attack that targeted a vehicle on a highway in Beirut. AFP

the 10-day ceasefire with Lebanon offered an opportunity for a "historic peace agreement" with Beirut, but insisted that the disarmament of militant group Hezbollah remained a precondition.

"We have an opportunity to make a historic peace agreement with Lebanon," he said in a televised speech, adding that Israel will maintain a 10-km "security zone" along the border in southern Lebanon.

Hezbollah lawmaker Ibrahim al-Moussawi told AFP that the Lebanese group would respect a ceasefire if Israeli attacks on the militants stopped. "We in Hezbollah will cautiously adhere to the ceasefire on the condition that it is a comprehensive halt to hostilities against us and that Israel not use it to carry out any assassinations," he said. "We ex-

press thanks to Iran for having applied pressure in Lebanon's favour," he said, adding that "the ceasefire would not have happened without Iran considering the ceasefire as equal to closing the Strait of Hormuz," he added.

Mr. Trump said in another post that he would invite Mr. Netanyahu and Mr. Aoun to the White House "for the first meaningful talks between Israel and Lebanon since 1983. Both sides want to see peace, and I believe that will happen, quickly!" He also said on Thursday that Iran has agreed to hand over its store of enriched uranium and that the two sides were "close" to a peace deal ending six weeks of conflict. (With inputs from AFP)

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KEY HIGHLIGHTS

Context of the News

- Donald Trump announced a 10-day ceasefire between Israel and Lebanon after consultations with:
 - Joseph Aoun
 - Benjamin Netanyahu
- The move extends the earlier U.S.-Iran ceasefire (April 2026), aiming to reduce wider regional tensions.
- The ceasefire includes Hezbollah, a major Iran-backed non-state actor operating from southern Lebanon.
- Israel proposed maintaining a 10-km security buffer zone along its northern border.
- Potential revival of Israel-Lebanon diplomatic engagement after decades (post-1983 agreement).

Key Points

- Nature: Temporary ceasefire (10 days)
- Stakeholders: Israel, Lebanon, Hezbollah, Iran (indirect), U.S.
 - Conditions: Hezbollah: conditional compliance (complete halt of Israeli attacks)
 - Israel: insists on Hezbollah's disarmament
- Iran's Role: Strategic pressure for Lebanon's inclusion; linkage with regional security concerns
 - Strategic Dimension: Risk to energy routes (Strait of Hormuz relevance)
 - Escalation could affect global oil supply and shipping lanes

- Diplomatic Development: Possible White House-hosted talks for long-term peace

Static Linkages

- West Asia geopolitics: Region marked by proxy conflicts and external interventions
- Non-state actors: Influence sovereignty and security (e.g., Hezbollah)
- Buffer zones: Used to reduce direct military confrontation
- Lebanon's polity: Confessional system (power-sharing among religious groups)
- Strait of Hormuz: Critical chokepoint for global energy security

Critical Analysis

Significance:

- Immediate de-escalation of conflict in a volatile region
- Inclusion of Hezbollah indicates pragmatic diplomacy beyond state actors
- Opportunity for revival of peace negotiations
- Reduces uncertainty in global energy markets

Challenges:

- Short-term arrangement; lacks structural resolution
- Core issue unresolved: Hezbollah's disarmament vs Lebanon's sovereignty
- Deep-rooted Israel-Iran rivalry persists
- High trust deficit; risk of ceasefire violations
- Complex internal dynamics within Lebanon

Way Forward

- Transition from ceasefire to formal, time-bound peace process
- Strengthen UN peacekeeping (UNIFIL) and monitoring mechanisms
- Address root causes:
 - Border disputes
 - Armed non-state actors
- Promote multilateral engagement (UN, regional powers)
- Initiate confidence-building measures (CBMs):
 - Humanitarian aid
 - Economic cooperation
- Balance security concerns with political stability in Lebanon

The institutional sluggishness of the legal system

For the millions of Indians who have spent years navigating the labyrinthine corridors of our legal system, the courthouse is often a place where hope goes to languish. While high profile cases capture the headlines and move through the docket with visible momentum, the average citizen finds himself trapped in a cycle of adjournments and procedural hurdles that can span generations. We have reached a point where the phrase "justice delayed is justice denied" is no longer a warning but a standard operating procedure.

It's time for the focus to shift away from the judge holding the gavel and towards the people standing in the dock. The urgency of judicial reform in India is not a professional concern for lawyers or a theoretical exercise for academics; it is a fundamental human rights crisis that demands a total reimagining of how the state delivers on its promise of fairness.

The excruciating wait

The primary grievance of the common person is the sheer, suffocating weight of pendency. With over five crore cases currently clogging the arteries of our courts, the system has become its own worst enemy. For a layman, the legal process feels like a black hole where time and money disappear without a clear horizon for resolution. This backlog embodies the lawbreaker and exhausts the law-abiding. When a land dispute takes 20 years to resolve, the winner often finds the victory hollow, having spent more on legal fees than the property was worth.

The institutional sluggishness of the Indian legal system has transformed the pursuit of justice into an endurance test, giving rise to the grim observation that "the process is the punishment." Unnecessary procedural bottlenecks and the culture of frequent, and often frivolous adjournments create a gravitational pull that keeps cases in limbo for decades, effectively stripping the accused of their dignity, livelihood, and social standing long before a verdict is ever reached. This systemic failure is most visible in the tragic stories of individuals charged with grave offences who are eventually acquitted, only to find their lives in ruins and their prime years spent behind bars, without compensation.

It is particularly unconscionable that those charged under stringent anti-terrorism laws, such as the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act (UAPA), languish in overcrowded prisons without trial and without the possibility of bail, as the prima facie evidence standard often makes



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incarceration the rule rather than the exception. To uphold the constitutional promise of liberty, the judiciary must urgently lay down clear, mandatory guidelines that fix a firm timeline – perhaps no longer than one or two years – within which the state must either commence a meaningful trial or grant the accused bail.

This transition requires a radical embrace of the 21st century. For too long, our courts have operated as if they were frozen in the colonial era, reliant on mountains of physical files, and the personal presence of litigants who must often travel hundreds of miles just to hear a new date for the hearing. The digital revolution that has transformed how we bank, shop, and communicate must now also conquer the judiciary. Artificial Intelligence (AI) and data-driven case management are not luxuries, but necessary tools to dismantle the backlog. Imagine a system where AI handles the routine administrative filing, flags delays, and even assists in legal research, allowing judges to focus their cognitive energy on the heart of the matter.

Need for inclusivity and accessibility

However, a faster court is only half the battle; we also require a more inclusive one. Citizens' trust in the law is deeply tied to whether they see themselves reflected in the people who interpret it. The judiciary has long been criticised for being an insular "old boys' club," where the glass ceiling for women and marginalised communities remains intact, with too many judges being relatives of earlier generations of judges. True reform means breaking these barriers to ensure that the Bench represents the vast and diverse tapestry of India. This is not about identity politics; it is about judicial quality. A Bench that understands the lived realities of a diverse population is a Bench that can deliver more nuanced and empathetic rulings. When a woman or a person from a historically oppressed community sits in judgment, she brings a perspective that enriches the law and makes it more responsive to the nuances of Indian society.

Beyond the composition of the Bench, there is the crushing issue of affordability. In its current form, justice is a luxury good. The cost of hiring competent counsel and the incidental expenses of long term litigation effectively price out a significant portion of the population. India must overhaul the legal aid system, transforming it into a high-calibre institution that offers the poor a comparable quality of the representation available to the rich. If the state can provide food

and education, it must also provide the means for a citizen to defend their life and liberty.

Furthermore, the geographical centralisation of our highest courts remains a relic of the past. The idea that a litigant from south India must travel to the capital for a final appeal is an unnecessary burden. Regional Benches or a more robust system of virtual hearings for the Supreme Court would go a long way in making the highest level of justice a local reality rather than a distant dream.

Beneath these logistical changes lies the soul of the reform: the preservation of constitutional morality and judicial independence. The people need a judiciary that acts as a fearless referee, one that can hold the powerful to account without blinking. This independence is the bedrock of a functioning democracy. Yet, independence should not be confused with a lack of accountability. By opening up the process – through live-streaming of important cases and clearer criteria for judicial appointments – the court can rebuild the "social contract" it has with the people.

A systemic overhaul

The country must stop treating judicial reform as a series of small, incremental adjustments and start treating it as a national emergency. The current state of affairs is a slow-motion catastrophe that erodes the rule of law every day. The people are not looking for grand speeches or ceremonial promises; they are looking for a system that works, and is fast and fair. We need to move away from the adversarial culture that views every legal disagreement as a battle to the death, toward a culture of resolution. We need judges who are as comfortable with a computer screen as they are with a law book, and a legal profession that values the closing of a case more than the prolongation of a fee.

As we move towards 'Viksit Bharat' 2047, the measure of our success as a nation will not just be our GDP or our technological prowess, but how we treat the person seeking justice in our courts. If we fail to reform, we risk a future where the law is seen merely as a tool of the powerful rather than as a shield for the weak.

But if we succeed, we can create a system where the scales of justice are finally balanced, ensuring that no Indian is ever again forced to wait a lifetime for a truth that should have been delivered in a day. The time for deliberation has passed; the time for a transformation that puts the citizen first, is now.

Static Linkages

- Article 21 guarantees right to life and personal liberty, interpreted to include speedy trial.
- Directive Principles emphasize equal justice and free legal aid (Article 39A).
- Concept of Rule of Law (Dicey) ensuring equality before law.
- Separation of powers and judicial independence as basic structure doctrine.
- Legal Services Authorities Act, 1987 for providing free legal aid.

Critical Analysis

Significance / Positives

- Judicial reforms can strengthen rule of law and democratic governance.
- Digitisation (e-Courts) improves efficiency and transparency.
- ADR mechanisms reduce burden on formal courts.

Challenges

- Persistent vacancies and low capacity in judiciary.
- Procedural rigidity and adjournment culture.
- Digital divide affecting access to e-justice.
- Prolonged detention under special laws raises civil liberty concerns.
- Delays impact economic development and contract enforcement.

Way Forward

- Increase judicial capacity: Fill vacancies; improve infrastructure.
- Time-bound justice delivery: Fix disposal timelines.
- Technology adoption: Expand e-filing, virtual courts, AI tools.
- Strengthen ADR: Mediation, arbitration, Lok Adalats.
- Procedural reforms: Limit adjournments; simplify processes.
- Improve legal aid: Ensure quality representation for poor.
- Decentralisation: Consider regional benches of Supreme Court.

KEY HIGHLIGHTS

Context of the News

- India's judicial system is facing a severe backlog, with over 5 crore pending cases across courts.
- Delays in justice delivery have led to concerns over violation of fundamental rights, especially "justice delayed is justice denied."
- Undertrials, including those booked under stringent laws like JAPA, often remain in custody for long periods without trial.
- Increasing demand for digitisation, AI integration, and procedural reforms to address systemic inefficiencies.
- Calls for enhancing accessibility, inclusivity, and affordability of justice delivery mechanisms.

Key Points

- Pendency Crisis: Over 5 crore cases pending; delays undermine rule of law.
- Procedural Bottlenecks: Frequent adjournments and complex procedures prolong litigation.
- Undertrial Issues: High proportion of prison population are undertrials (NCRB data ~75%).
- Digital Gap: Courts still rely heavily on physical files; limited adoption of e-courts.
- Judicial Infrastructure Deficit: Low judge-to-population ratio (~21 judges per million vs recommended 50).
- Access Barriers: High legal costs and geographical centralisation (especially Supreme Court).
- Representation Issues: Lack of diversity in judiciary affects inclusivity and public trust.

India's rural models are shaping development diplomacy

When India launched the National Rural Livelihood Mission (NRLM) in 2011, under the Ministry of Rural Development, it did so with an ambitious objective: to tackle multidimensional poverty by enabling rural households to access gainful employment and sustainable livelihoods through self-employment, financial inclusion, and learning new skills.

Now, 15 years later, the programme's scale, endurance, and outcomes have exceeded even its early champions' expectations. Over 20 million women members of Self-Help Groups (SHGs) earn over 1,00,000 in income, and women banking correspondents are present in over 60% of local governments. Further, over 50 million women have accessed bank credit, boosting female labour force participation since 2018.

Remarkably, the NRLM has crossed borders, guiding rural livelihood initiatives across the Global South, particularly in Africa, and is subtly shaping India's development diplomacy.

India's quiet transformation

The magnitude of the NRLM's achievements is striking. As of mid-2025, the mission is active in 742 districts; has reached over 100 million households; mobilised more than five million SHGs; facilitated ₹51,368 crore in capitalisation support; and enabled bank linkages amounting to ₹2 lakh crore, an expansion unprecedented in both scale and its focus on women. The Union Budget 2026-27 strengthened this trajectory with a ₹15,200 crore allocation, reaffirming the NRLM as India's flagship programme for rural poverty alleviation. What sets the NRLM apart is not only its breadth but the ecosystem it has nurtured. It has created federated community institutions at the village, cluster, and block levels; established community-based cadres delivering last-mile services; and embedded rural women in formal financial systems. Such a combination of social mobilisation, institutional architecture, and



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access to credit and skills has made the mission a unique and enduring intervention in global development practice.

Beyond borders

Innovations in development rarely travel easily across borders because they are shaped by local political economies, social structures, and state capacities. Yet the NRLM's design appears unusually portable. In recent years, a growing number of African governments have begun exploring the Indian SHG-based livelihoods framework. Delegations from Ethiopia, Tanzania, Malawi, Kenya, and Rwanda have undertaken detailed study visits to India, examining not just the outcomes of the NRLM but the operational mechanics that make it work. They sought to understand how India managed to scale SHGs to tens of millions of women; how credit linkages with banks were created and sustained; how communities were mobilised into federations; how trained cadres were deployed at scale; and how accountability and financial discipline were embedded in the system. This surge of interest reflects a wider shift in how countries of the Global South envision development: no longer in terms of Western knowledge templates but through peer learning, centred on contextually relevant and locally rooted innovation.

African policymakers are drawn to the NRLM for several interrelated reasons. First, its focus on women's collective empowerment resonates strongly with ongoing efforts across Africa to deepen women's economic participation. The SHG model, built on pooled savings, peer learning, and trust-based credit discipline, offers a structured yet flexible way to strengthen women's agency. Second, the NRLM's architecture is cost-effective, relying not on heavy capital investment but on community-driven processes and cadre systems that allow even resource-constrained governments to scale the programme. Third, the model aligns well with the

realities of large informal economies across Africa, where livelihood diversification and microenterprise formation are crucial. And finally, the model appeals to these countries because it is an institution-building approach rather than a mere scheme; it strengthens local governance, enhances accountability, and creates long-term community capacity.

India's emerging development diplomacy

India's development cooperation has historically emphasised capacity building, concessional finance, and technical assistance. The dissemination of the NRLM marks a clear evolution – the country is now exporting social sector institutions grounded in its own developmental experience. Such institutional models create sustained linkages between bureaucracies, implementing agencies, and community organisations, offering a distinct channel for international engagement. They also provide potential entry points for collaboration in digital governance, agriculture, and financial architecture. The NRLM example illustrates how India's domestic innovations are shaping South-South cooperation by circulating knowledge and institutional practices rather than resources alone. To build on this momentum, India could institutionalise the sharing of its rural livelihoods knowledge through a dedicated Rural Livelihoods Knowledge Exchange Platform, linking state livelihood missions, training institutions, and African governments. Expanded training, longer fellowships, immersion visits and joint pilot projects could help adapt SHG-based initiatives to local contexts. The NRLM is no longer only India's story of rural transformation. Growing interest from African nations demonstrates that India can generate solutions that develop livelihoods far beyond its borders. In doing so, New Delhi is shaping a new paradigm for global development. Views expressed are personal.

KEY HIGHLIGHTS

Context of the News

- The National Rural Livelihood Mission (NRLM), launched in 2011 under the Ministry of Rural Development, has evolved into India's largest poverty alleviation programme based on women-led Self-Help Groups (SHGs).
- By 2025–26, NRLM has achieved nationwide scale and measurable outcomes in financial inclusion, livelihoods, and women empowerment.
- The Union Budget 2026–27 allocated ₹19,200 crore, reinforcing its central role in rural development.
- The SHG-based model is gaining international traction, especially among African nations, marking a shift towards India-led development models in the Global South.

Key Points

- Coverage & Reach
 - Implemented in 742 districts.
 - Covers 100+ million rural households.
- Institutional Structure
 - Formation of 9+ million SHGs, predominantly women-led.
 - Multi-tier federations: SHGs → Village Organisations → Cluster Level Federations.
- Financial Inclusion
 - ₹12 lakh crore bank linkage achieved.
 - 50+ million women accessed institutional credit.
- Income & Livelihoods
 - 20 million+ women earning over ₹1 lakh annually.
 - Focus on farm, non-farm, and micro-enterprises.
- Governance & Social Capital
 - Community cadres ensure last-mile service delivery.

- Women banking correspondents in 60% Gram Panchayats.
- Global Significance
 - Countries like Ethiopia, Kenya, Rwanda exploring replication.
 - Represents a shift from aid-based to knowledge-based development cooperation.

Static Linkages

- SHG–Bank Linkage Programme (NABARD).
- Microfinance and poverty alleviation models.
- Role of social capital and collective action.
- 73rd Constitutional Amendment – decentralisation.
- Women empowerment and labour force participation.
- Inclusive growth and financial inclusion.
- Informal sector dynamics in developing economies.
- South-South cooperation and development partnerships.

Critical Analysis

Strengths

- Empowers women through collective decision-making and financial autonomy.
- Enhances access to formal credit, reducing dependence on moneylenders.
- Builds sustainable grassroots institutions and social capital.
- Cost-effective and scalable model suitable for developing economies.
- Strengthens India's soft power and development diplomacy.

Challenges

- Uneven implementation across states.
- Risk of over-indebtedness due to credit expansion.
- Weak market linkages and value addition.
- Capacity gaps in training and institutional support.
- Context-specific challenges in global replication.

Way Forward

- Strengthen market integration and value chain development for SHG products.
- Promote digital financial inclusion and fintech solutions.
- Enhance capacity building and skill development at grassroots.
- Develop robust monitoring and evaluation systems.
- Introduce credit risk mitigation and financial literacy programmes.
- Institutionalise global knowledge-sharing platforms for NRLM replication.
- Encourage cluster-based enterprise development.

Creeping risk

Industrial accidents occur due to neglect of risks built up over time

An engineering reality underlying the recent spate of boiler explosions is that boilers almost never fail this way suddenly. They are usually due to overpressure, scaling, mismanaged water level, and/or revival stress, the risk of each of which builds over time. The boiler explosion in Sakti, Chhattisgarh, that killed 20 people also shares a few similarities with the Visakhapatnam gas leak in 2020 and the blast at a thermal power station in Neyveli in 2020. In the former, safety systems at a unit had been inactive or uncalibrated following a post-lockdown restart while a plant restart process triggered the explosion at the latter. The Sakti plant had likewise been recently acquired, recently commissioned, and was operating at under its full capacity at the time of the blast. In these unstable operating regimes, failures often result due to transient thermal and pressure imbalances. However, in practice, neither the national boiler inspection regime nor the regulatory framework heighten oversight in these phases. Certification is valid for up to a year even though boiler conditions vary on a daily basis. The current structure also penalises downtime instead of unsafe operations and rewarding maintenance shutdowns. Events such as those at Sakti are also evidence that the framework's focus on fabrication standards rather than continuous instrumentation and auditing is not working. The Centre's focus on 'ease of doing business' has favoured self-certification and scheduled third-party audits in place of surprise government inspections. The Boiler Accident Inquiry Rules were notified in 2025; whether they will address these structural gaps remains to be seen.

The expansion of India's industrial capacity is pushing ageing infrastructure harder, more plants are operating closer to their limits, and flaws in their management are being exposed to more media coverage and political attention. It is possible that these facilities have long been exposing their workers to hazardous working conditions, and the ensuing crises are not altogether accidental. Contract labour is the most exposed. A growing share of workers are migrants hired via subcontractors, who trade blame with the operator after a disaster. The safety signage and manuals are often unavailable in workers' native languages. Investigators have reported workers in the Pune industrial belt since 2021 and following explosions in Sangareddy in 2024 and 2025 being unaware of the names and properties of the chemicals in their workplace. The new OSHW Code 2020 also does not clearly hold the principal employer criminally liable for safety lapses in contractors' operations but qualifies it on the employer's negligence. These are old complaints about how India treats its labour. Until this culture is dismantled, firms' and regulators' incentives, labour arrangements, and factory-floor practices will keep absorbing 'accidents' as the cost of doing business.

KEY HIGHLIGHTS

Context of the News

- A major boiler explosion in Sakti (Chhattisgarh) resulted in significant loss of lives, exposing systemic gaps in industrial safety.
- Similar incidents:
 - Visakhapatnam gas leak (2020) – linked to post-lockdown restart.
 - Neyveli thermal power plant explosion (2020) – occurred during restart operations.
- Pattern: accidents occur during transitional phases (restart/low capacity), not during stable operations.
- Highlights deficiencies in inspection regimes, labour protection, and regulatory enforcement.

Key Points

- Engineering Causes
 - Overpressure, scaling, improper water level, and thermal stress during restart.
 - Failures are cumulative, not instantaneous.
- Inspection & Regulation
 - Boiler certification valid for up to one year despite dynamic operational conditions.
 - No special regulatory focus on high-risk phases (restart/shutdown).
 - Increasing reliance on self-certification and third-party audits.

- Systemic Gaps
 - Greater focus on manufacturing standards rather than continuous monitoring.
 - Lack of surprise inspections weakens enforcement.
- Labour Vulnerability
 - High proportion of migrant and contract labour.
 - Workers often unaware of hazards due to lack of training.
 - Safety instructions not available in local languages.
- Legal Concerns
 - Occupational Safety, Health and Working Conditions Code, 2020:
 - Does not clearly impose absolute liability on principal employers.
 - Incentive Problem Industrial framework discourages downtime → discourages preventive maintenance.

Static Linkages

- Thermodynamics: relationship between pressure, temperature, and phase change in boilers (NCERT Physics).
- Factories Act, 1948 → safety and welfare provisions (now subsumed under OSHW Code).
- Article 42 (DPSP) → just and humane conditions of work.
- Bhopal Gas Tragedy → need for strict liability and regulatory oversight.
- Disaster Management Act, 2005 → industrial disasters as man-made disasters.
- ILO conventions → occupational safety and health standards.

Critical Analysis

Positive Developments

- Notification of Boiler Accident Inquiry Rules, 2025.
- Ease of doing business reforms have boosted industrial growth.

Key Issues

- Regulatory Weakness
 - Annual certification inadequate for high-risk equipment.
 - Self-certification reduces accountability.
- Operational Risks
 - Restart phases not adequately regulated despite high risk.
- Labour Issues
 - Contractualisation reduces accountability.
 - Lack of training and awareness increases vulnerability.

- Legal Gaps
 - Ambiguity in fixing responsibility on principal employer.
- Ethical Concerns
 - Workers treated as expendable in pursuit of efficiency.

Core Problem

- Structural imbalance: economic efficiency prioritized over safety compliance.

Way Forward

- Shift to real-time monitoring systems (IoT-enabled sensors).
- Introduce risk-based inspection regime with focus on restart phases.
- Strengthen independent inspections and reduce over-reliance on self-certification.
- Amend OSHW Code to ensure clear and strict liability.
- Ensure mandatory safety training and multilingual instructions.
- Reform incentives:
 - Reward preventive shutdowns and maintenance.
- Establish national industrial accident database for transparency.
- Align with global best practices (ILO standards, OECD guidelines).

Bengal SIR

the first and second phases.

The court said their names will be added through a 'supplementary revised electoral roll' for the two-phase elections to be held on April 23 and April 29.

A bench of Chief Justice of India Surya Kant and Justice Joydipya Bagchi said in its April 13 order, which was made available Thursday, that "if an appeal is allowed by the Appellate Tribunal and a conclusive direction for inclusion or exclusion is issued, such directions shall be duly effectuated prior to the State of West Bengal proceeding to polling on 23.04.2026 or 29.04.2026, as the case may be."

Welcoming the order, Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee told reporters in Cooch Behar that she has directed workers of the ruling TMC to deliver voter slips "overnight" to ensure that excluded voters whose names figure in the supplementary list can cast their ballots.

Chief Electoral Officer (CEO) Manoj Agrawal told reporters that the Election Commission would add to its voter list all

names cleared by the Tribunal up to April 21, adding that the supplementary list would cover cases accepted on appeal that had earlier been rejected during adjudication.

Meanwhile, at the SMP Institute in Joka, near Kolkata, where infrastructure is in place for the Tribunals and 19 retired judges have held discussions on SoPs to be followed, there has been no official word on the hearings. Earlier, two cases were heard — of Motab Shaikh, the Congress candidate from Parakka who was reinstated in the rolls after his passport deemed proof of citizenship; and, Mottakin Alam, the former Manikchak MLA, who was allowed to file his nomination from Ratua after his name was restored.

According to EC data, about 90.8 lakh names from the state's original 76 crore electorate have been deleted in the SIR. While about 63 lakh names were removed for designated reasons, such as death or relocation, the remaining 27 lakh were excluded during a "logical discrepancy" check.

Election officials are yet to disclose the number of appeals received even as sources indi-

cated that it has crossed 5 lakh. Voting will be held for 152 seats in the first phase and 142 seats in the second.

In its order, the SC bench said it was invoking its powers under Article 142 to direct the EC that "wherever the Appellate Tribunals are able to decide the appeals by 21.04.2026 or 27.04.2026, as the case may be, such appellate orders shall be given effect to by issuing a supplementary revised electoral roll, and all necessary consequences with respect to the right to vote shall follow".

The bench, however, clarified that "mere pendency of appeals preferred by excluded persons before the Appellate Tribunals shall not entitle them to exercise their right to vote".

It said, "...if such a scenario were to be permitted to subsist, the consequence would be that objectors may likewise seek denial of the right to vote to those individuals whose names appear in the revised electoral roll, but against whom such objectors have preferred appeals".

"The resultant situation would effectively recreate the very state of affairs that existed prior to the entrustment of the

verification exercise to the Judicial Officers. This, in our considered view, cannot be permitted, particularly when Judicial Officers from the State of West Bengal, duly assisted by Judicial Officers from the States of Jharkhand and Odisha, have completed what can only be described as a truly Herculean task within a remarkably short span of time," it said.

On April 13, the court had heard a plea by petitioners who said their cases were pending before the Appellate Tribunals and urged that their names be included in the electoral roll, pending final adjudication by the Tribunals. During the hearing, the bench of CJ and Justice Bagchi had indicated it may ask the EC to come out with a supplementary voters list as and when the appeals against decisions of the judicial officers, deputed for deciding names flagged on the ground of logistical discrepancies, are cleared by the Appellate Tribunals. Justice Bagchi had then flagged the issue of exclusion of voters vis and vis the winning margin and termed the right to vote the "biggest expression of nationality... in a democratic government".

KEY HIGHLIGHTS

Context of the News

- The Supreme Court of India permitted inclusion of voters cleared by Appellate Tribunals in the West Bengal Legislative Assembly Elections 2026.
- Directed preparation of a supplementary revised electoral roll before polling (April 23 & 29).
- Relief applicable only where appeals are decided before April 21 (Phase 1) and April 27 (Phase 2).
- Order passed using Article 142 of the Constitution of India.
- Nearly 90.8 lakh names deleted during Special Intensive Revision (SIR).

Key Points

- Only voters successfully cleared by Appellate Tribunals will be included.
- Pending appeals do not grant voting rights.
- Election Commission of India mandated to:
 - Issue supplementary electoral rolls
 - Ensure inclusion before polling
- Nature of deletions:
 - ~63 lakh: death/relocation
 - ~27 lakh: "logical discrepancies"
- Appeals reportedly exceed 5 lakh cases.
- Tribunal system involved judicial officers (including retired judges).
- Court stressed:
 - Electoral certainty
 - Avoidance of administrative disruption
 - Integrity of voter verification process

Static Linkages

- Article 324 – Powers of Election Commission
- Article 326 – Universal Adult Suffrage
- Article 142 – Complete Justice by Supreme Court

- Representation of the People Act, 1950 – Electoral rolls
- Representation of the People Act, 1951 – Elections & qualifications
- Free & fair elections – Basic Structure Doctrine (Kesavananda Bharati Case 1973)
- Right to vote – Statutory right
- Tribunal system in governance

Critical Analysis

Positives

- Protects legitimate voters from exclusion
- Strengthens procedural fairness through appeals
- Ensures time-bound corrective mechanism
- Upholds credibility of electoral process

Concerns

- Large-scale deletions raise transparency concerns
- Criteria of "logical discrepancies" lacks clarity
- Time constraints → risk of hurried adjudication
- Tribunal capacity limitations
- Potential politicisation of electoral rolls
- Expansive use of Article 142 → concerns of judicial overreach

Way Forward

- Ensure continuous and transparent electoral roll updation
- Define clear, publicly available criteria for deletion
- Strengthen digital verification with privacy safeguards
- Expand tribunal capacity and standardised procedures
- Independent third-party audits of electoral rolls
- Improve voter awareness & grievance redressal mechanisms

Trump's Modi-Munir balancing will not bring back India-Pak hyphenation

RESIDENT DONALD Trump is doing a balancing act between Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Field Marshal Asim Munir. Yes, Munir and not Prime Minister Sheikh Sharif. On April 14, Trump had a 40-minute telephonic conversation with Modi. According to US Ambassador to India Sergio Gora, he told Modi, "I just want you to know we all love you." Also on April 14, Trump publicly hinted that the US-India talks would resume in the next two days and that they would be held in Pakistan. He went on to add, "You know why? Because the field marshal is doing a great job." Separately, he said Munir was fantastic.

US leaders have not only praised Munir—Trump's "favourite" field marshal—but have put him on a higher pedestal than Sharif. Certainly, in the US-Iran intermediation process, this is borne out by Munir's visiting Tehran beginning on April 5, while Sharif, accompanied by Foreign Minister Ishaq Dar, was relegated to a trip to Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey, which began on the same date. The purpose of Sharif and Dar is, in all likelihood, to keep these countries benefited on the ongoing US-Iran negotiations. It is undoubtedly also to assuage any adverse sentiment in their leadership on account of the profile that Pakistan has because of its intermediary role. The real negotiating game is now being handled by Munir, who may be going to Washington. There is little doubt that if he does, much will be made of him there.

Trump's positivity towards Munir is not new. He is the only military leader who has been hosted by the US President for a formal lunch at the White House. It can be argued that in acknowledging Munir's status, Trump is only recognising the reality of Pakistan's political life. But in doing so, Trump and other US leaders are delivering brutal blows to Pakistan's ever-weakening democratic structures. That is not good for Pakistan's democracy or regional harmony.

The Pakistan army has always been an out-and-out promoter of terrorism and instability in the region. This has especially been so since the early 1990s. It is now ironic that its chief, who also engineered his own rise to become Pakistan's chief of defence forces, is looked upon by the US as the principal intermediary with the Iranian clerical system. Even if Munir's contacts with the Iranian Revolutionary Guards are important for the US to publicly raise his profile and, by implication, that of the army at the cost of Pakistan's civilian leadership and elected institutions.

The US's Modi-Munir balancing act leads to a very troubling India-specific question. Is the US going to a new variant of the past India-Pakistan hyphenation? In reality, the hyphenation is a relic of history, which has no relevance or justification now. This is because India has global weight, while Pakistan has been struggling for many



VIVEK KATJU

years to maintain its macroeconomic stability. That is unlikely to come about because Pakistan has no appetite to usher in the necessary structural changes, which have to begin with reducing the role of the army. The army not only consumes a large portion of state resources, but it is also Pakistan's largest, though unaccountable and inefficient, conglomerate. It will never agree to reduce its spending on the country's resources or stop feathering the nests of its officers and men. The importance being accorded to Munir may whet the army's appetite to corner more national resources and put Pakistan's political class further on the back foot.

The current intermediation role that the US has assigned to Pakistan, and to which Iran, too, has acquiesced, will undoubtedly raise its profile and generate a measure of goodwill for it in West Asia and the larger Islamic world. However, the goodwill bump can hardly turn into a lasting economic advantage because of structural infirmities in the system. This notwithstanding, as part of the new hyphenation, Pakistan may be accorded a larger security role by the US in West Asia and perhaps Afghanistan. Beginning in the 1970s, some of the Gulf states relied on Pakistan in the defence sector. Pakistani defence personnel served as part of their defence forces. Later, this waned, but Pakistan's involvement got a boost when Saudi Arabia entered into a strategic mutual defence agreement with it. Under this arrange-

ment, Pakistan has sent fighter aircraft to the Abdul Aziz airbase in Dhahran and troops to the country.

India has major interests in West Asia, and these demand the skilful enhancement of its security and diplomatic postures in this vital region, despite US desires. This cannot be limited to the UAE only. The UAE relationship is important, but as imponderables will emerge once the Iran war is over, Indian economic interests demand that ties be deepened with all Gulf countries. That process must begin now. External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar has visited only the UAE. Why?

The US will seek a consolidation of India's role in the Quad (the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue comprising India, the US, Japan, and Australia) as part of its encouragement to India to play a greater role in the Indo-Pacific. The problem with this is that the US's Indo-Pacific approach is a subset of its relations with China. It seems that Trump wants a rapprochement with Beijing. In reality, the Quad is hostage to US-China ties. In view of India's problems with China, it would be unwise to rely only on Quad-like structures to manage the Chinese challenge.

Finally, while there is the constant talk of ever-greater content in India-US ties, this country should never forget Christopher Landis's plain speaking in March in India—that the US will not make the same mistake with India as it did with China.

The writer is a former diplomat

India's Strategic Concerns

- Need to deepen ties beyond UAE to entire Gulf region
- Limitations of reliance on Quad due to US-China dynamics

Static Linkages

- Civil-military relations and democratic accountability
- Balance of power and realism in international relations
- India's Look West Policy and energy security
- Non-alignment vs strategic autonomy
- Role of armed forces in governance (comparative political systems)
- India's diaspora and remittance dependence on Gulf region
- Evolution of US foreign policy (Cold War to present)

Critical Analysis

Advantages

- May facilitate diplomatic engagement between US and Iran
- Potential short-term stabilisation in West Asian geopolitics

Concerns

- Undermines democratic institutions in Pakistan
- Legitimises military dominance in governance
- Risks revival of outdated India-Pakistan hyphenation
- Ignores India's enhanced global economic and strategic status

Stakeholder Concerns

- US: Pragmatic geopolitical balancing
- Pakistan Army: Gains legitimacy and influence
- India: Strategic and diplomatic recalibration required

Challenges

- Maintaining India's strategic autonomy amid shifting US priorities
- Expanding diplomatic footprint in West Asia beyond limited partners
- Addressing China factor alongside US engagements

Way Forward

- Strengthen India's independent West Asia policy with broader regional outreach
- Deepen engagement with Gulf countries and regional groupings
- Reinforce strategic autonomy in foreign policy decisions
- Reduce overdependence on single platforms like Quad
- Enhance economic, energy, and diaspora diplomacy
- Promote democratic norms in regional engagements

KEY HIGHLIGHTS

Context of the News

- Donald Trump publicly praised Asim Munir and indicated Pakistan's role as an intermediary in US-Iran negotiations.
- Pakistan's military leadership appears to have gained prominence over its civilian government in diplomatic engagements with the US.
- This development raises concerns about:
 - Weakening democratic institutions in Pakistan
 - Revival of India-Pakistan hyphenation in US foreign policy
- The US may assign Pakistan a larger security role in West Asia and Afghanistan, reviving past strategic patterns.
- India's strategic interests in West Asia and the Indo-Pacific (Quad) are being tested amid evolving US geopolitical priorities.

Key Points

- US-Pakistan Engagement
 - Pakistan acting as intermediary in US-Iran talks
 - Military leadership gaining diplomatic primacy
- Democratic Concerns in Pakistan
 - Civil-military imbalance reinforced
 - Military dominance over political institutions
- India-Pakistan Hyphenation
 - Historical US policy of linking India and Pakistan resurfaces
 - Ignores India's distinct global status and economic strength
- Pakistan's Strategic Role
 - Potential expansion in West Asia security architecture
 - Historical defence cooperation with Gulf countries

India's migration governance has a blind spot



HARSHITA SINHA AND BHARGABI GHOSH

WHEN AN evacuation flight touches down in New Delhi, it is seen as a moment of national pride. India's ability to coordinate the return of over 4.75 lakh citizens from West Asia by the end of March reflects logistical capacity and diplomatic reach. But that visibility can obscure a harder policy question: Whether India will continue to engage with migration only at moments of disruption rather than across the full continuum of mobility, work, welfare and return.

The Gulf is one of the central geographies of Indian mobility, household welfare, and labour-market dependence. The six GCC countries alone were estimated to host nearly 99.35 lakh Indians in December 2025, while the region accounted for 37.9 per cent of India's remittance inflows in 2023–24. When instability deepens there, its effects travel quickly into districts, households, and state welfare systems. This is why the present moment is also a test of how India understands migration governance itself.

India's mobility system, both internal and external, rests on interconnected chains that are often thinly institutionalised and highly sensitive to disruption. During Covid, this was visible in the sudden immobilisation of millions of internal migrants. Today, even without a formal lockdown, signs of stress are emerging again: Rising costs of living, increasing LPG prices, tightening mobility conditions, and sectoral slowdowns that do not always register as crisis signals but steadily erode worker stability.

The current response has demonstrated the value of diplomatic engagement, consular coordination, and repatriation mechanisms. But such crises also reveal the limits of a framework that becomes legible only once disruption is underway. By the time a state is arranging return flights, the more foundational questions have already been deferred: How workers were recruited, what forms of support existed at the destination, and what awaited them on return.

Moreover, many of the fragilities in India's migration system emerge without immediately disrupting production itself. Workers may continue to move, work, and remit, even as the conditions around them become more precarious. It is this slow accumulation of stresses that policy frameworks often struggle to capture.

One reason is that India's governance architecture was not built around migrants' journeys, whether across districts or across borders

grants' journeys, whether across districts or across borders. The Ministry of External Affairs manages emigration clearances and diplomatic coordination; the Ministry of Labour oversees recruitment and worker welfare; state governments run skilling programmes and welfare funds with widely varying capacity. But the worker's journey does not mirror these clean mandates. It begins in a source district, passes through recruitment systems, crosses administrative and national boundaries, and eventually returns, sometimes with savings and skills, sometimes with debt or displacement. At each stage, the worker is visible to some part of the system, rarely to the whole.

That partial visibility is most consequential in data. India still lacks sufficiently granular and dynamic migration information for anticipatory governance. In ordinary times, this is an administrative gap. In extraordinary times, it becomes a welfare challenge.

This unevenness is not uniform across India. Kerala's investment in migration data and institutions shows what sustained political attention can achieve. But this cannot be assumed across major sending states. Workers do not return to the Union government in abstraction. They return to district administrations, local labour markets, and households whose ability to absorb shocks varies.

The pending Overseas Mobility Facilitation and Welfare Bill provides an opportunity to embed welfare into the system's architecture. Whether a worker leaves Jharkhand to work in Surat or in Riyadh, they are navigating variations of the same fragmented system. The policy challenge is to recognise them as parts of a connected mobility landscape that requires steady protections, coherent governance and assured accessibility.

India enters this moment with real foundations — a growing policy base, maturing bilateral relationships, and a growing role in local and global labour corridors. But that maturity now demands a shift to building a continuous architecture of visibility, coordination, welfare, and return across all forms of mobility. The question is whether India is willing to govern mobility, internal and international, as a connected social and economic system, before, during, and after a crisis.

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- State governments → Skilling & welfare
- → Absence of integrated migration governance framework.

- Data Deficiency
 - Lack of real-time, granular migration data.
 - Limits anticipatory policy intervention.
- Emerging Stress Factors
 - Rising living costs, restrictive labour policies, and sectoral slowdowns in Gulf economies.
- Policy Opportunity
 - Overseas Mobility Facilitation and Welfare Bill aims to institutionalize migrant welfare and streamline migration systems.

Static Linkages

- India is the largest remittance recipient globally (World Bank).
- Article 21 → Right to life and dignity (extends to migrant protection).
- DPSP Article 42 → Just and humane working conditions.
- Inter-State Migrant Workmen Act, 1979 → Regulates internal migration.
- Economic Survey → Migration as a driver of urbanization and inclusive growth.
- Kerala Migration Survey → Example of evidence-based migration governance.

Critical Analysis

Strengths

- Demonstrates effective crisis response and diplomatic coordination.
- Strengthens India's soft power and diaspora trust.
- Remittances contribute to poverty reduction and macroeconomic stability.

Weaknesses

- Migration governance remains reactive and fragmented.
- Lack of end-to-end policy coverage (recruitment → employment → return).
- Weak data systems and institutional coordination.
- Inadequate reintegration and social security mechanisms.

Key Challenges

- Protecting migrant workers in foreign jurisdictions.
- Managing return migration shocks at state/district level.
- Balancing economic dependence on remittances with worker welfare.

Way Forward

- Develop a comprehensive lifecycle-based migration policy.
- Create a national migration database with real-time tracking.
- Strengthen bilateral labour agreements with GCC countries.
- Ensure portable social security and insurance coverage.
- Operationalize Overseas Mobility Facilitation and Welfare Bill effectively.
- Promote state-level migration governance models (e.g., Kerala).
- Enhance pre-departure training and awareness for migrants.

KEY HIGHLIGHTS

Context of the News

- India evacuated ~4.75 lakh citizens from West Asia (Gulf region) by March 2026, reflecting strong diplomatic and logistical capacity.
- Gulf (GCC) countries host ~99.35 lakh Indians (Dec 2025).
- The region contributes ~37.9% of India's remittance inflows (2023–24).
- The development highlights a key issue: India's migration policy remains largely crisis-driven rather than system-based.

Key Points

- Centrality of Gulf Migration
 - Major destination for Indian workers (especially semi-skilled and low-skilled).
 - Critical for household welfare and rural economies.
- Economic Importance
 - India is the largest global recipient of remittances (~\$125 billion, World Bank).
 - Remittances support consumption, savings, and foreign exchange reserves.
- Reactive vs Structural Approach
 - Strong evacuation and consular systems.
 - Weak preventive safeguards, welfare systems, and reintegration policies.
- Fragmented Governance
 - Ministry of External Affairs → Emigration & diplomacy
 - Ministry of Labour → Worker protection

Cancer cure must not be hostage to Big Pharma

IN RECENT years, immunotherapy has expanded the limits of cancer treatment. Therapies that harness the body's immune system to fight malignant cells have improved survival rates in cancers once considered terminal. Yet, some of these breakthroughs, such as Merck & Co's Keytruda, have also become a source of ethical unease. An investigation by this newspaper, in collaboration with the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists, reveals that the drug is priced beyond the reach of most patients. A 100 mg vial costs Rs 1.5 lakh and for most patients, therapy extends over months or years, taking the total cost into tens of lakhs. The medicine has become mired in a shadow economy. Across cities, networks involving hospital staff, pharmacists, and middlemen allegedly diverted used vials, refilled them with other substances and sold them as genuine doses at discounted rates. Patients, driven by desperation, have become easy targets of such illicit activity.

The investigation points to gaps in hospital waste disposal, weak tracking systems, and an absence of accountability in the drug supply chain. More fundamentally, it exposes how large pharmaceutical firms game the patent system. Merck holds the primary patent on pembrolizumab — the generic name for Keytruda — till 2028 and has built a dense "patent thicket" around it that includes protections over formulations, delivery mechanisms and incremental innovations. Such strategies are designed to delay the entry of cheaper alternatives even after the core patent expires. India has historically used its patent laws to curb such "evergreening". Indian firms are now working on biosimilars of Keytruda that could reduce costs by as much as 70 per cent. But unlike conventional generics, biosimilars are derived from living cells rather than chemical synthesis. They demand advanced manufacturing capabilities, face stricter regulatory scrutiny, and can take four to eight times longer to develop. Courts have, by and large, prioritised patient access when cheaper substitutes are challenged by Big Pharma. Yet, legal battles can be protracted and critically ill patients do not have time.

In the short term, India must strengthen regulatory oversight and fast-track biosimilars. The country must also move beyond being a manufacturer of affordable medicines to becoming a centre for innovation. India's early success with CAR-T therapy shows that homegrown therapies can lower costs while expanding access. Scaling the model that produced the CAR-T breakthrough will require sustained investment in R&D, stronger academia-industry collaboration, speedier regulation that doesn't compromise on safety, and financing that can absorb risks associated with biotech. This shift will not happen overnight. But the country with the world's third-largest cancer burden cannot treat drug discovery as a distant goal. It needs to begin conversations on this imperative urgently.

KEY HIGHLIGHTS

Context of the News

- Recent investigative reports (with global collaboration) have highlighted high pricing and illicit trade surrounding cancer immunotherapy drugs such as Keytruda (pembrolizumab).
- The drug, developed by Merck & Co., costs around ₹1.5 lakh per 100 mg vial, with total treatment running into tens of lakhs.
- Reports indicate a black market involving reused vials and counterfeit drugs, exploiting vulnerable cancer patients.
- Concerns raised over patent monopolies, regulatory gaps, and limited accessibility of life-saving therapies in India.

Key Points

- Immunotherapy revolution: Enhances the immune system to fight cancer; significantly improves survival in advanced cancers.
- Affordability crisis: High cost due to patent protection; limited insurance coverage exacerbates inequity.
- Patent thicket strategy:
 - Core patent of pembrolizumab valid till 2028.
 - Additional patents (formulations, delivery systems) delay generic entry ("evergreening").
- Illicit supply chain:
 - Diversion of used vials from hospitals.
 - Refilling and resale of fake drugs at discounted prices.
- Regulatory gaps:
 - Weak biomedical waste management.

- Lack of end-to-end drug tracking systems.
- Biosimilars challenge:
 - Indian firms developing biosimilars (possible ~70% cost reduction).
 - Complex manufacturing; longer development cycles (4–8 times slower than generics).
- Domestic innovation:
 - India's CAR-T therapy success shows potential for affordable indigenous biotech solutions.

Static Linkages

- Patent protection under TRIPS Agreement and India's compliance framework.
- Provisions of the Indian Patents Act, 1970 (Section 3(d)) to prevent evergreening.
- Compulsory licensing provisions for public health emergencies.
- Role of Central Drugs Standard Control Organisation (CDSCO) in drug regulation.
- Biomedical Waste Management Rules, 2016.
- National Pharmaceutical Pricing Authority (NPPA) and drug price control mechanisms.
- Public health ethics: equity vs innovation dilemma.

Critical Analysis

Positives

- Immunotherapy improves survival in previously terminal cancers.
- Patent protection incentivizes R&D and innovation.
- Biosimilars and domestic innovation can enhance affordability in the long run.

Negatives

- High pricing leads to health inequity and catastrophic expenditure.
- Patent thicket practices undermine affordable access.
- Weak regulation enables counterfeit drug markets.
- Delayed availability of biosimilars due to technical and legal barriers.

Stakeholder Perspective

- Patients: affordability, safety risks.
- Government: balance between innovation and public health.
- Pharma companies: profit recovery and IP protection.
- Healthcare system: ethical dilemmas in treatment access.

Ethical Dimension

- Conflict between profit maximization vs right to health.
- Exploitation of vulnerable patients through illegal drug markets.

Way Forward

- Strengthen drug traceability systems (barcode/blockchain).
- Ensure strict biomedical waste disposal enforcement.
- Fast-track biosimilar approval mechanisms.
- Use compulsory licensing in critical public health situations.
- Expand Ayushman Bharat coverage to include advanced therapies.
- Promote biotech R&D and public-private partnerships.
- Develop India as a global hub for affordable biologics innovation.

Trade data frames challenge in time of war

THE YEAR 2025-26 was full of turmoil. Beginning with the imposition of reciprocal tariffs by US President Donald Trump and ending with the conflict in West Asia, global trade faced significant disruptions. It was also a year in which China recorded a trade surplus of \$1.2 trillion (2025) as the export behemoth charged ahead despite Trump's trade wars. India, too, faced uncertainty on several fronts, even as it finalised trade agreements, as with the UK and the EU, and reached an agreement with the US. In this year of unpredictability, merchandise exports for the full year stood at \$441.78 billion, only marginally higher than the year before.

Disaggregated data shows that most labour intensive sectors such as gems and jewellery, textiles and leather, fared poorly during the year. The electronic goods segment stood out — exports were just shy of \$48 billion, driven by smartphones. The impact of Trump's tariffs, the Iran war, and the blockage of the Strait of Hormuz is visible in the data. Exports to the US barely rose during the year, while those to West Asia, which accounts for a significant share of India's trade basket, collapsed in March. As many as 24 out of 30 export categories contracted during the month. Exports to the region fell by 57.95 per cent in the month, dragging down overall goods exports by 7.4 per cent. Imports were down by 1.64 per cent. Within the region, exports to the UAE were down 61.93 per cent, and those to Saudi Arabia by 45.67 per cent.

These trade disruptions will be seen in the month of April as well. But to what extent they continue will depend on talks between Iran and the US, and the movement of cargo through the Strait of Hormuz. Oil prices remain elevated. Brent crude is currently trading at around \$95.8 per barrel. India's crude basket, which comprises Sweet grade (Brent dated) and Sour grade (Oman and Dubai average), was around \$110 per barrel as on April 15. Higher oil prices, if sustained, will have implications for the current account deficit — a \$10 per barrel increase in price is estimated to increase the deficit-to-GDP ratio by around 30-40 basis points as per ICRA. In the current scenario, financing this may prove challenging.

KEY HIGHLIGHTS

Context of the News

- Global trade in 2025–26 was disrupted due to:
 - Reciprocal tariffs imposed by Donald Trump.
 - Geopolitical instability in West Asia affecting energy and trade routes.
- China recorded a \$1.2 trillion trade surplus (2025) despite trade tensions.
- India's merchandise exports showed marginal growth to \$441.78 billion.
- Sharp contraction in exports to West Asia due to disruptions in the Strait of Hormuz.
- Crude oil prices surged (India's basket ~\$110/barrel), raising macroeconomic risks.

Key Points

- Export Performance Overall exports showed stagnation despite global recovery expectations.
- 24 out of 30 export categories contracted in March 2026.
- Sectoral Trends Labour-intensive sectors (textiles, leather, gems & jewellery) declined.
- Electronics exports (~\$48 billion), led by smartphones, showed strong growth.
- Regional Trends Exports to the US stagnated due to tariff barriers.
- West Asia witnessed sharp decline:
 - Overall fall: ~57.95%
 - UAE: ↓61.93%
 - Saudi Arabia: ↓45.67%
- Oil & Trade Linkages Brent crude ~\$95.8/barrel; India's basket ~\$110/barrel.

- As per ICRA:
 - \$10 increase → CAD rises by 0.3–0.4% of GDP.
- Macroeconomic Impact Rising import bill → widening Current Account Deficit (CAD).
- Pressure on rupee, inflation, and external financing.

Static Linkages

- Current Account Deficit (CAD):
 - $CAD = \text{Trade Deficit} + \text{Net Invisibles (services, remittances)}$.
- Oil Import Dependence:
 - India imports ~85% of crude oil (Economic Survey).
- Trade Chokepoints:
 - Strait of Hormuz handles ~20% of global oil trade.
- Export Competitiveness Factors:
 - Exchange rate, logistics cost, global demand.
- Structural Shift:
 - Movement from labour-intensive to capital/technology-intensive exports.
- Trade Agreements:
 - FTAs aim to reduce tariffs and improve market access.

Critical Analysis

Positives

- Growth in electronics exports indicates integration into Global Value Chains (GVCs).
- Trade agreements with developed economies may diversify markets.
- India maintained export stability despite global shocks.

Concerns

- Overdependence on oil imports increases vulnerability.
- Labour-intensive sectors weakening → employment implications.
- High exposure to specific regions (US, West Asia).
- Supply chain disruptions due to geopolitical conflicts.
- Rising CAD poses risks to macroeconomic stability.

Key Challenges

- Sustaining export growth amid global slowdown.
- Managing inflation due to high energy prices.
- Ensuring external sector resilience.

Way Forward

- Diversify export destinations (Africa, Latin America, ASEAN).
- Strengthen labour-intensive sectors via targeted incentives and skilling.
- Promote high-value manufacturing (PLI schemes, electronics).
- Reduce oil dependency:
 - Expand renewable energy
 - Increase strategic petroleum reserves
- Improve logistics and trade infrastructure (PM Gati Shakti).
- Enhance trade diplomacy and secure supply chains.
- Maintain macroeconomic stability through prudent fiscal and monetary policy.

Below normal monsoon, but no cause for alarm



AMITABH SINHA

AFTER SEVEN consecutive years of fairly good rainfall in the monsoon season, India seems to be finally running out of luck. This year's monsoon is expected to be relatively dry, according to the forecast by India Meteorological Department (IMD). In its first forecast for the coming rainy season, IMD on Tuesday said the country as a whole was likely to get only 92% of normal rainfall this time. It is the lowest forecast for all India monsoon rainfall that IMD has put out in the last 20 years.

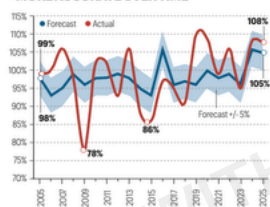
The monsoon forecast is one of the most keenly tracked announcements in the month of April. It is not merely an exercise in weather prediction. The four-month monsoon, from June to September, brings over 70% of India's annual rainfall. Besides offering respite from the summer heat to large parts of the country, rainfall during this season has a big impact on the economy.

Nearly half of India's cropland is still dependent on rainwater for irrigation. Timely and adequate rainfall is critical for good agricultural yields which in turn drives up farm incomes and rural demand. The monsoon rainfall also feeds India's reservoirs, which are used to meet the needs of drinking water, hydroelectricity, and industry for the rest of the year. Maintaining the flow of rivers, inland water transportation, and groundwater recharge are some of the other things affected by monsoon rainfall.

An early monsoon forecast — the first one comes in April, which is updated with a more detailed one in May, and then daily updates after that — is used by policy planners for water management decisions for the year.

A forecast for low rainfall, like this year, is a sort of notice to governments and policymakers to begin preparing for all kinds of contingencies to absorb the impacts of a dry monsoon season.

MORE ACCURATE OVER TIME



Increasing resilience

Until recently, a prediction of relatively low rainfall usually triggered alarm bells in the government. It was seen as a sure sign of impending agricultural stress and a dampener on economic growth outlooks. Even the market sentiment used to get affected.

Things have become a lot better in the last few years. Not because the dependence on monsoon rainfall has reduced, but because India has been slowly becoming more resilient to the annual fluctuations in monsoon rainfall, thanks to a diverse set of initiatives in different areas.

That IMD's own forecasts have improved significantly over the last one decade has helped immensely. Forecasts have not just become more accurate and timely, but also more detailed, granular, and actionable. This has brought about greater efficiency and certainty in the policy planning exercise.

The improvement in forecast accuracy has come at a time when weather patterns are becoming increasingly unpredictable under the influence of climate change. Rainfall events have become particularly erratic. The number of very heavy and highly localised rainfall events have in-

Better prepared

Unless the rainfall scarcity is really acute, India looks better prepared to deal with shortages than excesses of rainfall.

Heavy rainfall events have resulted in at least one major disaster every year over the last one decade.

Reservoir storage in 166 large reservoirs

Last year at this time of the year (10-year average)

Normal storage (10-year average)

105% No. of reservoirs with storage better than last year

122% No. of reservoirs with storage better than 'normal' (10-year average)

crossed significantly over the last few years, and so have extended dry spells. The challenge ahead of IMD is to further improve the forecasts of these events because of their potential to cause large-scale disasters and destruction.

There are many other reasons why the prospects of a bad monsoon is not seen as a major cause of worry. Better water management practices, efforts to improve groundwater conservation, river and lake cleaning exercises have all contributed to ensuring that India is much better prepared to deal with rainfall shortages during the monsoon.

A large part of the work done under the flagship rural employment guarantee programme were aimed at water conservation. Creation of thousands of ponds, wells, check dams, and other similar assets in the rural areas has improved water availability, raised groundwater levels, and reduced the dependence on rainwater. Successive assessments of groundwater resources, prepared by the Central Ground Water Board and the state governments, have shown an encouraging improvement in groundwater situation in most parts of India.

Similarly, the river and lake cleaning exercises have made several water bodies ac-

India has been slowly becoming more resilient to annual up and downs. Improvements in IMD's own forecasts have helped as well

cessible for normal usage.

A major concern in a bad monsoon year is reservoirs getting drained out. Thanks to bountiful rains in the last two years — both 2024 and 2025 saw more than 100% rains during the monsoon season — the reservoirs are in a relatively comfortable position right now.

The combined water storage in India's 166 large reservoirs is not just better than last year, but also higher than the average of the last 10 years (see table). This is true for reservoirs in almost every region of the country. This asset will be crucial in the coming months.

Unless the rainfall scarcity is really acute, India seems to be better prepared to deal with shortages than excesses of rainfall, particularly when it leads to flooding and disasters. Heavy rainfall events have resulted in at least one major disaster every year over the last one decade.

Impact not uniform

The monsoon forecast for the entire country — done in April every year — is useful and indicative, but does not say anything about the expected temporal and spatial variations in rainfall. The 92% rainfall forecast does not mean that every place in the country was likely to get deficient rainfall. The forecasts for specific regions and months are done in the month of May.

This year, however, IMD has given an indication of what might be in store for individual regions and months. "Below normal rainfall" was expected almost over the country, and only a few areas in the northeast, the northwest, and southern peninsula could be expected to get normal or above-normal rainfall.

The rainfall is likely to be normal during the first two months of the season (June and July) while the second half (August and September) are expected to be dry, because the main cause for suppressing the monsoon rainfall, the El Niño phenomenon in the eastern Pacific Ocean, was expected to peak sometime in July, and its impact over India is usually felt after a lag of one or two months.

An indication of the likely impacts during specific months and regions in April itself is a sign of IMD's greater confidence in its forecasts.

- Improved groundwater levels (Central Ground Water Board reports)
- Higher reservoir storage due to good rainfall in 2024–25
- Climate Change Trends: Increasing erratic rainfall patterns
- Rise in extreme rainfall events and dry spells
- Regional & Temporal Variation: Northeast, Northwest, and Southern Peninsula → near/above normal rainfall
- August–September → likely drier due to El Niño lag effect

Static Linkages

- Indian monsoon mechanism driven by:
 - Differential heating of land and sea
 - ITCZ (Inter-Tropical Convergence Zone) shift
 - Role of jet streams (NCERT Geography)
- El Niño leads to:
 - Weakening of monsoon circulation
 - Reduced rainfall over India
- Groundwater recharge and watershed management principles
- Cropping patterns: Kharif crops highly monsoon-dependent
- Inflation linkage: Food inflation driven by monsoon variability

Critical Analysis

Positives / Strengths

- Improved forecasting capability of IMD enables proactive planning
- Enhanced water conservation infrastructure reduces vulnerability
- Higher reservoir storage buffer entering the season
- Diversification of rural livelihoods reduces full dependence on agriculture

Concerns / Challenges

- Still ~50% agriculture rain-fed → high vulnerability
- Regional disparities may worsen agrarian distress
- Risk of food inflation and macroeconomic instability
- Increased climate variability makes predictions uncertain
- India is less prepared for excess rainfall (floods) than deficits

Stakeholder Impact

- Farmers → crop yield uncertainty
- Government → policy pressure (MSP, irrigation, relief)
- RBI → inflation management
- Urban areas → water supply stress

Way Forward

- Expand micro-irrigation (PMKSY) and drip irrigation
- Strengthen climate-resilient agriculture (drought-resistant crops)
- Improve district-level weather forecasting & advisories
- Enhance water-use efficiency and groundwater regulation
- Invest in flood management infrastructure alongside drought planning
- Promote crop diversification & millets (Shree Anna initiative)
- Strengthen data integration (IMD + ISRO + ICAR) for real-time planning

KEY HIGHLIGHTS

Context of the News

- The India Meteorological Department (IMD) has forecast 92% of Long Period Average (LPA) rainfall for the 2026 southwest monsoon.
- This is the lowest monsoon forecast in ~20 years, indicating a below-normal monsoon.
- Comes after seven consecutive years of normal/above-normal rainfall.
- The likely cause is the developing El Niño conditions, expected to peak around mid-2026.
- Monsoon (June–September) contributes ~70% of India's annual rainfall, making it critical for the economy.

Key Points

- Rainfall Classification (IMD): Normal: 96–104% of LPA
- Below Normal: <96%
- Current forecast: 92% → Below Normal
- Economic Significance: ~50% of net sown area depends on rainfall (Economic Survey).
- Influences agricultural output, rural demand, inflation, and GDP growth.
- Water Resources: Monsoon replenishes:
 - Reservoirs (drinking water, irrigation, hydropower)
 - Groundwater
 - Rivers and inland navigation
- Improved Resilience Factors: Better forecasting by IMD (higher accuracy, granular data)
- Water conservation structures under Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act