# DAILY NEWSPAPER ANALYSIS

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CIVILS WITH AKASH
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# U.S-Iran talks in doubt; truce expiring today

President Trump eyes 'great deal', while Tehran rules out joining talks 'under shadow of threats'

All arrangements made for talks, yet to receive confirmation from the Iranians, says Pakistan

Trump said on Monday that V-P Vance, Envoy Witkoff and Jared Kushner had left for Islamabad

Stanly Johny

With the two-week truce in the U.S.-Israel war on Iran due to expire on Wednesday, Iran said on Tuesday the U.S. blockade of its ports and the seizure of a tanker in the Gulf of Oman amounted to violation of ceasefire. Iran added that it has yet to decide whether to join a new round of talks with Washington in Islamabad, even as U.S. President Donald Trump claimed that his team would "soon" hold negotiations with Tehran.

Pakistan said it has made all arrangements for the talks, but has yet to receive formal confirmation from Iran about its participation, as of Tuesday evening.

"Blockading Iranian ports is an act of war and thus a violation of the ceasefire. Striking a commercial vessel and taking its crew hostage is an even greater violation," Iran's Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi said in a social media post on Tuesday. "Iran knows how to neutralise restrictions, how to defend its interests, and how to resist bullying."

Foreign Ministry spokesperson Esmail Baghaeri told the state-owned IRIB Network that that "no final decision has been taken" on whether to participate in the Pakistan talks. "The reason is the inconsistent behaviour and unacceptable actions of the American side," he said.

**Vance trip on hold**

Mr. Trump on Monday said that Vice-President J.D. Vance, Special Envoy Steve Witkoff and the President's son-in-law Jared Kushner had already left for Islamabad. But U.S. media reported on Tuesday, citing White House officials, that Mr. Vance's planned trip to Pakistan was put on hold as Iran failed to respond to American positions.

Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf, Iran's Parliament Speaker and chief negotiator, said Mr. Trump was seeking Iran's surrender which his country would not accept. "Trump, by imposing a siege and violating the ceasefire, seeks to turn this negotiating table... into a table of surrender or to justify renewed warmongering," he wrote in a social media post. "We do not accept negotiations under the shadow of threats, and in the past two weeks, we have prepared to reveal new cards on the battlefield."

**Shadow of war:** Iranians walk past a mural against U.S. and Israel in Tehran on Tuesday, a day before the end of the two-week ceasefire. AFP

Earlier in the day, Mr. Trump also said Iran had violated the ceasefire "numerous times". In an interview with CNBC, he said the U.S. was "going to end up with a great deal" with Iran as "they have no choice". He added that the U.S. "is loaded up" to respond if Iran failed to make a deal. "We have so much ammo, so much of everything... We've used this to restock, and they probably have done a little bit of restocking. We're ready to go. The military is raring to go."

Pakistan's Information Minister Attaullah Tarar said on Tuesday that Islamabad continued its efforts to hold the talks between the two warring sides. As of 7.30 p.m. Pakistan time, a formal response about Iran's participation "is still awaited", he said in a statement. "Pakistan as the mediator is in constant touch with Iranians and pursuing the path of diplomacy and dialogue. Ceasefire ends at 4.50 am PST, 22 April. Decision from Iran to attend the talks before the end of two weeks ceasefire is critical," Mr. Tarar added. "Pakistan has made sincere efforts to convince the Iranian leadership to participate in the second round of talks."

Mr. Trump announced the two-week ceasefire, after 40 days of war, on April 8. On April 11, Vice-President Vance held direct talks with an Iranian delegation led by Mr. Ghalibaf in Islamabad but they failed to reach a breakthrough. The next day, Mr. Trump enforced a blockade on ships going to and coming from Iranian ports. On Sunday, the U.S. military seized an Iran-flagged vessel in the Gulf of Oman, raising tensions ahead of the ceasefire expiry.

Last week, Iran announced that it would reopen the Strait of Hormuz for commercial traffic but reversed its decision after Mr. Trump said the U.S. blockade would remain in place until there is a deal between the two countries.

Iran's Tasnim news agency reported on Tuesday that the U.S. naval blockade and "excessive demands" have prevented the formation of a new round of talks.

REOPENING AIRSPACE
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# KEY HIGHLIGHTS

## Context of the News

- A two-week ceasefire in the ongoing tensions involving Iran, United States, and Israel is set to expire.
- Iran has accused the U.S. of violating the truce by imposing a naval blockade and seizing an Iranian tanker in the Gulf of Oman.
- Proposed diplomatic talks in Pakistan (Islamabad) remain uncertain due to Iran's reluctance.
- The ceasefire was initially announced after ~40 days of conflict, but tensions have escalated again over maritime actions and coercive diplomacy.
- Strategic chokepoints like the Strait of Hormuz have emerged as critical flashpoints.

## Key Points

- Iran termed the U.S. blockade as an "act of war" and a violation of ceasefire norms.
- The U.S. seized an Iranian-flagged vessel, escalating maritime tensions.
- Iran has not confirmed participation in peace talks, citing "inconsistent behaviour" by the U.S.
- The U.S. insists on negotiations, but also signals military preparedness.
- Pakistan is acting as a mediator but lacks formal confirmation from Iran.
- The Strait of Hormuz remains central to global oil supply (≈20% of global petroleum passes through it – as per EIA data often cited in Economic Survey discussions).
- The episode highlights growing militarisation of trade routes and coercive diplomacy.

## Static Linkages

- Freedom of navigation is a key principle under international maritime law (UNCLOS, 1982).
- Blockades are generally considered acts of war under customary international law.
- Strategic chokepoints (Hormuz, Malacca) are critical to global energy security.
- India imports ~85% of its crude oil; West Asia remains a key supplier.
- Balance of Power theory in international relations explains such strategic coercion.
- Role of third-party mediation in conflict resolution (Track-1 diplomacy).

## Critical Analysis

Strategic Concerns

- Militarisation of sea routes threatens global trade.
- Undermines credibility of ceasefire agreements.

Economic Impact

- Oil price volatility → inflation risk for India.
- Supply disruptions affect global markets.

Geopolitical Dimensions

- U.S. coercive diplomacy vs Iran's sovereignty stance.
- Role of middle powers (Pakistan) in mediation.

Challenges

- Trust deficit between parties
- Escalation risk in already volatile West Asia
- Weak enforcement of international maritime norms

## Way Forward

- Promote rules-based maritime order (UNCLOS compliance)
- Strengthen multilateral diplomacy (UN framework)
- Diversify India's energy imports
- Enhance strategic petroleum reserves (SPR)
- Secure Sea Lanes of Communication (SAGAR vision)

CIVILS WITH AKASH

# Livelihood of Mumbai fishers at risk as mangroves are cut

Snehal Mutha
MUMBAI

At first light, Pujan Bhende, 30, sets out from Versova for the Arabian Sea in his blue fishing boat and spends at least nine hours at the edge of vast, tangled clusters of green-brown mangroves, casting his net, checking the trapped fish and crabs as the water recedes, and repeating the process.

Fishing near mangroves is the only source of livelihood for about 400 fisherfolk residing at Versova, Charkop, Dahisar, Malvani, and Gorai in Mumbai.

However, ongoing work to cut 45,675 mangroves across 103.6 hectares of forest land for the 23-km-long Versova-Bhayandar Coastal Road project has left them worried. "When these mangroves are gone, I will probably end up working as a labourer," says Mr. Bhende.

Ongoing work to cut 45,675 mangroves for the construction of the 23-km-long Versova-Bhayandar Coastal Road project. SNEHAL MUTHA

Krishnahari Sathe, 70, and his wife earn a living by selling fish that they buy from small fishermen. "Mangroves are breeding grounds for fish. We are practically living on them."

Dipti Bhandari, 45, a fisherwoman from Charkop, 17 km from Versova, where the Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC) has begun work on the coastal road, says, "We raised objections, but no BMC official mentioned compensation or attempts to resolve our concerns about loss of livelihood."

The BMC has assured compensation of up to ₹6 lakh for affected fisherfolk. However, fisherfolk claim that the civic body did not consult them about the felling of mangroves.

**'Failure in planning'**

According to B.N. Kumar, who heads the Mumbai-based NGO NatConnect, public consultations for such projects are often reduced to formalities and authorities continue to overlook practical alternatives. "Such projects reflect a deeper failure in urban planning, especially in the face of warnings like the Mumbai Climate Action Plan, which projects submergence risks by 2050."

The Supreme Court on March 20 had refused to interfere with the Bombay High Court's order allowing the axing of mangroves for the proposed coastal road. Clearance for the project was granted after taking note of the assurance given by authorities about reforestation.

However, environmentalists have questioned whether compensatory plantation will benefit Mumbai as the proposed areas for reforestation are located on its outskirts.

Mumbai-based NGO Vanshakti's director Stalin D., who filed a special leave petition in the Supreme Court against the BMC challenging the Bombay High Court's February 25 decision to clear the project, says species such as *Avicennia marina*, *Excoecaria agallocha*, *Avicennia officinalis*, and *Rhizophora mucronata* are being felled but replaced only with saplings of *Ceriops tagal*.

An official from the BMC's Mangrove Cell points out that certain saplings are prone to mortality but there is provision for replacement. "We are doing channel deepening work. So far, 37,764 trees have been planted in Bhayandar," he says.

The deadline for the project is December 2028. It is expected to cut travel time between Versova and Bhayandar from two hours to 15-20 minutes. BMC officials say the project is aimed at decongesting traffic and reducing overcrowding in local trains.

However, transport analyst A.V. Shenoy says while the road will ease congestion, it is a "facade" as such roads are primarily designed for high-speed vehicular traffic, specifically cars and taxis, with two-wheelers, three-wheelers, and heavy goods vehicles restricted from using the route. "Hence, congestion on the Western Express Highway (the 25-km-long arterial road in Mumbai connecting Bandra in the south to Mira Road in the north) will continue."

# KEY HIGHLIGHTS

## Context of the News

- The Versova-Bhayandar Coastal Road Project (23 km) proposes cutting 45,675 mangroves across 103.6 hectares in Mumbai.
- The project is being executed by the Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation to reduce travel time between Versova and Bhayandar from ~2 hours to 15–20 minutes.
- Around 400 fisherfolk from coastal areas like Versova, Charkop, Dahisar, Malvani, and Gorai depend on mangrove ecosystems for livelihood.
- The Supreme Court of India upheld the Bombay High Court decision permitting mangrove felling, based on compensatory afforestation assurances.
- Environmental groups (e.g., NatConnect, Vanshakti) have raised concerns about ecological loss and ineffective reforestation.

## Key Points

- Ecological Importance of Mangroves
  - Act as natural buffers against coastal erosion, cyclones, and storm surges (as highlighted in the Economic Survey).
  - Serve as breeding grounds for fish and crustaceans, sustaining coastal livelihoods.
  - Significant carbon sinks ("blue carbon"), aiding climate mitigation.
- Project Benefits
  - Reduced travel time and improved connectivity.
  - Potential decongestion of suburban transport networks.
- Concerns Raised
  - Loss of livelihood for fisher communities.
  - Weak public consultation and inadequate compensation mechanisms.
  - Questionable compensatory afforestation (different species, different ecological zones).
  - Risk of increased flooding and climate vulnerability (as per Mumbai Climate Action Plan projections).
- Compensation
  - BMC has proposed compensation up to ₹6 lakh, but stakeholders claim lack of proper consultation.

## Static Linkages

- Mangroves fall under ecologically sensitive ecosystems protected under environmental laws.
- Coastal Regulation Zone (CRZ) Notification, 2019 restricts activities in mangrove areas.
- India is a signatory to the Ramsar Convention (wetland conservation).
- Article 21: Right to life includes the right to a healthy environment (judicial interpretation).
- Directive Principles (Article 48A): State shall protect and improve the environment.
- Fundamental Duty (Article 51A(g)): Duty of citizens to protect the environment.
- Forest Conservation Act, 1980: Regulates diversion of forest land.

## Critical Analysis

Positives

- Infrastructure development improves urban mobility and economic efficiency.
- May reduce pressure on suburban rail networks.
- Judicial oversight ensures procedural legality.

Negatives

- Livelihood loss for traditional fishing communities (social justice issue).
- Ecological imbalance due to destruction of mangroves.
- Compensatory afforestation may not replicate original ecosystem complexity.
- Risk of urban flooding (Mumbai floods history).
- Elite bias: infrastructure benefits mainly private vehicle users.

Stakeholder Perspectives

- Government/BMC: Focus on urban infrastructure and congestion reduction.
- Fisherfolk: Livelihood insecurity and lack of participation.
- Environmentalists: Long-term ecological and climate risks.
- Judiciary: Balancing development with legal safeguards.

## Way Forward

- Ensure genuine public consultation (Free, Prior, Informed Consent principles).
- Strengthen scientific compensatory afforestation with native species.
- Adopt nature-based solutions (e.g., mangrove restoration alongside infrastructure).
- Provide livelihood rehabilitation packages (skill training, alternative employment).
- Integrate climate resilience planning in urban infrastructure (as per NITI Aayog & IPCC recommendations).
- Promote multi-modal transport planning instead of car-centric infrastructure.

CIVILS WITH AKASH

# India must draw a red line on U.S. unilateral sanctions

Suhasini Haidar

The dust – nuclear and otherwise – has yet to settle on how the United States-Israel war against Iran will ultimately end, but its impact on India's growth projections is evident. Already reeling from U.S. tariffs, the Indian economy has seen damage pile up due to the U.S.-Israel initiation of the war, Iran's targeting of Gulf countries, and now the 'double blockade' of the Strait of Hormuz by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and U.S. forces – manifested in rising energy bills, higher shipping and insurance costs, supply chain disruptions, a slump in exports (down 7% in March), and mounting inflation. The rupee's fall has resulted in India slipping from being projected to fourth spot, to sixth in terms of the largest economies rankings, according to the International Monetary Fund.

**Break sanction alignment**

India is by no means the only country thus affected, but as the world's most populous nation, it is bound to feel the effects more acutely. Given the little attention that the U.S. has paid to India's economic concerns, it is surprising that the Narendra Modi government continues to pay heed to U.S. unilateral sanctions amid the war. This month, as temporary waivers on many of those sanctions come up for renewal, it is time for New Delhi to unequivocally denounce them and declare that it will no longer abide by them.

A cursory list of U.S. sanctions with which India has partially or fully complied is both illustrative and eye-opening. Since May 2019, India has not purchased any Iranian or Venezuelan oil following U.S. President Donald Trump's demand for 'zeroing out. India faced similar secondary sanctions from the U.S., during 2012-14, when the Barack Obama administration used them as leverage in Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) negotiations (the Iran nuclear deal).

While India reduced its imports of Iranian oil from about 18.5 million tonnes in 2010-2011 to 11 million tonnes in 2013-2014, it never agreed to halt them altogether. In 2015, following the signing of the JCPOA, India stepped up its oil imports again and also signed a strategic connectivity trilateral agreement with Iran and Afghanistan to develop the Chabahar port, along with road and rail links connecting it to Afghanistan and Central Asia.

Early in his second term in 2025, Mr. Trump pushed India to end all its imports of Russian oil, adding a 25% penalty on top of existing 25% tariffs to enforce his demand. For three months – from November 2025 to February 2026 – India complied, halving its intake of about two million barrels per day (bpd) to one million bpd. As the U.S. has issued temporary sanctions waivers to deal with oil price hikes during the war with Iran, India has increased its intake of both Russian and Iranian oil, but will have to decide what to do once the waivers end.

Since the U.S. kidnapping of Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro in January 2026 and the subsequent easing of sanctions, India's intake of Venezuelan oil has also increased. Meanwhile, the U.S.'s waiver extension on India's use of Chabahar port is set to expire on April 26. Mr. Trump has also said that he intends to impose sanctions on any country conducting trade with Iran or holding Iranian funds, and will sanction all BRICS members if they seek to establish a non-dollar payment mechanism among themselves

The result of all these on-again, off-again sanctions, waivers, extensions and exemptions is to defeat India's best efforts to diversify and broad-base its energy, food and fertilizer sourcing. India's decision not to protest the US's decision to go to war with Iran in the first place is presumably out of concern that the U.S. may come down even more heavily on the Indian economy.

"The sui generis 'whack-a-mole' nature of these measures only adds to their capriciousness," former Reserve Bank of India Governor Urjit Patel concludes in his book *The Great Sanctions Hack*. According to his research, the U.S. stands out as the world's main sanctioning power, having imposed 365 sanctions in the present century, with the European Union a distant second at about 133. Only 12 counter-sanctions by China, Russia and Iran are active. According to the Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) of the U.S. Department of the Treasury, the U.S. today maintains sanctions on at least 23 countries and has more than a dozen sanction regimes on specific issues (cyber-terror, non-proliferation, and foreign interference). The United Nations Security Council, in comparison, has only about 15 active sanction regimes in all.

**Compliance increases coercion**

It is therefore necessary to analyse India's experience with U.S. sanctions over the past decade and draw conclusions about the pros and cons of yielding to them. There is little evidence that yielding to unilateral U.S. sanctions curbs its appetite, as India's experience since 2019 shows; it instead leads to additional demands for compliance.

Conversely, when India ignored sanctions such as Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA) and purchased Russian S-400 air defence systems in 2018, it faced no U.S. penalties and benefitted from the decision, as during Operation Sindoor (May 2025). The "opportunity costs" of complying must also be calculated – had India continued to buy discounted sweeter Iranian crude or Venezuelan oil from 2019-25, as it did with Russian oil (2022-25), the government could have saved billions, and built strategic energy reserves (as China has) that would have been useful today.

Had India not complied with sanctions against the Chabahar port, built rail and road infrastructure in Iran, and not curtailed its plans for the International North South Transport Corridor (INSTC) through Iran's Bandar Abbas, it may have had connectivity in place that could have reduced its dependence on imports coming through the Strait of Hormuz today. Moreover, India's compliance with U.S. international sanctions has further weakened the rules-based international order and the UN's multilateral mandate.

Going forward, if the Indian government decides to turn course and announce a national resolve against unilateral sanctions, it will not only spur its own private sector to seek braver options but also inspire countries in the neighbourhood and the Global South to follow suit, pushing back on other coercive measures employed by big powers such as China as well.

The government has a number of avenues to pursue if it decides to do so – from building payment mechanisms such as the rupee-rial trade system with Iran, to developing national payment systems including intra-BRICS settlement arrangements, to using 'air-gapped' banking and financial institutions insulated from western pressure, as well as exponentially expanding renewable and alternative energy sources.

Unfortunately, by withdrawing its bid to host the United Nations Climate Conference of the Parties (COP33) in 2028, New Delhi may have lost an opportunity to lead discussions on such options in the wake of the war, but it must take advantage of other such forums to do so.

**History as policy guide**

Lessons from history are worth revisiting. In 1966, U.S. President Lyndon Johnson amended the United States' 'Food for Peace' (PL-480) law – formally the Agricultural Trade Development and Assistance Act of 1954 – under which India, then suffering from famine, received millions of tonnes of wheat. Johnson's amendments, called the "short-tether" policy, limited the U.S.'s grain shipments to monthly or bi-monthly approvals, leading to what was called a "ship to mouth" existence for India.

That the amendments followed closely on the heels of then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's visit to Moscow – where she had called on Washington to stop bombing Vietnam to make space for peace efforts – was no coincidence, although the U.S. insisted that the changes were intended to spur agricultural reforms in India.

The move, and the subsequent international pressure for a major rupee devaluation, pushed the then neophyte Prime Minister into a corner. In a national address, Mrs Gandhi vowed that India should never again find itself in such a humiliating position, and intensified efforts toward the Green Revolution and agricultural self-sufficiency. A "New Green revolution" and energy independence can only follow if New Delhi draws a red line on U.S. sanctions in the next few weeks. These sanctions do not just harm India's economy. They also seek to bend India's foreign policy to another's will, and are a blow to its proudly-held tenets of strategic autonomy.

For India to launch a new Green Revolution in energy independence, it must first rebuff U.S. sanctions

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# KEY HIGHLIGHTS

## Context of the News

- Escalation of U.S.–Israel conflict with Iran has disrupted global energy supply chains, particularly through the Strait of Hormuz.
- India is facing higher crude oil prices, increased logistics costs, export decline (~7%), and inflationary pressures.
- The International Monetary Fund has indicated adverse impacts on India's growth outlook and global ranking.
- India's past compliance with U.S. unilateral sanctions on Iran, Russia, and Venezuela is under renewed debate.
- Strategic projects like Chabahar Port and the International North South Transport Corridor face uncertainties due to geopolitical tensions.

## Key Points

- Energy Security
  - India imports ~85% of its crude oil requirement.
  - Strait of Hormuz carries ~20% of global oil trade → critical vulnerability.
- Macroeconomic Impact
  - Rising oil prices → inflation + widening Current Account Deficit (CAD).
  - Rupee depreciation increases import burden.
  - Export slowdown due to global instability.
- Sanctions Mechanism
  - U.S. sanctions implemented via Office of Foreign Assets Control.
  - Legal backing: Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act.
  - India stopped Iranian oil imports (post-2019) and partially complied with Russia-related restrictions.
- Strategic Implications
  - Impact on connectivity (Chabahar, INSTC).
  - Pressure on India's policy of strategic autonomy.

## Static Linkages

- Current Account Deficit and exchange rate dynamics
- Energy security and import dependence
- Strategic chokepoints (Hormuz, Malacca)
- Evolution from Non-Alignment to Strategic Autonomy
- Green Revolution as response to external dependence
- Multilateral vs unilateral sanctions

## Critical Analysis

- Pros of Compliance
  - Prevents secondary sanctions and financial exclusion
  - Maintains strong India–U.S. strategic partnership
- Cons of Compliance
  - Loss of access to cheaper crude (Iran, Venezuela)
  - Higher energy import bill → inflationary impact
  - Weakening of strategic autonomy
  - Delays in key connectivity projects
- Challenges
  - High import dependence on fossil fuels
  - Exposure to geopolitical chokepoints
  - Limited diversification of payment mechanisms

## Way Forward

- Diversify crude sourcing (West Asia, Russia, Latin America)
- Expand Strategic Petroleum Reserves (SPR)
- Accelerate renewable energy transition (solar, green hydrogen)
- Develop alternative payment systems (rupee trade, BRICS mechanisms via BRICS)
- Strengthen regional connectivity (Chabahar, INSTC)
- Maintain balanced strategic autonomy in foreign policy

CIVILS WITH AKASH

# India's LPG crisis is the wake-up call it cannot ignore

India is staring at an energy reality it can no longer ignore. The gas crisis of 2026, marked by liquefied petroleum gas (LPG) shortages, volatile liquefied natural gas (LNG) prices, and soaring import bills, is not a temporary disruption. It is a structural warning. For a country aiming to sustain high economic growth and emerge as a global manufacturing hub, energy insecurity is not just an inconvenience; it is a strategic risk. The real question is no longer whether India should act, but how quickly it can pivot toward self-reliance.

**Unsustainable energy gap**

The numbers tell a troubling story. India's crude oil import dependence has reached a staggering 88.6%, with domestic production unable to keep pace with rising demand. LNG imports are projected to hit 28 million metric tonnes (MMT)-29 MMT this year, even as domestic gas production meets barely half of the requirement. Meanwhile, energy demand is expected to triple by 2047.

This widening gap between demand and domestic supply is not sustainable. Every global price shock, geopolitical disruption, and currency fluctuation directly impacts India's economy – fuelling inflation, straining public finances, and exposing systemic vulnerabilities.

What makes the situation more concerning is that existing systems are clearly failing to keep up. India has invested in LNG infrastructure, with regasification capacity exceeding 50 MMT annually. Yet, utilisation remains stuck at 50%-60% due to pipeline constraints and demand mismatches. LPG supply chains are even more fragile, heavily dependent on imports from West Asia.

The recent disruptions – which led to shortages in cities such as Mumbai and Bengaluru and triggered price spikes of up to five times – highlight just how exposed India remains.

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A push towards Compressed Biogas (CBG) will ensure energy security, environmental sustainability, and rural economic growth

Government interventions have helped manage the crisis in the short term, but they are reactive by design. They do not solve the fundamental problem: India's overdependence on imported fuels.

**Decisive steps to take**

And yet, the solution lies in plain sight. Compressed Biogas (CBG) offers India a rare combination of energy security, environmental sustainability and rural economic growth. The country has an estimated potential of 62 MMT of CBG annually from agricultural residues, animal waste, and municipal solid waste. But the current output is just 920 tonnes per day from 132 operational plants. This is not a resource constraint – it is an execution failure.

To be fair, the policy intent is strong. Initiatives such as Sustainable Alternative Towards Affordable Transportation (SATAT) and Galvanising Organic Bio-Agro Resources (GOBAR-DHAN) have laid the groundwork, offering assured offtake, financial incentives, and a clear vision for a bioenergy ecosystem. But progress on the ground has been slow. Feedstock supply remains fragmented and unreliable. Financing is often delayed or inadequate. Regulatory approvals can take months. And the market for digestate – a key by-product – remains underdeveloped. In short, India has built the vision but not yet the system to deliver it at scale.

This is where decisive action is needed.

First, India must establish a national feedstock security framework. Without a reliable and predictable supply of biomass, no CBG project can succeed. This means State-wise mapping of feedstock availability, creation of aggregation models, and long-term contracts that give developers confidence. It also requires aligning feedstock types with suitable technologies to improve efficiency and viability.

Second, the regulatory and financial ecosystem must be streamlined. Single-window clearance systems are no longer optional; they are essential. Project developers should not spend six to nine months navigating approvals. At the same time, financial support mechanisms need to go beyond traditional subsidies. Viability gap funding, green bonds and carbon credit integration can significantly improve project economics and attract private investment.

Third, India must think beyond waste and actively promote dedicated energy crops. Napier grass, for instance, offers high yields and can serve as a reliable feedstock. Allocating even 2%-3% of agricultural land – particularly in regions with surplus production – can create a stable biomass base without compromising food security. This is not about replacing existing crops, but about strategic diversification.

**Meaningful energy reform**

If these interventions are implemented with urgency, the impact could be transformative. India can scale CBG production to 20 MMT by 2030. But the benefits go far beyond numbers. A robust CBG ecosystem would reduce stubble burning, improve air quality, create rural jobs and enhance farmer incomes. It would turn waste into wealth and shift India toward a truly circular economy.

The lesson from the current crisis is clear: incremental fixes will not work. India needs a structural shift in how it produces and consumes energy. The success of the ethanol blending programme shows that large-scale transformation is possible when policy clarity meets execution discipline. CBG can – and must – be the next big success story.

India's gas crisis is not just a challenge; it is a test of intent. The country can either continue to rely on volatile global markets or invest in building a resilient, domestic energy system. The choice should be obvious. The time to act is now.

# KEY HIGHLIGHTS

## Context of the News

- India is facing a structural gas crisis (2026) marked by LPG shortages, volatile LNG prices, and rising import bills.
- Crude oil import dependence has reached 88.6%, increasing vulnerability to global disruptions.
- LNG imports projected at 28–29 MMT, while domestic production meets only ~50% of demand.
- Energy demand expected to triple by 2047, widening the demand-supply gap.
- Recent disruptions led to urban LPG shortages and sharp price spikes, exposing supply chain fragility.

## Key Points

- Energy Vulnerability
  - High dependence on imports → inflation, fiscal pressure, BoP stress
  - Exposure to geopolitical risks (West Asia, global supply chains)
- Infrastructure Issues
  - LNG regasification capacity >50 MMT but utilisation only 50–60%
  - Pipeline connectivity constraints
- CBG Potential
  - Estimated potential: 62 MMT/year
  - Current output: ~920 tonnes/day (very low utilisation)
  - Sources: agri-residue, animal waste, municipal waste
- Government Initiatives
  - SATAT scheme – promotes CBG production & marketing
  - GOBAR-DHAN – waste-to-wealth initiative
- Implementation Gaps
  - Fragmented feedstock supply
  - Regulatory delays
  - Financing challenges
  - Weak market for by-products (digestate)

## Static Linkages

- Energy security: availability, affordability, accessibility
- Fossil fuel dominance in India's energy mix (~75%)
- Impact of imports on Current Account Deficit (CAD)
- Biofuels as part of renewable energy transition
- Environmental issues:
  - Stubble burning
  - Air pollution
- Circular economy: waste-to-energy conversion
- Agricultural diversification and sustainable practices

## Critical Analysis

Advantages

- Reduces import dependence → strengthens energy security
- Supports climate commitments (lower emissions)
- Generates rural employment and increases farmer income
- Helps manage agricultural and municipal waste

Challenges

- Lack of assured feedstock supply chain
- High capital cost and financing barriers
- Policy implementation gaps at ground level
- Infrastructure bottlenecks
- Limited private sector participation

Concerns

- Over-reliance on global markets persists
- Regional disparities in energy access
- Weak institutional coordination

## Way Forward

- Develop national biomass/feedstock policy with state-level mapping
- Ensure long-term supply contracts for feedstock
- Introduce single-window clearance for faster approvals
- Expand financing:
  - Viability gap funding
  - Green bonds
  - Carbon markets
- Promote energy crops (e.g., Napier grass) strategically
- Strengthen gas pipeline and distribution infrastructure
- Create market ecosystem for digestate (bio-fertilizer)
- Scale up CBG similar to ethanol blending success

CIVILS WITH AKASH

# Lustre or bluster?

India's economic mettle will be on test as it faces headwinds

Data are now beginning to accumulate, revealing the slowdown in the Indian economy brought on by the crisis in West Asia. The latest is the Index of Eight Core Industries. The data for March, the first month since the war broke out, show that these eight key industrial sectors together contracted by 0.4% over their level in March last year. This was the worst performance in 19 months but was not unexpected. The supply constraints, fuel shortages, and general subdued economic sentiments due to the conflict were bound to take a toll on the economy, especially given India's dependence on imports. The private sector Manufacturing PMI for March also revealed a considerable slowdown, citing fewer fresh orders. Yet, the core sector data nonetheless make for a sobering read. Of the eight sectors, four contracted, one remained flat, and two witnessed sharp slowdowns. Notably, the worst performer was the fertilizer sector. This, too, was expected given the constraints on natural gas imports. While the domestic natural gas sector grew by a relatively robust 6.4%, the fertilizer sector contracted by 24.6% in March 2026. The implications of this are severe. The agriculture sector is already set for a tough year, with the India Meteorological Department predicting an El Niño-impacted below-normal monsoon this year. A poor harvest has a direct impact on rural demand, which is already far from robust. Sharp slowdowns in steel and cement production also show that construction activity has taken a hit as companies pause new investments. All of this – compounded by poor performances in the coal, crude oil, petroleum products and electricity sectors – dragged the overall index to its lowest full-year growth in 2025-26 since the COVID-19 pandemic hit the economy.

Most of the factors driving this recent slowdown are external. However, if they persist, they could turn India's economic tailwinds into substantial headwinds. The Narendra Modi government's first term was characterised by low inflation and high foreign investment. Domestic political momentum was such that voters also forgave devastating policy missteps such as demonetisation. The pandemic and the global turn away from China also worked to India's advantage in terms of foreign direct investment in the second term. Low oil prices in the beginning of the third term, leading up to the war in Iran, helped inflation stay low. Yet, signs were emerging that foreign investors, spooked by India's trade frictions with Donald Trump, were cooling off on the India story. Now the war has made it painfully clear that India is hostage to global dynamics. Inflation is rearing its head again. This, along with continued stagnation in household real incomes, means that the government will have to work that much harder to restore India's 'bright spot' sheen.

# KEY HIGHLIGHTS

## Context of the News

- The Index of Eight Core Industries (ICI) recorded a −0.4% contraction in March 2026, the weakest performance in the last 19 months.
- The slowdown coincides with the West Asia crisis (Iran-related conflict) disrupting global energy supplies.
- India's dependence on imported crude oil (~85%) and natural gas has intensified supply-side shocks.
- Manufacturing PMI indicates reduced new orders and weakening industrial momentum.
- Agriculture faces additional risk due to IMD forecast of El Niño → below-normal monsoon, further dampening rural demand.

## Key Points

- ICI Composition & Importance:
  - Sectors: Coal, Crude Oil, Natural Gas, Refinery Products, Fertilizers, Steel, Cement, Electricity.
  - Weight: ~40% in Index of Industrial Production (IIP) → leading indicator of industrial growth.
- Sector-wise Trends (March 2026):
  - Fertilizers: −24.6% (due to natural gas import disruptions).
  - Natural Gas: +6.4% (domestic growth but inadequate).
  - Steel & Cement: Slowdown → reflects weak infrastructure and construction demand.
  - Energy sectors (coal, petroleum, electricity): subdued performance.
- Macroeconomic Implications:
  - Industrial slowdown → impacts GDP growth.
  - Rising inflation (cost-push) due to energy supply shocks.
  - Weak rural demand due to:
    - Poor monsoon outlook
    - Stagnant real incomes
- External Sector Concerns:
  - Vulnerability to global geopolitical shocks.
  - Trade frictions and global uncertainty affecting FDI inflows.
  - Risk of imported inflation + current account pressure.

## Static Linkages

- Eight Core Industries and their weight in IIP
- Concept of cost-push inflation vs demand-pull inflation
- Imported inflation in open economies
- El Niño–Southern Oscillation (ENSO) and Indian monsoon
- Role of fertilizers in Green Revolution and food security
- Link between infrastructure sectors (steel, cement) and economic growth
- Energy security and strategic petroleum reserves (SPR)

## Critical Analysis

Positives:

- Push towards self-reliance in energy and fertilizers
- Opportunity to accelerate renewable energy transition
- Scope for supply chain diversification (China+1 strategy)

Challenges:

- High import dependence on energy → external vulnerability
- Fertilizer decline → risk to agricultural output and food inflation
- Weak rural demand → slows consumption-driven growth
- Simultaneous inflation + slowdown → stagflation risk
- Investment slowdown due to uncertainty

Stakeholders:

- Farmers: Higher input costs, lower yields
- Industry: Rising production costs
- Government: Fiscal burden (subsidies + inflation control)
- Consumers: Reduced purchasing power

## Way Forward

- Energy Security:Diversify imports and expand renewables + green hydrogen
- Increase domestic exploration and SPR capacity
- Agriculture & Fertilizers:Promote nano-urea, organic fertilizers
- Ensure stable gas supply through long-term contracts
- Demand Revival:Boost rural incomes (MSP, DBT, MGNREGA)
- Public investment in infrastructure
- Macroeconomic Stability:Balance inflation control with growth
- Strengthen investor confidence via policy stability
- Structural Reforms:Improve logistics and manufacturing competitiveness

CIVILS WITH AKASH

# Invidious speech

## ECI's inaction on the Prime Minister's violations of model code is troubling

While Prime Minister Narendra Modi's address to the nation on April 18 differed from a speech he made at a similar election-eve juncture in 2019, it was nonetheless problematic. In 2019, following a successful anti-satellite missile test, private news channels aired a speech by Mr. Modi extolling the mission and his government's commitment to the country's technological prowess even as the Model Code of Conduct (MCC) was in force ahead of the general election. Late last week, Mr. Modi's transgression was greater as Doordarshan and Sansad TV broadcast his speech even as he accused the Congress, DMK, Trinamool Congress and Samajwadi Party of committing the "sin of foeticide" after they blocked the combined women's reservation and delimitation Bills, and suggested that women voters would punish them electorally in the Tamil Nadu and West Bengal elections on April 23. Thus far, the Opposition in Parliament as well as numerous academics and activists have written to the Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) urging that the Election Commission of India (ECI) should sanction Mr. Modi for violating the MCC. In a familiar but also increasingly dispiriting turn, the ECI has yet to respond. It is expected to act reasonably quickly, as it has against Opposition parties.

Since the facts are not in dispute in this instance and the ECI's reluctance to sanction the Prime Minister has become well-known, it is hard to believe that the delay is benign. The constitutional body allowed the Prime Minister's monthly radio programme to continue broadcasting during the State polls in 2015 and 2017 and permitted NaMo TV to air in 2019 after prior approval of its contents. In 2024, the ECI issued a notice regarding a controversial speech by Mr. Modi in Rajasthan, but addressed it to the BJP president rather than to him. After the 2019 missile test, critics argued that the ECI's refusal to sanction had created a loophole whereby major announcements could be framed as 'official', thus having an electoral impact while affording the ECI plausible deniability. As the letter to the CEC specified, Mr. Modi's violation is clear if he delivered his address without the ECI's prior approval. If the ECI did approve it, it must explain why it saw fit to grant the Prime Minister this precious privilege, investigate the speech's contents, remove it from official platforms, and sanction Mr. Modi. The ECI's inaction – rendered more pronounced by the two States voting on April 23 – only reinforces its partisan character, and undermines the fairness of polls as well as its own credibility.

# KEY HIGHLIGHTS

## Context of the News

- On April 18, Narendra Modi delivered a national address during the enforcement of the Model Code of Conduct (MCC).
- The speech was broadcast through state-run platforms — Doordarshan and Sansad TV.
- The address contained political criticism and electoral messaging concerning ongoing State elections.
- Opposition parties and civil society filed complaints with the Election Commission of India (ECI).
- ECI's delay in response has raised concerns over neutrality and credibility.

## Key Points

Model Code of Conduct (MCC):

- Comes into force immediately after election announcement.
- Objective: Ensure free, fair, and level playing field.
- Covers:
  - Political speeches and campaigning
  - Use of official machinery and media
  - Government announcements

Alleged Violations:

- Use of government-controlled media for political messaging
- Targeted electoral appeal during MCC period
- Possible misuse of official position

Role of ECI:

- Constitutional authority under Article 324
- Ensures conduct of free and fair elections
- Can issue notices, advisories, censures, and campaign bans

Emerging Concern:

- Delay or selective action weakens MCC enforcement
- Raises issue of institutional bias and erosion of trust

## Static Linkages

- Article 324 – Powers of Election Commission
- Basic Structure Doctrine – Free and fair elections
- MCC – Non-statutory instrument
- Representation of the People Act, 1951
- Doctrine of level playing field
- Electoral reforms (Law Commission, ADR)

## Critical Analysis

Key Issues:

- Incumbency advantage misuse through official platforms
- Weak enforcement due to non-statutory nature of MCC
- Increasing perception of partisan behaviour of ECI

Implications:

- Threat to free and fair elections (basic structure)
- Decline in public confidence in institutions
- Creation of dangerous precedents

Counter Perspective:

- Government communication may continue if non-electoral in nature
- Lack of clear legal backing leads to interpretational ambiguity

Ethical Dimension (GS4):

- Integrity and neutrality of constitutional bodies
- Ethical restraint by public office holders
- Maintaining public trust in democracy

## Way Forward

- Provide statutory status to MCC
- Ensure time-bound and transparent decisions by ECI
- Clearly define rules on use of official media during elections
- Strengthen institutional autonomy and accountability
- Introduce independent oversight or review mechanisms

CIVILS WITH AKASH

# A year later, Pahalgam's shadow lingers over Kashmir's people and economy

HASEEB A DRABU

ON THIS day last year, the Baisaran meadows of Pahalgam became the site of a horrific terror attack that claimed 26 innocent lives, most of them tourists. The assault sent shockwaves not just across the country but around the globe. A year later, Kashmir is limping towards recovery; healing is still some distance away. The tragedy's shadow lingers most painfully over the grieving families and in the silent despair of countless households whose livelihoods have been impaired.

While the Indian state responded decisively with Operation Sindoor, the security forces eliminated the perpetrators in a counter-operation, delivering immediate justice. Beyond the strike itself, Operation Sindoor marked a significant doctrinal shift in India's counterterrorism policy: Major attacks on Indian soil would now trigger calibrated conventional retaliation without the need to definitively establish Pakistan's direct state complicity.

This muscular posture, visible since the 2016 Uri attack, has evoked an enthusiastic response from Indian civil society and popular culture, with a wave of films and mass-media narratives emerging. While these productions often carry a heavy dose of propaganda, their success nonetheless reflects a deepening societal engagement and a welcome hardening of the national narrative around cross-border terrorism — and unfortunately on Kashmir, too, to some extent.

Compare, for instance, Aditya Dhar's blockbuster *Dhurandhar* (2025) with Mani Ratnam's 1992 classic *Roja*. Where *Roja* sought to explore the human and political complexities of Kashmir — its pain, its aspirations, and the human cost on all sides — the newer wave of cinema is singularly focused on terrorism itself, on the machinery of response, and on unapologetic assertions of national will. Kashmir, in these stories, almost recedes to the background as a mere theatre for larger battles rather than a land with its own layered realities.

Yet the human cost remains searing. None of the images from that day is more haunting than that of a newlywed woman holding the lifeless body of her husband, her dreams destroyed in a single moment of mindless violence. The attack claimed lives and much more. It violated the deepest sensibilities and traditional values of Kashmiri society. By targeting tourists, the assailants struck at the moral core of humanity. The incident shook Kashmiri society to its core, triggering a wave of collective grief, outrage and trauma that cut across political and community lines.

The economic fallout has been enduring and become increasingly painful. What began as an exodus of visitors in the immediate aftermath has hardened into a sustained slump. Tourist arrivals crashed through last year. Even the Tulip Festival saw footfalls drop sharply this year, from over eight lakh visitors to barely a third of its peak. The "tulip hotspot" that had begun to symbolise Kashmir's soft power and seasonal promise now tells a story of hesitation and fear. The ripple effects have reached small vendors who depend on the summer rush.

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The impact goes beyond livelihood. Historically, in Kashmir, tourists have been harbingers and ambassadors of socio-economic integration with the mainland, respectful of cultural diversity. Kashmiris can survive without incomes from tourism but cannot live in social isolation in Kashmir and ostracisation in the rest of the country.

This is not going to be another seasonal dip. Globally, economic uncertainty looms. Recent developments in India-US trade relations and the easing of import duties on American apples have dealt a severe blow. The Indian economy faces its own headwinds: Uneven recovery, high youth unemployment, and questions over the quality of growth. In such an environment, a local economy already reeling from one shock has little margin for error. The anxiety goes beyond tourist spots in the orchards of Shopian and Sopore, where it is palpable. The local economy is staring at tough times and can implode under pressure.

The deeper irony is that the promised economic renaissance and genuine empowerment of the people after the political changes have not materialised in any meaningful way. Investment has not surged as hoped. The result is a J&K that has seen its political architecture altered dramatically, but whose people continue to wait for the dividends of normalcy, jobs, and dignity.

The much-hyped integration has so far translated more into administrative centralisation than into tangible economic opportunity or political agency for ordinary Kashmiris. If anything, in the weeks and months following Pahalgam, incidents of harassment, intimidation and violence against Kashmiris — students in universities, shawl sellers in markets, traders and ordinary migrants — rose sharply across several parts of the country. Many of these acts have gone largely unpunished, with little visible action to protect innocent citizens or hold perpetrators accountable. Such backlash not only deepens the sense of alienation but also undermines the very idea of a shared national fabric, which the post-2019 political changes were meant to strengthen.

A year after Pahalgam, the message is somewhat sombre and sobering. The political reengineering has not eliminated terrorism. The economic costs of insecurity are immediate and painful. And the grand political project that was meant to transform Kashmir has, so far, delivered changes in form but not in substance, where it matters most to ordinary lives.

The anniversary of Pahalgam should not merely be a day of remembrance. It must also be a moment for reflection on what has been achieved — and what, painfully, has not.

*The writer is former finance minister, Jammu and Kashmir*

# KEY HIGHLIGHTS

## Context of the News

- One year after the Pahalgam (Baisaran) terror attack killing 26 civilians (mostly tourists), Jammu & Kashmir continues to face security, economic and socio-political challenges.
- India's response through Operation Sindoor reflects a doctrinal shift towards calibrated conventional retaliation in counter-terrorism.
- Despite security measures, tourism decline, weak investment, unemployment and social alienation persist.
- The situation highlights the interlinkage between security, development, governance and social cohesion.

## Key Points

Security Dimension

- Shift from strategic restraint → proactive deterrence (post-Uri doctrine).
- Focus on cross-border terrorism and hybrid threats.
- Continued presence of non-state actors and radical networks.

Economic Dimension

- Tourism sector severely impacted → multiplier effect on local economy.
- Decline in income of artisans, transporters, horticulture-linked services.
- Limited private investment despite policy changes.
- High youth unemployment (as highlighted in Economic Survey trends).

Social Dimension

- Tourism as a bridge for cultural integration weakened.
- Increased alienation and psychological insecurity among locals.
- Rise in targeting of Kashmiris outside the region → social cohesion concerns.

Governance & Political Dimension

- Post-2019 changes → greater centralisation.
- Limited political participation and grassroots empowerment.
- Gap between policy announcements and implementation outcomes.

International Dimension

- Issue linked with India-Pakistan relations and cross-border terrorism.
- Global focus on counter-terror frameworks (UNSCR 1373, FATF norms).
- Tourism decline affects India's global image of internal stability.

## Static Linkages

- Article 14, 19, 21 – Equality, freedom, life & dignity
- DPSPs – Promotion of welfare and reduction of regional inequality
- Federalism and Union Territory governance
- Internal security: terrorism, insurgency, border management
- Inclusive growth and balanced regional development
- Role of tourism in economic geography
- Human rights and social justice
- Disaster/conflict economy linkages

## Critical Analysis

Strengths

- Strong deterrence-based security doctrine
- Clear message against terrorism
- Improved operational capability of security forces

Weaknesses

- Overdependence on hard power approach
- Limited economic dividends post-political changes
- Weak institutional response to social discrimination
- Lack of grassroots political engagement

Opportunities

- Tourism revival as engine of inclusive growth
- Use of soft power and cultural diplomacy
- Integration through connectivity and digital economy

Threats

- Persistent cross-border terrorism
- Radicalisation and youth alienation
- Economic stagnation leading to instability
- Erosion of national integration due to social backlash

## Way Forward

- Adopt "3D Strategy" – Defence, Development, Dialogue
- Revive tourism via security assurance + branding campaigns
- Promote local economy (horticulture, handicrafts, MSMEs)
- Ensure inclusive governance and political participation
- Strengthen counter-radicalisation and community outreach
- Enforce strict action against hate crimes and discrimination
- Improve infrastructure, connectivity and digital inclusion
- Align policies with NITI Aayog's regional development approach

CIVILS WITH AKASH

# Tadoba's lesson: Conservation needs compromise, coexistence

ROHINI NILEKANI

IT IS tiger time in India. Across at least 25 of the 58 tiger reserves, people are on the move despite the summer heat, all to catch a glimpse of arguably the world's most striking predator.

We were particularly lucky recently in the Tadoba-Andhari Tiger Reserve (TATR) in Maharashtra when a two-day trip led us to 10 individual tigers, including the famous Junabai with her four cubs. It led me to understand that TATR is somewhat of an outlier among tourist-friendly tiger reserves. First and foremost, the terrible news. TATR witnesses lethal human-tiger conflict. There are about 10 tiger-related human deaths a year in TATR alone, and around 45 in its district of Chandrapur. Add to that the cattle deaths from wild animal attacks, and we can understand just how vulnerable local communities are.

TATR has around 100 tigers. There have been no reported conflict deaths in the core zone of 625 sq km, from where entire villages have been voluntarily relocated over the past decades. Despite strict control over numbers, 1,17,000 tourists drove safely through the core area in the past year alone. Tiger numbers in Tadoba-Andhari keep growing, a metric of successful tiger conservation. However, that means that tigers must keep dispersing beyond the buffer zone, itself more than 1,000 sq km, with 95 inhabited villages and a population of 1.25 lakh.

Despite the conflict, there appears to be unusual stability in the tiger reserve. The Forest Department there routinely refines its management practices. It is quick to release compensation for both human and cattle deaths. More importantly, it has tried to ensure that locals have a solid stake in forests and tourism.

No wildlife reserve can operate without local co-operation. The farmers around the Nagarahole Tiger Reserve in Karnataka recently demonstrated their angst against tiger-related conflict by causing a shutdown of all tourism facilities for six months in the prime season. It did not solve the conflict problem. Yet, it caused immense loss to the local tourist economy and the public exchequer, as some parks like Kabini are run by a government monopoly. Now, a new compromise is being crafted where all stakeholders can benefit.

There is no need to reinvent the wheel. In TATR, as in many well-managed parks in Madhya Pradesh, a win-win has long been orchestrated. Thanks to earlier visionary bureaucrats, there has been genuine financial decentralisation. That process continues to be strengthened today. Many villagers, especially those relocated from the core areas, benefit from the booming tourism economy. At least half the households get direct employment from the forest department itself, with 400 locals as safari guides alone. It supports value-added forest-produce collection with honey and amla sales. It invests in zero-waste management, employing women workers. It conducts safety protocol training and school trips for children. A significant proportion of the ticket revenues of Rs 40 crore a year is redistributed locally.

TATR has ambitious plans to build strategic partnerships for moving the tourism focus beyond tigers. The field director spoke of agrotourism, stargazing, cycling, boating, ayurvedic spas and butterfly parks. TATR has its own water bottling plant, again creating employment locally, and dispatches glass water bottles with every tourist to avoid single-use plastics.

The young guide who accompanied us agreed that the strategy was working reasonably well. While some villagers lament the more restricted access into the core forest for mahua and other minor forest produce, most accept the trade-off for more stable income, and better access to modern infrastructure — especially broadband.

Naturally, many problems remain. For example, like all reserves, TATR must rethink ubiquitous waterhole projects. These add unnatural numbers to the prey base and predator population, leading to conflict.

India understands that we need our tigers and our biodiversity, even if we use only economic logic to show how it contributes billions of rupees of ecosystem services annually. We must aim for maximum natural capital regeneration with minimum loss of life. TATR shows one of many paths to co-existence with potentially dangerous wildlife that make all our lives worth living.

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> The Forest Department there routinely refines its management practices. It is quick to release compensation. Importantly, it has tried to ensure that locals have a stake in forests and tourism

# KEY HIGHLIGHTS

## Context of the News

- Surge in wildlife tourism during summer months across Indian tiger reserves.
- Case study of Tadoba-Andhari Tiger Reserve (TATR) with ~100 tigers and high tourist footfall (~1.17 lakh annually).
- Rising human-wildlife conflict in surrounding areas: ~10 annual human deaths in TATR; ~45 in Chandrapur.
- Coexistence model emerging through decentralised governance, compensation, and community-based tourism.
- Contrast with conflict-driven disruption in Nagarahole Tiger Reserve.

## Key Points

- Human-Wildlife Conflict
  - Increasing tiger population → dispersal beyond protected zones.
  - Buffer zones (~1000 sq km) contain ~95 villages and 1.25 lakh population.
  - Livelihood losses: human casualties + cattle depredation.
- Conservation Success
  - Zero conflict deaths in core area (~625 sq km) due to voluntary relocation.
  - Rising tiger numbers reflect effective conservation (aligned with Project Tiger goals).
- Tourism Economy
  - ~1.17 lakh tourists annually in core zone.
  - Revenue ~₹40 crore/year; significant local redistribution.
- Community Participation
  - Employment: ~400 local safari guides.
  - Livelihood diversification: honey, amla collection, waste management, tourism services.
  - Compensation for losses is timely → builds trust.
- Innovations in TATR
  - Zero-waste tourism (glass bottles).
  - Local employment generation (water bottling plant).
  - Diversification: agrotourism, stargazing, eco-tourism activities.
- Ecological Concerns
  - Artificial waterholes → unnatural prey-predator concentration.
  - Habitat saturation leading to dispersal and conflict.

## Static Linkages

- Project Tiger (1973) – Centrally Sponsored Scheme.
- National Tiger Conservation Authority (NTCA).
- Wildlife Protection Act, 1972 (Schedules, protected areas).
- Biosphere reserve concept vs National Parks vs Wildlife Sanctuaries.
- Carrying capacity and ecological balance (NCERT XI Geography).
- Ecosystem services (Economic Survey, Millennium Ecosystem Assessment).
- FRA, 2006 – rights of forest dwellers.
- 42nd Amendment – Forests in Concurrent List.
- DPSP Article 48A & Fundamental Duty Article 51A(g).

## Critical Analysis

- Pros
  - Rising tiger population → ecological success.
  - Community-based model improves compliance.
  - Tourism supports local livelihoods.
- Cons
  - Continued human casualties in buffer zones.
  - Unequal benefits from tourism.
  - Ecological imbalance due to artificial interventions.

## Way Forward

- Strengthen wildlife corridors for safe dispersal.
- Improve compensation + insurance mechanisms.
- Promote community-led conservation models.
- Limit artificial ecological interventions.
- Regulate tourism based on carrying capacity.
- Use technology for conflict prediction and mitigation.

CIVILS WITH AKASH

# Recusal, responsibility and red lines in court

DELHI HIGH Court judge Justice Swarana Kanta Sharma's rejection of former chief minister Arvind Kejriwal's recusal plea in the liquor policy case brings to an end a troubling exchange. Underlining that "justice is not achieved by bowing to pressure," Justice Sharma held that a litigant cannot be allowed to judge a judge without material evidence, and judges cannot recuse themselves merely to satisfy unfounded apprehensions of bias. There can be little disagreement with this but two issues frame this episode: The imperative to protect judicial independence, which is threatened when motives are imputed through hearsay and speculation; and the disquieting pattern of opposition leaders in the dock after being targeted by central agencies.

In a polarised polity, the temptation to blur the line between courtroom and political battleground is ever-present. Litigants have been known to withdraw cases rather than argue before a judge they distrust. This erodes public faith in an institution already strained by delays and deficits. Kejriwal went further, personally arguing the plea, questioning the judge's "ideology" based on her attendance at certain public events. That sets a perilous precedent and turns the courtroom into an arena of accusation. As Justice Sharma cautioned, such pleas risk converting every bench into a veto point for the aggrieved. His argument that the judge had earlier denied him bail relief, and similarly denied Manish Sisodia and K Kavitha, is undercut by the manner in which a trial court subsequently discharged Kejriwal and the other accused. This affirms the primacy of due process over the disposition of any individual judge.

Yet judges, with due respect, need to look within. Their system of checks and balances — opaque by design, justified as a shield for independence — places the greater burden of self-regulation on the judiciary itself. When political discourse outside the courtroom is so fractured, judges must be careful about which stages they share and which they decline. Just as judicial assets are subject to disclosure, appointments of judges' family members to government panels — where governments are themselves frequent litigants — should be brought within the ambit of transparent public disclosure. More structurally, the MP/MLA (Criminal) roster, conceived to streamline cases against elected representatives, has often come to concentrate a disproportionate share of high-profile Opposition cases before a single judge. A polyvocal court — where benches are rotated and no single judge becomes the face of political prosecutions — is among the judiciary's strongest institutional safeguards. The court must diversify its pool and rotate its benches, not as a concession to political pressure, but as a guarantee of its own integrity. As for the litigant, VIP or otherwise, let this episode also be a cautionary lesson: Targeting the judge isn't sharp legal strategy, it distracts from, and can even weaken, the argument.

# KEY HIGHLIGHTS

## Context of the News

- The Delhi High Court rejected a recusal plea filed by Arvind Kejriwal in the liquor policy case.
- The plea sought recusal of Justice Swarana Kanta Sharma on grounds of alleged bias, citing prior judicial orders and perceived ideological leanings.
- Justice Sharma dismissed the plea, emphasizing that recusal cannot be based on conjecture, hearsay, or dissatisfaction with prior rulings.
- The case highlights tensions between judicial independence and political contestation, especially in cases involving opposition leaders investigated by central agencies.

## Key Points

- Doctrine of Recusal:
  - Judges may step aside if there is a real likelihood of bias, not mere apprehension.
  - Based on principles of natural justice (Nemo judex in causa sua).
- Court's Observations:
  - Litigants cannot "choose" judges without substantive evidence of bias.
  - Recusal demands cannot become a tool for forum shopping.
- Judicial Independence:
  - Essential for rule of law; threatened when judges face public or political pressure.
- Due Process Affirmed:
  - Trial court discharge of accused shows judicial hierarchy and procedural safeguards work independently of individual judges.
- Systemic Concerns Raised:
  - Concentration of politically sensitive cases before specific benches.
  - Lack of transparency in judicial conduct norms (e.g., public engagements, family appointments).

## Static Linkages

- Article 14 – Equality before law and equal protection of laws.
- Article 21 – Due process and fair trial.
- Article 50 – Separation of judiciary from executive.
- Principles of Natural Justice – Bias rule and fair hearing.
- Collegium system – Judicial appointments and independence.
- Judicial accountability mechanisms – In-house procedure (SC guidelines).
- Law Commission (230th Report) – Judicial reforms and delays.

## Critical Analysis

Positives

- Reinforces judicial independence against political pressure.
- Prevents misuse of recusal as a litigation strategy (forum shopping).
- Upholds institutional integrity and hierarchy of courts.

Concerns

- Perception of selective targeting of opposition leaders by investigative agencies.
- Opaque judicial processes may fuel public distrust.
- Concentration of cases risks creating "judge-specific narratives".
- Lack of codified standards for recusal leads to subjectivity.

Stakeholder Perspectives

- Judiciary: Needs autonomy but also public confidence.
- Political actors: May perceive bias in politically sensitive cases.
- Citizens: Expect impartial justice and transparency.
- Executive agencies: Scrutiny over misuse of investigative powers.

## Way Forward

- Develop clear, codified guidelines on judicial recusal.
- Ensure random and transparent roster allocation of cases.
- Enhance institutional transparency (disclosure norms, public engagements).
- Strengthen checks on investigative agencies to prevent misuse.
- Promote judicial accountability mechanisms without undermining independence.
- Foster constitutional morality and restraint among litigants and political actors.

CIVILS WITH AKASH

# Manipur needs healing, not just containment

IN FEBRUARY, the return of a popular government in Manipur after a prolonged spell of ethnic violence and the imposition of President's Rule came as a welcome reset. When the Yumnam Khemchand Singh government took office, it raised hopes of both administrative stability and political reconciliation. That promise is yet to be realised. A fortnight after two Meitei siblings were killed in a projectile attack in Tronglaobi village, massive protests, shutdowns, clashes with security forces and calls for boycotts indicate that the change in leadership is yet to translate into meaningful transformation on the ground.

The fault lines in Manipur are the result of a larger pattern of administrative abstinence that predates the current crisis. Dipping indices of employment, education and healthcare have long given rise to a virulent identity politics and hardening narratives of victimhood among the state's Meiteis, Kuki-Zos and Nagas. Unlike his predecessor N Biren Singh, Khemchand Singh has made efforts to reach out to all communities since he took office. Last month, he met with leaders of the Kuki-Zo Council. On Friday, he visited the Ukhrul district, calling for dialogue between the Tangkhul and Kuki communities. But the persistence of unrest — there was a suspected militant attack the day after his visit — and the visible mistrust — there have been calls for a "boycott" of the ruling party by civil-society groups — suggest that the fractures of the past two years remain largely unhealed.

The emphasis must now shift from containment to repair. Thousands remain displaced, a reminder that the crisis is both humanitarian and political and that rehabilitation must move to the centre. The CM's efforts at bridge-building underline that channels for engagement exist and can be expanded. What is required now is open, sustained dialogue with all stakeholders, an urgent clampdown on the free flow of weapons in the state and the foregrounding of an administration that is even-handed and emotive in its response, rather than merely reactive.

## KEY HIGHLIGHTS

### Context of the News

- The return of an elected government in Manipur after a phase of instability (including President's Rule) raised expectations of peace and administrative normalcy.
- The new Chief Minister, Yumnam Khemchand Singh, initiated outreach efforts to different ethnic groups.
- Despite leadership change, violence persists—evidenced by killings, protests, shutdowns, and clashes with security forces.
- Ethnic tensions among Meiteis, Kuki-Zo groups, and Nagas continue to dominate the socio-political landscape.
- Large-scale displacement and humanitarian distress remain unresolved.

### Key Points

- Continued ethnic violence despite regime change indicates deep-rooted structural issues.
- Administrative gaps in employment, education, and healthcare have historically contributed to identity-based mobilization.
- Trust deficit persists between communities and the state apparatus.
- Attempts at reconciliation include dialogues with Kuki-Zo Council and outreach to Naga-majority regions like Ukhrul.
- Proliferation of illegal arms and militant activities aggravates instability.
- Civil society responses include protests and calls for political boycotts.

### Static Linkages

- President's Rule provisions under Article 356
- Role of Governor in constitutional breakdown
- Federal structure and Centre-State relations
- Ethnic conflicts and identity politics in Northeast India
- Internal security challenges: insurgency and militancy
- Disaster management framework (rehabilitation of displaced persons)
- Fundamental Rights: Right to Life (Article 21) and equality
- Directive Principles: promotion of welfare state
- Role of civil society in governance

### Critical Analysis

Positives

- Restoration of democratic government improves legitimacy.
- CM's outreach signals intent toward inclusive governance.
- Dialogue channels between communities are being explored.

Challenges

- Deep-rooted ethnic mistrust remains unresolved.
- Administrative response largely reactive rather than preventive.
- Humanitarian crisis (IDPs) inadequately addressed.
- Proliferation of arms fuels recurring violence.

Core Issue (Exam Insight)

- Crisis reflects a triad problem:
- Identity conflict + Development deficit + Weak governance capacity

### Way Forward

- Shift from law-and-order approach → reconciliation & trust-building
- Time-bound rehabilitation of displaced populations
- Institutionalize continuous dialogue platforms among communities
- Strengthen inclusive development in hill and valley regions
- Crackdown on illegal arms and militant networks
- Promote community policing and grassroots governance
- Enhance Centre–State coordination under cooperative federalism

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