



DAILY NEWS PAPER ANALYSIS

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**CIVILS WITH AKASH
SECTOR 25 CHANDIGARH**

Pricey food, dining out push retail inflation to a 13-month high of 3.5%

T.C.A. Sharad Raghavan
NEW DELHI

Retail inflation quickened to a 13-month high of 3.5% in April 2026, although still coming in lower than what was expected by most economists. The price rise was largely driven by higher food inflation as well as higher prices at restaurants as they passed on higher fuel prices to consumers.

Data on the Consumer Price Index (CPI) for April showed that inflation quickened from the 3.4% registered in March, the first month following the start of the war in West Asia.

"The April inflation reading came in softer than expectations," Upas-

Price pressures

Retail inflation continued its accelerating trend in April 2026, with food and restaurant costs driving the uptick



to 4.2% in April from 2.9% in the previous month.

Ease in transport

Notably, inflation in the transport sector stood at -0.01% in April as compared to 0% in the previous month.

This, according to Ms. Thakur, was more because of the passenger transport services sector rather than the price at which goods were transported.

"While food prices have nudged higher by around 30 basis points, overall transportation prices have actually eased," Ms. Thakur said. "This is largely on account of easing prices for the services sector, while prices of transport of goods have increased by 7.6% in the month."

na Bhardwaj, chief economist at Kotak Mahindra Bank said, a sentiment echoed by Madan Sabnavis, chief economist at the Bank of Baroda as well as Rajni Thakur, chief economist at L&T Finance.

"However, the outlook remains clouded with upside risks amid supply side

disruptions from geopolitics and El Nino," Ms. Bhardwaj said.

Inflation in the food and beverages category climbed to 4% in April from 3.7% in March.

Simultaneously, inflation in the restaurant and accommodation services sector quickened sharply

- Food inflation has highest weight in CPI basket.
- Types of inflation:
 - Demand-pull inflation
 - Cost-push inflation
 - Imported inflation.
- El Niño:
 - Warming of Pacific Ocean waters affecting Indian monsoon.

Analytical Dimensions for Mains

Why is inflation rising?

- Increase in food prices.
- Global crude oil uncertainty.
- Pass-through of fuel costs to services sector.
- Climate risks affecting agriculture.

Why is inflation still manageable?

- Inflation remains within RBI tolerance band.
- Transport service prices eased.
- Domestic demand conditions remain stable.

Major Concerns

- Food inflation affects poor households disproportionately.
- Imported inflation can widen current account deficit.
- Persistent inflation may delay RBI rate cuts.
- El Niño may worsen rural distress and food insecurity.

Way Forward

- Improve agricultural supply chains and storage.
- Strengthen food buffer stock management.
- Promote climate-resilient agriculture.
- Reduce dependence on imported crude oil.
- Maintain calibrated monetary policy.
- Expand renewable energy capacity.
- Improve logistics efficiency under PM Gati Shakti.

KEY HIGHLIGHTS:

Context

- India's retail inflation, measured by the Consumer Price Index (CPI), increased to 3.5% in April 2026 from 3.4% in March 2026.
- Inflation was mainly driven by:
 - Rise in food prices
 - Increase in restaurant and accommodation costs
 - Impact of higher global fuel prices due to West Asia tensions.
- Economists have also highlighted risks from:
 - Supply-chain disruptions
 - Crude oil volatility
 - Possible El Niño impact on monsoon and agriculture.
- Despite this rise, inflation remains within the RBI's target range of 4% ± 2%.

Key Points

- Retail Inflation (CPI): 3.5% in April 2026.
- Food & beverages inflation: Increased to 4%.
- Restaurant & accommodation inflation: Increased to 4.2%.
- Transport inflation: Marginally negative at -0.01%.
- Increase in logistics cost:
 - Transport of goods inflation rose by 7.6%.
- Inflationary pressures linked to:
 - Imported fuel costs
 - Geopolitical tensions
 - Climate-related risks (El Niño).

Important Static Concepts

- CPI is released by:
 - National Statistical Office (NSO).
- RBI follows:
 - Flexible Inflation Targeting (FIT) framework.
- Inflation target:
 - 4% with tolerance band of ±2%.
- Monetary Policy Committee (MPC):
 - Sets repo rate to control inflation.

Concept	Important Fact
CPI	Measures retail inflation
Released by	NSO
RBI Inflation Target	4% ± 2%
Core Inflation	Excludes food and fuel
Imported Inflation	Due to rise in import prices
El Niño Impact	Weak monsoon, food inflation

A society at large under question: rebuild a culture where safety of children is collective responsibility

There was a time when social trust formed the invisible foundation of everyday life. Children moved freely within neighbourhoods, and parents could rely on relatives and neighbours without hesitation or fear. Safety was not viewed as an individual concern alone; it was understood as a shared social responsibility.

That sense of trust today appears increasingly fragile. The recent incident at Nasrapur village in Maharashtra's Pune district, where a three- to four-year-old girl was allegedly sexually assaulted and murdered by a 65-year-old man, has once again exposed the disturbing vulnerabilities that continue to confront children in our society.

The reported criminal history of the accused makes the incident even more troubling, raising important questions about monitoring mechanisms for repeat offenders and the effectiveness of preventive vigilance.

Such incidents are not merely isolated criminal acts; they strike at the moral and social fabric that sustains collective life. Every such crime deepens public mistrust and weakens confidence in the very idea of social security. Parents increasingly find themselves burdened by a fear that earlier generations rarely experienced with such intensity.

India has, over the years, enacted stringent legal provisions to address crimes against women and children. The Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act remains one of the strongest legislative measures aimed at safeguarding minors from sexual violence. However, legislation alone cannot guarantee protection.



Vijaya Bahatkar
Chairperson,
National Commission
for Women

Laws intervene after offences occur; prevention requires sustained social awareness, institutional preparedness, and collective responsibility.

Need comprehensive approach
Incidents like Nasrapur underline the need for a more comprehensive approach towards dealing with repeat sexual offenders. Individuals convicted of rape, aggravated sexual assault, repeated sexual crimes, and serious POCSO offences should not ordinarily be granted parole or temporary release, given the gravity of such offences and their broader implications for public safety.

In exceptional cases where temporary release is considered, it should be preceded by stringent safeguards, including risk assessment, police verification, electronic monitoring, and consultation with the victim's family.

Public confidence in the justice system depends not only on punishment after conviction but also on ensuring that systems of supervision remain effective.

There is also a strong case for regular monitoring of habitual offenders by local law enforcement agencies. Periodic reporting, preventive surveillance, and legally permissible measures aimed at ensuring good conduct can contribute towards reducing the possibility of repeat offences.

Equally important is the question of timely justice. Delays in forensic analysis, witness examination, and trial proceedings often weaken both deterrence and public faith in institutions. Fast-tracked investigations and expeditious judicial processes are

therefore essential in crimes involving children.

At a broader level, these incidents compel society to engage in introspection. The erosion of social sensitivity and moral accountability cannot be ignored. A society that speaks of rights must also remain conscious of duties. Moderation cannot come at the cost of compassion, vigilance, and ethical responsibility.

The responsibility of child safety cannot rest solely with governments or law enforcement agencies. Parents, teachers, neighbours, and communities all have a role to play in creating safer environments for children. Greater awareness regarding child protection, including conversations around personal safety and appropriate conduct, has become necessary in contemporary society.

In the present case, the accused must face the strictest punishment permissible under law. Justice in such matters serves not only the victim and her family but also reinforces society's collective faith in the rule of law. The National Commission for Women is in continuous contact with the authorities concerned to ensure a time-bound investigation and expeditious proceedings.

The larger challenge before us is not merely legal or administrative; it is civilisational. The need of the hour is to rebuild a culture where the safety of every child is treated as a collective moral responsibility.

Only through sustained vigilance, social sensitivity, and institutional accountability can society hope to restore the trust that such incidents continue to erode.

- Child safety linked with:
 - Governance efficiency
 - Ethical values in society
 - Institutional accountability

Static Linkages

- Article 14 – Equality before law
- Article 15(3) – Special provisions for women and children
- Article 21 – Right to life and dignity
- Article 39(e) & 39(f) – Protection of children from abuse and exploitation
- Article 45 – Early childhood care
- Fundamental Duty under Article 51A(e)
- Juvenile Justice Act, 2015
- Fast-track courts for sexual offences
- Community policing recommended by ARC reports

Critical Analysis

Issues

- Weak post-release monitoring of sexual offenders
- Delay in justice delivery weakens deterrence
- Poor coordination among police, prisons, and judiciary
- Social apathy and erosion of community vigilance
- Underreporting in many child abuse cases

Significance

- Crimes against children affect social trust and public security.
- Reflects governance and policing challenges.
- Raises questions on balance between reformatory justice and public safety.

Ethical Dimensions

- Protection of children is a constitutional and moral responsibility.
- Need for compassion, vigilance, and collective responsibility in society.

Way Forward

- Strengthen implementation of POCSO provisions.
- Create database and monitoring system for repeat offenders.
- Improve forensic and investigative capacity.
- Ensure time-bound trials through fast-track courts.
- Promote child safety awareness in schools and communities.
- Enhance community policing and local vigilance.
- Strengthen victim support and counselling systems.
- Improve coordination between police, prisons, and judiciary.

KEY HIGHLIGHTS:

Context

- A minor girl in Nasrapur village, Pune district of Maharashtra was allegedly sexually assaulted and murdered.
- The accused reportedly had a criminal background, raising concerns regarding monitoring of repeat offenders and effectiveness of preventive policing.
- The incident has revived debate on:
 - Child protection mechanisms
 - Criminal justice reforms
 - Role of society and institutions in child safety
 - Implementation of the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act

Key Points

- POCSO Act, 2012:
 - Comprehensive law for protection of children from sexual offences.
 - Covers sexual assault, harassment, and pornography.
 - Provides child-friendly investigation and trial procedures.
 - Defines child as a person below 18 years.
- NCRB data shows continued rise in crimes against children due to:
 - Better reporting
 - Increasing vulnerability
 - Digital exposure
- Concerns highlighted:
 - Weak monitoring of habitual offenders
 - Delays in forensic investigation and trials
 - Inadequate community vigilance
 - Need for preventive policing

IMD unveils 'block-level' monsoon forecast model

It has been a long-standing aim of IMD to provide hyper-local forecasts to help farmers time their sowing precisely; however, the system might face a formidable test this year in light of El Niño

Jacob Koshy
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At the head of the monsoon, the India Meteorological Department (IMD) on Tuesday unveiled a new forecast system that will, for the first time, generate "block-level" forecasts of the season's arrival over 15 States. The system comprises about half of India's roughly 7,200-odd blocks. Historically, such estimates are available, at best, over States or at the level of districts. For instance, it is known that the monsoon arrives in Mumbai around June 10 and in Delhi, around June 26. However, the inherent variation of the monsoon is such that even within a district, several blocks and villages remain rainless despite the monsoon having officially "arrived" in the district.

It has been a long-standing aim of the IMD to provide hyper-local forecasts to address this shortcoming to enable farmers to time their sowing precisely. At the new system's core are two forecasting models whose predictions are "blended" to sharpen ac-



At the new system's core are two weather forecasting models whose predictions are blended to sharpen accuracy. C. VENKATACHALAPATHY

curacy. From the date of the monsoon's onset in Kerala, it can use AI-based analysis, the IMD's trove of nearly a century of detailed meteorological data and global weather models, to give the monsoon's itinerary with unprecedented granularity, Science Minister Jitendra Singh said at a press briefing.

Forecasts for 4 weeks

This was a system specifically developed at the request of the Ministry of Agriculture and Farmers' Welfare, whose existing advisory system is built to deliver forecasts in a roughly weekly format. The blend-

ing framework, developed by the Indian Institute of Tropical Meteorology, a research institute of the Ministry of Earth Sciences, is designed to feed directly into the Ministry's pipeline and issue probabilistic forecasts for four weeks.

Currently, this system can be used to provide forecasts to 3,396 blocks across 15 States and one Union Territory. Two trial runs have already been completed successfully, according to a press statement. "These States are part of the monsoon core zone, which are the regions that are largely rainfed and are most sensitive to southwest monsoon

dynamics," M. Ravichandran, Secretary to the Ministry, said at a press briefing. "Of course, going ahead we aim to extend this all over India but that requires more observational data."

Mr. Ravichandran told *The Hindu* that the system would face a formidable test this year given that the IMD and global models were expecting "below normal" rainfall in light of a developing El Niño – frequently causing weak monsoon rain in India – from July.

On Tuesday, the IMD launched a monsoon forecast model specifically for Uttar Pradesh with a 1-km resolution (indicative of granularity) that is valid for 10 days. This, Mr. Singh said, was because of a very extensive coverage of automatic weather stations in the State that allowed a weather model called the Mithuna (which works at a 12.5 km resolution) to be "downscaled" to 1 km. "We are encouraging other States to share their data with us that will allow their forecasts to be generated with higher resolution," Mr. Ravichandran added.

- IMD warned of possible:
 - El Niño conditions,
 - Below-normal rainfall from July onward.

Static Points

- Southwest Monsoon contributes nearly 75% of India's annual rainfall.
- Normal monsoon onset over Kerala:
 - Around June 1.
- Monsoon influenced by:
 - Differential heating,
 - ITCZ shift,
 - Jet streams,
 - ENSO,
 - Indian Ocean Dipole (IOD).
- El Niño:
 - Periodic warming of central/eastern Pacific Ocean,
 - Usually linked with weak Indian monsoon.
- Weather forecasting methods:
 - Statistical models,
 - Dynamical/Numerical Weather Prediction models,
 - Ensemble forecasting.
- Key weather infrastructure:
 - Doppler Weather Radar,
 - Automatic Weather Stations (AWS),
 - Satellites.

Critical Analysis

Significance

- Promotes precision agriculture.
- Improves climate resilience.
- Supports disaster preparedness.
- Enhances localized weather forecasting.

Challenges

- Need for dense observational infrastructure.
- Forecast uncertainty due to chaotic monsoon behavior.
- Limited awareness among farmers.
- Data-sharing issues between States and Centre.

Way Forward

- Expand block-level forecasting nationwide.
- Increase Automatic Weather Stations.
- Integrate forecasts with:
 - PM Fasal Bima Yojana,
 - Kisan advisory systems.
- Improve regional-language dissemination.
- Strengthen AI and climate-data integration.

KEY HIGHLIGHTS:

Context

- The India Meteorological Department (IMD) launched an AI-enabled block-level monsoon forecast system before the 2026 southwest monsoon season.
- The system covers 3,196 blocks across 15 States and 1 Union Territory in the monsoon core zone.
- Developed by the Indian Institute of Tropical Meteorology under the Ministry of Earth Sciences.
- Aim:
 - Hyper-local monsoon onset forecasts,
 - Better agricultural planning,
 - Improved agrometeorological advisories.
- IMD also launched a 1-km resolution forecast model for Uttar Pradesh.

Key Points

- Forecast generated using:
 - AI-based analysis,
 - Historical weather data,
 - Global weather models,
 - Blended forecasting techniques.
- Forecast validity:
 - Up to 4 weeks.
- Importance:
 - Helps farmers decide sowing time,
 - Supports rainfed agriculture,
 - Reduces crop-loss risks.
- Focus area:
 - Monsoon Core Zone (MCZ) → highly dependent on southwest monsoon rainfall.
- Uttar Pradesh model:
 - Based on "Mithuna" weather model,
 - Downscaled from 12.5 km to 1 km resolution.

Tamil Nadu's political transition, growth story faultlines

In Tamil Nadu, the electoral triumph of the Tamilaga Vetti Kazhagam (TVK) under the leadership of C. Joseph Vijay is seen as something that would lead to a break from the 'Dravidian Model of development'. But only time will tell if Mr. Vijay's victory is only an extension of Dravidian politics. Going by the TVK's election manifesto, there is scope for continuity, not a break, from extant economic policy. The party's victory comes at a time when Tamil Nadu is faced with a series of challenges. While some are internal, emerging from cracks in the State's relatively better development outcomes and in its political trajectory, others have been aggravated by external challenges such as the shifts in federal relations and the changes in the global economic order.

Successive Dravidian parties have built an economy that is inclusive, productive, and broad-based. The State has shown that economic growth can go together with social development: simultaneous interventions in growth drivers (infrastructure such as power and transport) alongside investments in affordable health and education. It may not be an exaggeration to say that, even without parental support, the probability of a child surviving, getting fully immunised, being fed nutritious food, getting into school, entering college, and progressing to university is far higher in Tamil Nadu than in many other States in India (perhaps, Kerala is the other).

But now, "there is trouble in paradise". New faultlines have emerged in the Dravidian model. Historically, Tamil Nadu's industrial story has rested on a simple idea: using state policy to stitch together the growth of territorially rooted micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs) and large electronics and manufacturing firms, so that learning, jobs, and value creation are spread across regions within the State. That model has weakened with the rise in precarity of jobs and sluggish wage growth. The growth – and indeed there has continued to be growth – has not generated jobs or real wage growth. Ex-post welfare transfers have not cut it either. Not to mention, the increased welfare transfers have come at the expense of fiscal prudence.

Jobs and growth
Tamil Nadu is a global manufacturing hub and its industrial policy, irrespective of the political regime, has remained consistent and non-contradictory. It has, therefore, attracted large global investments such as Hyundai, Ford and Nokia in the past, and Foxconn which manufactures Apple iPhones. However, there has been a gap between the investment promised and actualised. As per Centre for Monitoring



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Indian Economy Pvt. Ltd (CMIE) data, during 2021-25, announced investments rose to ₹6.80 lakh crore, but completed investments stood lower at ₹1.57 lakh crore. The completion ratio stands at 23.09%, which is lower than before. Even these investments did not generate commensurate jobs. The employment elasticity of new jobs is much lower now than in previous regimes: 0.01 per unit of promised capital, less than one job per crore of investment. The latest Annual Survey of Industries tells us that the ratio of jobs created per unit of capital investment, number of workers to gross capital formation, was 0.58 for Tamil Nadu, 0.34 for Gujarat, and 0.33 for Maharashtra. Historically, Tamil Nadu's uniqueness lies in the pursuit of development that delicately balances the needs of capital with a requisite degree of safeguards for workers. As a result, even when the wage share in national income has been falling across the world due to increases in capital intensity, Tamil Nadu has been able to protect it, at least relatively.

The wage levels in Tamil Nadu were higher because of lower levels of contractualisation and the better bargaining strength of labour. Relative to its own past, the State is now witnessing rising contractualisation, declining wage shares, and weakening employment elasticity as capital intensity increases. MSMEs are losing ground and many traditional, labour-intensive clusters face a survival crisis. They are yet to recover fully from successive shocks of demonetisation (2016), Goods and Services Tax (2017) and COVID-19 (2020). U.S. President Donald Trump's tariffs have compounded the crisis. The new factories that have come in have weak linkages with the existing small firms. On the other hand, the persisting skill gap in labour market has further limited the ability to generate jobs, adopt new technologies and absorb new entrants.

Aspirations versus achievement
The Dravidian model that generated aspirations among youth has brought new troubles. Its emphasis on education as the route to self-respect translated into broad-based aspirations for success which implied dignity and self-respect. These are values that the Dravidian movement has long stood by. Tamil Nadu is one of the few Indian States that democratised higher education and addressed elite bias. Its gross enrolment ratio (GER) in higher education is 51%, which means that 51% of all youth in the age group of 18-23 years are engaged in some form of higher education, which is twice the national average of 27.1% and comparable to most European countries. It is also inclusive, as the GER of Scheduled Caste (SC) men and women stands at 38.8% and 40.6%, respectively, much

higher than that of upper-caste youth in many States.
But since education expanded without improvements in quality, its returns have declined, weakening the prospect of mobility and opening new pathways for inequality. With education being decoupled from the job market, the relative position of the first-generation graduate has become increasingly fragile when compared to those with generational wealth. Double-digit growth does not mean anything to new entrants if it does not generate jobs with commensurate wages. Educated youth work as delivery agents and gig workers who are exploited by platform companies. A feeling of betrayal has set in. The welfare that follows is not enough and cannot compensate for the loss of dignity that is endured through joblessness or informality. The new welfare of the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam party has ensured a vast social and economic safety net for the underprivileged, but these welfare measures did not resonate with first-time voters in 2026. In the absence of meaningful joblessness or informality, the youth perceive these as measures that take away dignity.
New policies, delivering dignity
No doubt, Tamil Nadu still does better in most indicators vis-à-vis other States. For youth, this is a given. They have been listening to this narrative their entire lives, but that slogan of success does not resonate with their lives. The Dravidian movement took on the old hierarchy but is blind to the new hierarchy, and their own position within it. Thomas Piketty emphasises that besides political equality, voice, power, and participation, and access to basic goods for everyone, the question of dignity is the most severe form of inequality in our times. Tamil Nadu has achieved some degree of equality in basic health, education, food, and transportation through a more generous welfare state. But it has not delivered dignity. So how does one even do that?
Addressing that requires a reworking of the growth strategy to generate decent jobs, better wages and reforming governance to reduce the gap between the governed and the governing, foster associational life among people, and dismantle new sites of hierarchy. In absence of these measures, even welfare, framed in the language of rights, may not work because the line between legitimate welfare and illegitimate bribe, or money-for-votes, has blurred. This often makes youth resentful or confused about what is an entitlement and whether a cash transfer is a right or a bribe. What is thus required is a new set of economic and social policies attentive to these faultlines.

◦ National Average: 27.1%.

- Growth of gig economy and informal jobs among educated youth.

Static Linkages

- Inclusive growth requires both economic growth and equitable distribution.
- Employment elasticity indicates job creation capacity of growth.
- MSMEs are major contributors to employment and exports.
- Human capital formation depends on quality education and employability.
- Welfare measures without productive employment may create fiscal stress.
- Informalisation of labour weakens social security and bargaining power.
- Directive Principles aim to reduce inequalities and ensure social justice.

Critical Analysis

Positives

- Better human development indicators.
- High educational access and social inclusion.
- Stable industrial policy attracted investments.
- Strong welfare architecture.

Challenges

- Jobless and capital-intensive growth.
- Weak employment generation despite investments.
- Rising informalisation and gig work.
- Skill gap and employability crisis.
- MSME sector distress.
- Fiscal burden of expanding welfare schemes.

Way Forward

- Promote labour-intensive manufacturing.
- Strengthen MSME competitiveness and credit support.
- Improve quality of higher education.
- Expand skill development linked with industry demand.
- Increase social security for gig workers.
- Balance welfare spending with fiscal prudence.
- Improve investment implementation and employment outcomes.

KEY HIGHLIGHTS:

Context

- Debate on the future of Tamil Nadu's "Dravidian Model" after the rise of TVK under C. Joseph Vijay.
- Concerns regarding:
 - Jobless growth
 - Weakening MSMEs
 - Rising contractualisation
 - Declining returns from higher education.
- Tamil Nadu historically combined:
 - Industrial growth
 - Welfare policies
 - Social justice measures.

Key Points

- Tamil Nadu attracted major global investments:
 - Hyundai
 - Ford
 - Nokia
 - Foxconn.
- CMIE Data (2021–25):
 - Announced investments: ₹6.80 lakh crore
 - Completed investments: ₹1.57 lakh crore
 - Completion ratio: 23.09%.
- Declining employment elasticity due to capital-intensive growth.
- MSMEs affected by:
 - Demonetisation
 - GST
 - COVID-19
 - Global tariff disruptions.
- Higher Education GER:
 - Tamil Nadu: 51%

Managing coexistence in human-wildlife conflict zones

Human-wildlife conflict (HWC) is often framed as a conservation problem. In reality, it is a complex socio-ecological challenge shaped by land use, livelihoods and ecological change. Across continents, interactions between people and wildlife are becoming more frequent and more intense, not because animals are encroaching on human space alone, but because human activity is rapidly transforming natural habitats.

In India, hundreds of people die each year in encounters with elephants, while large numbers of livestock are lost to predators. Similar patterns are reported in parts of Africa, Southeast Asia and Latin America. These conflicts reflect deeper pressures such as habitat fragmentation, agricultural expansion and changing land use. Where biodiversity overlaps with dense human settlement, conflict becomes almost inevitable.

A reflection of ecological imbalance
Geographically, the most severe conflicts occur in South and Southeast Asia and sub-Saharan Africa. Brazil, India, Indonesia, Kenya and Tanzania face recurring challenges involving elephants, big cats and other large mammals. These species require extensive ranges and seasonal movement corridors. When forests are cleared, roads constructed or farms expanded, these natural pathways are disrupted. Wildlife then adapts, often by moving into agricultural landscapes or peri-urban areas in search of food and shelter.

Importantly, animal behaviour in such contexts is rarely 'aggressive' in intent. Crop raiding by elephants or livestock predation by carnivores are adaptive responses to ecological constraints. Monkeys and wild boars exploit easily available food near forest edges, while predators turn to livestock when natural prey declines. These patterns reflect ecological imbalance rather than aberrant animal behaviour.

Global responses to HWC show that coexistence is possible when policy moves beyond reactive measures. In Africa, Botswana and Namibia have implemented



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The approach should be scientifically informed, socially just, and ecologically sustainable

community-based natural resource management systems, where local communities share tourism revenues and gain rights over wildlife use. This aligns conservation goals with economic incentives, reducing hostility toward wildlife. In central America in Costa Rica, ecological corridors are integrated into national planning to maintain habitat connectivity. Finland combines real-time wildlife monitoring with rapid compensation systems, reducing both risk and resentment.

These approaches share three key features: strong local participation, reliable economic support and the use of ecological data for planning; they treat conflict as a shared management issue rather than a law-and-order problem.

The complexities in India
In India, significant efforts have been made to address HWC through compensation schemes, technological interventions and legal frameworks. However, given the scale and complexity of the challenge, there remains scope to further strengthen implementation. Compensation mechanisms, while well-intentioned, can benefit from greater timeliness, enhanced coverage and improved accessibility for marginalised communities. Similarly, measures such as solar fencing and early warning systems have shown context-specific success, but their effectiveness depends on better coordination and ecological planning.

At the policy level, India's legal framework has played a crucial role in wildlife conservation. Going forward, there is scope to better align these frameworks with the evolving realities of human-wildlife interfaces. As land-use patterns and ecological pressures change, adaptive, locally responsive governance approaches can help strengthen coexistence outcomes.

There is a need to carefully assess the practicality and long-term effectiveness of proposed interventions. Suggestions such as

occasionally entered public debate; however, experts note that such measures have limited applicability beyond small, intensively managed populations. In the Indian context, where elephants range across vast and fragmented landscapes, the key challenge remains habitat loss, increasing competition for food and water, and growing human-wildlife interface. Therefore, lasting solutions must focus on habitat restoration, ecological connectivity, and community-based conflict mitigation rather than isolated technical fixes.

Evidence from Bhutan and Nepal shows that locally grounded solutions can reduce conflict. Community-managed forests, coordinated grazing and predator-proof livestock enclosures have shown positive results, supported by stable conservation funding mechanisms.

Focus on education and awareness
Climate change is likely to intensify HWC by altering resource availability and forcing both humans and wildlife to adapt. This adds urgency to the need for a shift in perspective. Wildlife cannot be treated as an external threat to be controlled, nor can human livelihoods be side-lined in the name of conservation.

The way forward lies in designing landscapes that accommodate both. This includes securing wildlife corridors, improving land-use planning, strengthening compensation systems, and involving communities as active partners in conservation. Education and awareness can also play a role in rebuilding tolerance and understanding.

HWC is not an anomaly. It is a predictable outcome of how we use land and resources. The challenge is not to eliminate conflict entirely, but to manage it in ways that are scientifically informed, socially just and ecologically sustainable. If approached thoughtfully, coexistence is not only possible, but it is also essential for the future of both people and wildlife.

The views expressed are personal

- Compensation mechanisms
- Early warning systems
- Solar fencing
- GPS tracking
- Successful global examples:
 - Community-based conservation in Botswana and Namibia
 - Ecological corridors in Costa Rica
 - Real-time monitoring in Finland
- Nepal and Bhutan have reduced conflict through:
 - Community-managed forests
 - Predator-proof livestock enclosures

Static Linkages

- Article 48A – Protection of environment and wildlife.
- Article 51A(g) – Fundamental duty to protect natural environment.
- Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972 provides legal framework for wildlife conservation.
- Project Elephant launched in 1992.
- India hosts nearly 60% of global Asian elephant population.
- Wildlife corridors maintain genetic diversity and species movement.
- Eco-sensitive zones reduce pressure on protected areas.
- Habitat fragmentation decreases ecosystem carrying capacity.
- Community participation is essential for sustainable conservation.

Critical Analysis

Significance

- Protects biodiversity and ecological balance.
- Reduces economic losses to farmers.
- Promotes sustainable coexistence.
- Supports long-term conservation goals.

Challenges

- Delay in compensation payments.
- Encroachment into forest areas.
- Linear infrastructure projects disrupting corridors.
- Poor coordination among States.
- Lack of scientific land-use planning.
- Climate change increasing resource stress.

Concerns

- Rising human casualties reduce support for conservation.
- Marginal farmers bear disproportionate losses.
- Development-conservation conflict persists.

Way Forward

- Secure wildlife corridors through legal and ecological measures.
- Improve compensation delivery mechanisms.
- Expand community-based conservation models.
- Integrate ecology into infrastructure planning.
- Strengthen real-time monitoring and early warning systems.
- Promote habitat restoration and afforestation.
- Increase awareness among local communities.
- Enhance inter-state coordination for migratory species.

KEY HIGHLIGHTS:

Context of the News

- Rising incidents of human deaths, crop damage and livestock loss due to increasing interaction between humans and wildlife in India and globally.
- Habitat fragmentation, deforestation, infrastructure expansion and climate change are increasing the frequency of conflicts.
- Recent policy discussions emphasise coexistence models, wildlife corridors and community participation instead of purely reactive measures.
- India is focusing on compensation schemes, early warning systems, solar fencing and habitat restoration to reduce conflicts.

Key Points

- Human-Wildlife Conflict (HWC) refers to interaction between humans and wild animals resulting in negative impacts on people, wildlife or ecosystems.
- Major conflict species in India:
 - Elephants
 - Tigers
 - Leopards
 - Wild boars
 - Monkeys
- Key causes:
 - Habitat loss
 - Fragmentation of wildlife corridors
 - Agricultural expansion
 - Decline in prey base
 - Urbanisation
 - Climate change
- Elephants require large migratory corridors; blockage increases encounters with humans.
- Predators attack livestock when natural prey declines.
- India has implemented:

Data and justice

As courts adopt AI, care must be taken on the potential for abuse

In the latest step in a long-standing effort to digitise the judiciary, Chief Justice of India (CJI) Surya Kant announced two initiatives from the Bench, called 'One Case, One Data' (OCOD), a unified judicial data platform, and 'Su-Sahayak', an AI-powered chatbot on the Supreme Court of India website. OCOD promises a unified digital trail for a dispute as it moves through various courts, linkages between court records and litigant actions (such as appeals), easier access to various documents, lower need for manual verification, reciprocal access to High Courts and other courts, and more accurate judicial statistics. It is notable considering the wide variation in software practices and records quality across India's thousands of district and subordinate courts. If the programme succeeds, standardised data could also allow administrators to determine where cases are held up and ease procedural bottlenecks, and improve data-based decision-making overall. 'Su-Sahayak' has been integrated into the Court website's front-end to help users navigate case status, cause lists, orders and judgments, e-services, and frequently asked questions. As with any major state-backed technology rollout in India, questions about interoperability, integrity of legacy records, restricting access to private information, and staff skilling remain. By aspiring to a centralised digital fingerprint for each case, OCOD also bears the risk of misuse.

While the CJI said that these new tools will improve "access to justice", their introduction risks deepening the digital divide. OCOD may require lawyers to maintain digital scanners, cloud backup options, and updated software. Metropolitan corporate firms can easily absorb these costs but independent practitioners in the district and taluka levels will lack the capital. The system may also introduce digital middlemen to help litigants who cannot navigate the e-filing portal, potentially creating a new layer of unregulated costs. While the government has launched assistants with voice-first capabilities, such as Jan Sahayak, 'Su-Sahayak' is primarily text-based and could exclude people who are not comfortable typing or navigating complex website menus. The state and the judiciary must ensure that the AI model is not biased against marginalised communities who were historically disproportionately arrested or denied bail. India's courts have generally been more comfortable with AI for assistance than for substantive reasoning. 'Su-Sahayak' follows SUVAS, to translate judgments, and SUPACE, which processes facts and legal precedents. The line must continue to hold as the judiciary adopts more powerful tools that have already tempted practitioners in other domains to abuse them.

KEY HIGHLIGHTS:

Context

- Chief Justice of India Surya Kant launched:
 - One Case, One Data (OCOD) platform.
 - 'Su-Sahayak' AI-based chatbot on Supreme Court website.
- Aim:
 - Improve judicial efficiency,
 - strengthen digital access,
 - create integrated judicial databases.
- Part of broader judicial digitisation under:
 - e-Courts Mission Mode Project,
 - Digital India initiative.
- Comes amid rising pendency and need for faster case management.

Key Points

One Case, One Data (OCOD)

- Creates a single digital identity for each case.
- Tracks cases across:
 - District Courts,
 - High Courts,
 - Supreme Court.
- Enables:
 - easier document access,
 - reduced duplication,
 - better judicial statistics,

- faster verification.

'Su-Sahayak'

- AI-powered chatbot for Supreme Court services.
- Assists users regarding:
 - case status,
 - orders,
 - judgments,
 - cause lists,
 - e-services.
- Follows earlier AI tools:
 - SUVAS – translation tool,
 - SUPACE – legal research assistance.

Concerns

- Digital divide affecting rural litigants and small lawyers.
- Privacy and cybersecurity risks.
- Bias in AI systems.
- Need for multilingual and voice-based accessibility.
- Risk of excessive dependence on technology.

Static Linkages

- Article 14 – Equality before law.
- Article 21 – Right to fair procedure and access to justice.
- Article 39A – Equal justice and free legal aid.
- Right to Privacy judgment (Puttaswamy Case, 2017).
- e-Courts Mission Mode Project.
- National Judicial Data Grid (NJDG).
- Digital India Programme.
- Principles of:
 - Rule of Law,
 - Judicial Accountability,
 - Good Governance,
 - E-Governance.

Critical Analysis

Advantages

- Faster disposal and tracking of cases.
- Better coordination among courts.
- Reduces paperwork and delays.
- Promotes transparency.
- Supports data-driven judicial reforms.

Challenges

- Unequal digital infrastructure.
- Low digital literacy among litigants.
- Data protection concerns.
- AI bias against vulnerable groups.
- Increased dependence on private tech systems.

Ethical Concerns

- AI should assist, not replace judges.
- Need for human oversight.
- Ensuring fairness and non-discrimination.

Way Forward

- Develop multilingual and voice-enabled systems.
- Strengthen cybersecurity safeguards.
- Provide digital training for court staff and lawyers.
- Ensure affordable digital infrastructure at district level.
- Establish AI ethics and accountability framework.
- Maintain hybrid online-offline judicial access.
- Periodic audit of AI systems for bias and transparency.

In a shifting world order, five principles should guide India's diplomacy



RAJA MOHAN
BY C RAJA MOHAN

PRIME MINISTER Narendra Modi's brief stop in the United Arab Emirates en route to Europe this week comes amid growing uncertainty over the fragile ceasefire between the United States and Iran and the danger of an intensifying regional war. Modi's presence in Abu Dhabi underlines an enduring principle of sound diplomacy: Stand by your partners when they need you.

Cynics will argue that the relationship is permanent. But when two countries are bound by deep economic interests, share stakes in regional stability, and support each other's core interests, there is no room for Indian hesitation in demonstrating solidarity. The UAE has emerged as one of India's most important partners. It is a major supplier of energy, a growing source of investment, and home to millions of Indians whose contributions bind the two countries in ways that go far beyond formal agreements. Over the last decade, the relationship has expanded from trade and remittances to encompass security cooperation, logistics, food security, new technologies, and co-ordination on regional issues.

The lesson is straightforward. In foreign policy, there is no substitute for nurturing trusted partnerships even while seeking new opportunities. Modi's Gulf visit will be

followed by a tour of Europe, including the Netherlands, Sweden, Norway, and Italy, as well as a Nordic summit in Oslo.

Meanwhile, the world's attention will be riveted this week on the encounter between Donald Trump and Xi Jinping in Beijing — the US president's first trip to China in nine years. India will also host meetings of the BRICS and Quad foreign ministers in New Delhi and convene an India-Africa summit at the end of the month. Each of these events reflects a different strand of Indian diplomacy. Together, they illuminate five principles that should guide India in a period of extraordinary international turbulence.

The first principle is reciprocity. The UAE has been a consistent partner on issues of central importance to India, including Kashmir and cross-border terrorism. Modi's visit signals that India, in turn, stands with the Emirates at a time of heightened threat to its security.

The second principle is diversification. Modi's European tour underlines how far India's engagement with Europe has evolved. During the Cold War, India's view of Europe was often filtered through its close ties with the Soviet Union. In the decades after the Cold War, India was slow to recognise Europe's strategic significance.

This is no longer true in Delhi. Europe is now central to India's search for export markets, capital, advanced technology, and green energy partnerships. It has also become a major destination for Indian students, professionals, and tourists. Even Europe's smaller states possess capabilities of direct relevance to India's economic, industrial, and technological modernisation.

The conclusion of trade agree-

ments with the European Union and the European Free Trade Association was a reflection of Delhi's new strategic appreciation of Europe.

The third principle is strategic flexibility. India's outreach to Europe unfolds amid the return of great-power politics and a rapid restructuring of relations among the United States, Europe, Russia, and China. The Donald Trump-Xi Jinping summit in Beijing may not resolve the structural rivalry between the US and China, but it could alter the terms on which they manage competition.

For India, the challenge is not to predict every turn in great power relations. It is to secure its own interests, limit the negative fallout, and seize new possibilities.

The BRICS and the Quad are often portrayed as ideologically opposed formations — the former as a vehicle for the East to dethrone the Western hegemony, the latter as a strategic bulwark against China. Such descriptions exaggerate the coherence of both groups.

The BRICS includes countries with divergent interests and direct conflicts. The Quad, for all its growing practical cooperation, is not a formal alliance. Delhi, in particular, argued against turning the Quad into a forum for deeper and structural security cooperation.

For India, the emphasis must remain on pragmatic pursuit of interests rather than vacuous ideological slogans. It is also important to note that India's interests in the two forums are not symmetrical. At a time when even longstanding institutions such as NATO and the transatlantic partnership are under strain, and the famed Anglo-Saxon unity looks shaky, it would be unwise to as-

sume that newer coalitions are immune to internal differences.

The fourth principle is strategic expansion. The India-Africa summit at the end of the month highlights a region whose importance to India will grow steadily in the decades ahead.

Africa is central to the future of the global economy. Its youthful population, expanding markets, and rich endowment of critical minerals are attracting increasing attention from all major powers. Parts of the continent are also emerging as important theatres of geopolitical competition.

India's ties with Africa are rooted in anti-colonial solidarity, but the relationship now requires greater strategic focus on trade, investment, connectivity, and security cooperation. Delhi can't forget for a moment that Africa has many powerful suitors who promise more and deliver faster than India.

The fifth and most important principle is domestic renewal. No amount of diplomatic activism can compensate for the economic sclerosis at home. Managing the consequences of geopolitical turbulence, the restructuring of global trade, and the rise of disruptive technologies requires rapid internal reform. That will not be easy. Bureaucratic resistance to change and the political combat with the status quo remain formidable obstacles. But world history reminds us that only those countries that continually reinvent themselves at home are the ones that leverage the world for the peace and prosperity of their citizens.

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The lesson is straightforward. In foreign policy, there is no substitute for nurturing trusted partnerships even while seeking new opportunities

KEY HIGHLIGHTS:

Context of the News

- Prime Minister Narendra Modi visited the UAE amid rising tensions in West Asia and uncertainty over the U.S.-Iran ceasefire.
- India is simultaneously expanding engagement with Europe, BRICS, Quad, and African nations.
- The developments reflect India's evolving strategy of multi-alignment and strategic autonomy.
- The article highlights five guiding principles of India's diplomacy:
 - Reciprocity
 - Diversification
 - Strategic Flexibility
 - Strategic Expansion
 - Domestic Renewal

Key Points

- UAE is a major partner for India in:
 - Energy security
 - Investments
 - Diaspora engagement
 - Counter-terror cooperation
- Europe is important for:
 - Trade diversification
 - Green technology
 - Advanced manufacturing
 - FTA negotiations
- India engages with both BRICS and Quad, reflecting issue-based partnerships.
- Africa is strategically significant because of:
 - Critical minerals
 - Young population
 - Expanding markets
 - Maritime importance
- India's foreign policy increasingly focuses on:
 - Supply-chain resilience
 - Economic security
 - Technological partnerships
 - Indo-Pacific stability

Static Linkages

- Strategic Autonomy
- Panchsheel Principles
- Non-Alignment Movement
- Multi-Alignment
- Balance of Power
- South-South Cooperation
- Energy Security
- Maritime Security
- Indo-Pacific Strategy
- Diaspora Diplomacy
- Blue Economy
- Critical Minerals
- Globalisation and Trade Blocs
- Supply Chain Resilience

Critical Analysis

Positives

- Enhances India's strategic flexibility.
- Reduces dependence on any single power bloc.
- Strengthens energy and trade security.
- Expands India's influence in Global South.
- Improves technology and investment access.
- Balances China's growing geopolitical influence.

Challenges

- Simultaneously balancing U.S., Russia, Europe, and West Asia is difficult.
- West Asian instability threatens:
 - Oil supplies
 - Shipping routes
 - Indian diaspora
- BRICS lacks internal cohesion.
- Quad may increase strategic tensions with China.
- India faces implementation deficits in overseas projects.
- Domestic economic bottlenecks reduce external leverage.

Stakeholder Perspective

- Gulf countries seek stable strategic partners.
- Europe views India as a trusted democratic and economic partner.
- African nations expect faster investment and connectivity projects.
- Indian industry seeks market access and technology transfer.

Way Forward

- Accelerate domestic economic reforms.
- Strengthen manufacturing and export competitiveness.
- Expand trade agreements with Europe and Africa.
- Diversify energy imports and strategic reserves.
- Improve implementation of overseas infrastructure projects.
- Enhance maritime security in the Indian Ocean Region.
- Build resilient supply chains for critical minerals and semiconductors.
- Continue strategic autonomy with issue-based cooperation.

Time is ripe for a long-term Russia-Ukraine ceasefire



RAJAN KUMAR

LAST WEEK, Russia and Ukraine agreed to a three-day ceasefire and the exchange of prisoners. The request for the temporary ceasefire came from Russia to commemorate the Allied victory over Nazi Germany in World War II. Ukraine was initially hesitant to honour the request, but US President Donald Trump persuaded it to accept the deal. Ukraine demands a permanent ceasefire, which Russia refuses without a formal peace agreement.

Vladimir Putin announced the ceasefire ahead of Victory Day (May 9). Out of the 75 million people who died in World War II, a staggering 26 million were from the USSR. The Great Patriotic War, the term used in Russia for World War II, occupies a foundational place in its historical memory. Ukraine is an equal inheritor of this legacy. However, in its attempt to distinguish itself from the Soviet Union and Russia, it focuses on its own sacrifices in the fight against the Nazis.

The US-brokered 72-hour ceasefire has ended and hostilities have resumed, but a long-term ceasefire remains possible for three reasons. First, the war is caught in a deadlock. Both sides claim to be making incremental territorial gains, but neither is in a position to achieve its ultimate objective. Russia cannot push Volodymyr Zelenskyy out of power and install a favourable regime, nor does Ukraine have the military capability to push Russian forces out of the territories occupied by Moscow. Russia will not cede land it controls in Crimea, Kherson, Zaporizhzhia, Donetsk and Luhansk. Both sides are incurring heavy casualties.

Second, Trump is unwilling to commit more resources to Ukraine, given the preoccupation with West Asia. Ever since his reelection, he has pressured Ukraine to accept an unfavourable deal. He has also stalled the supply of weapons and financial support to Kyiv. Without US support, Ukraine cannot expect to win. Instead, it risks losing more territory if the war continues. Therefore, Ukraine may ultimately be forced to accept a peace deal.

Third, European economies are faltering due to Trump's tariffs and the wars in Ukraine and Iran. Though the EU has committed \$100 billion in loans to Ukraine, signs of fatigue are emerging. The rising cost of living, growing unemployment and Trump's threats to abandon NATO have created doubts about long-term European support for Ukraine. Therefore, Europe too has compelling reasons to pursue a peace deal. Finally, Russia has begun responding positively to European overtures. Putin has expressed willingness to begin talks over Ukraine and the broader European security architecture. Russia wants Europe to recognise its security concerns, abandon the idea of Ukraine joining NATO, and acknowledge the territories it currently occupies.

Europe and Ukraine are unlikely to accept these demands readily. Nonetheless, the time appears ripe for a ceasefire, provided European leaders initiate direct negotiations with Russia. Europe must take pragmatic steps to secure a long-term ceasefire so that negotiations can begin on territorial disputes, security guarantees and sanctions relief.

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The war is caught in a deadlock. Both sides claim to be making incremental territorial gains, but neither is in a position to achieve its ultimate objective

KEY HIGHLIGHTS:

Context of the News

- Russia and Ukraine observed a temporary 72-hour ceasefire around Russia's Victory Day celebrations.
- The ceasefire was linked to commemoration of Allied victory in World War II.
- Hostilities resumed after the ceasefire period ended.
- Discussions on long-term ceasefire and peace negotiations have again gained momentum.
- The conflict continues amid economic stress in Europe, reduced Western enthusiasm for prolonged war, and evolving geopolitical alignments.

Key Points

- Russia considers the "Great Patriotic War" central to its national identity.
- Soviet Union suffered around 26 million deaths during World War II.
- Russia currently controls:
 - Crimea
 - Parts of Donetsk
 - Luhansk
 - Zaporizhzhia
 - Kherson
- Ukraine seeks:
 - Restoration of territorial integrity
 - Security guarantees
 - Continued Western support
- Russia demands:
 - No NATO membership for Ukraine

- Recognition of occupied territories
- Revised European security framework
- US and European support to Ukraine is showing signs of strategic fatigue.
- European economies are facing:
 - Energy insecurity
 - Inflationary pressures
 - Rising defence expenditure
- The war has affected:
 - Global food supply chains
 - Fertilizer exports
 - Crude oil and gas markets

Static Linkages

- Sovereignty and territorial integrity are core principles of international law.
- Article 2(4) of the UN Charter prohibits aggression against sovereign states.
- Article 51 of the UN Charter recognises the right to self-defence.
- NATO was formed in 1949 as a collective defence alliance.
- Balance of Power is a major concept in realist theory of international relations.
- Economic sanctions are instruments of coercive diplomacy.
- Strategic autonomy is an important pillar of India's foreign policy.
- Wars significantly influence global energy and food security.

Critical Analysis

Opportunities

- Ceasefire may reduce humanitarian crisis.
- Possibility of diplomatic negotiations increases.
- Reduction in volatility of global food and energy prices.
- Europe may stabilise economically.
- Scope for rebuilding global supply chains.

Challenges

- Territorial disputes remain unresolved.
- Mutual distrust between Russia and Ukraine.
- NATO expansion remains a major security concern for Russia.
- Ukraine fears loss of sovereignty and territory.
- Risk of prolonged proxy conflict persists.
- Continued sanctions may deepen global economic fragmentation.

Implications for India

Positive

- Stable crude oil prices may help India control inflation.

- Peace may improve global trade conditions.
- India's balanced diplomacy strengthens strategic credibility.

Concerns

- Continued instability affects fertilizer and energy imports.
- Geopolitical polarisation may pressure India diplomatically.
- Prolonged conflict impacts global economic growth.

Way Forward

- Immediate humanitarian ceasefire mechanism.
- Direct negotiations between Russia and Ukraine.
- Greater role for multilateral diplomacy through UN mechanisms.
- Balanced European security architecture.
- Respect for sovereignty alongside security guarantees.
- Long-term reconstruction and economic stabilisation framework.
- Diversification of global energy and food supply chains.

NEET leak unacceptable: Who's accountable?

ON MAY 3, more than 22 lakh students sat for one of the most consequential examinations in the country — the National Eligibility-cum-Entrance Test (NEET), the gateway to roughly 1.3 lakh MBBS seats in India's medical colleges. For them, the brutally competitive test was the culmination of painstaking preparation as well as financial and emotional investment. Less than 10 days later, they suffered a devastating disappointment after the examination was cancelled because investigators reportedly found extensive overlap between the actual paper and a pre-circulated "guess paper". Multiple suspects have reportedly been detained, and the Centre has handed the case to the CBI. But reducing this episode to a mere law-and-order breach understates the scale of institutional failure. It is an indictment of the National Testing Agency (NTA), the body entrusted with conducting some of the country's most high-stakes examinations. Created in 2017 to professionalise testing, the NTA was mandated to standardise procedures and eliminate the inconsistencies of fragmented state-level systems. Instead, its record has been steadily marred by paper leaks and recurring allegations of irregularities. The latest NEET fiasco — the second major controversy surrounding the medical entrance examination in two years — has raised serious questions about the agency's capacity to safeguard the sanctity of examinations on which thousands of youngsters stake their futures.

Conducting an examination of this scale is undeniably a logistical challenge — this year's NEET was conducted across nearly 5,500 centres in more than 550 cities. The NTA has highlighted its use of technology-driven safeguards. But the alleged circulation of papers before the examination shows that a fool-proof system is elusive. After the 2024 NEET controversy, the Centre constituted a committee headed by former ISRO chairperson K Radhakrishnan to suggest measures to improve the NTA's working. The agency is yet to completely implement the digital-first approach underlined by the committee and has dithered in acting on its most meaningful recommendation — improving accountability at all steps of the examination process. The NTA depends heavily on private examination centre operators and logistics service providers, even after several paper leak episodes — including that of the NEET in 2024 in Jharkhand — have underlined the links between these vendors and the coaching industry. At the same time, the agency has evaded institutional responsibility for failures by directing blame at external operators.

The latest NEET leak is a warning. To reap the demographic dividend, the state must ensure the credibility of institutions that shape young lives. Compromised examinations are unacceptable. Fixing this will require, first, assigning accountability.

KEY HIGHLIGHTS:

Context

- NEET-UG examination faced allegations of paper leak and irregularities.
- Examination was conducted for more than 22 lakh students seeking admission to medical colleges.
- Investigation revealed similarities between actual paper and pre-circulated "guess papers".
- Case handed over to CBI for investigation.
- Issue raised concerns over credibility of National Testing Agency (NTA).
- Second major controversy related to NEET in recent years.

Key Exam Points

- NTA established: 2017 under Ministry of Education.
- Purpose: Conduct transparent, efficient, and standardised national-level entrance examinations.
 - Major exams conducted by NTA: NEET
 - JEE Main
 - CUET
 - UGC-NET
 - NEET scale: Around 22 lakh candidates
 - ~1.3 lakh MBBS seats
 - Conducted across thousands of centres.
 - Committee formed after earlier controversy: Headed by former ISRO Chairman K. Radhakrishnan.

- Key recommendations: Digital-first examination system
- Strong accountability mechanisms
- Better cybersecurity safeguards
- Monitoring of private vendors

Static Linkages

- Equality before law and equal opportunity.
- Transparency and accountability in governance.
- Rule of Law.
- Good governance principles.
- Probity in public administration.
- Role of technology in governance.
- Human capital and demographic dividend.
- Ethical conduct in public institutions.
- Delegated administration and accountability.
- E-governance reforms.

Critical Analysis

Concerns

- Repeated paper leaks undermine meritocracy.
- Loss of trust in public institutions.
- Psychological stress on students.
- Coaching-centre and paper-leak nexus.
- Weak monitoring of outsourced vendors.
- Lack of institutional accountability.
- Centralised exams create large-scale vulnerability.

Governance Issues

- Failure of examination security systems.
- Weak coordination between agencies.
- Poor accountability framework.
- Delayed reforms despite previous controversies.

Ethical Dimensions

- Violation of fairness and equal opportunity.
- Injustice to honest students.
- Commercialisation of education system.

Way Forward

- End-to-end encrypted digital systems.
- Strong chain-of-custody mechanism for papers.
- Independent examination regulatory authority.
- Strict accountability for officials and vendors.
- AI-based surveillance and anomaly detection.
- Regular third-party security audits.
- Strong anti-paper leak legislation.
- Reduce excessive coaching dependence.
- Transparent grievance redressal mechanism.

West Asia crisis is nudge for fertiliser reform

PRIME MINISTER Narendra Modi's call to Indian farmers to cut chemical fertiliser consumption by half and move towards "natural farming" may not be practical or desirable. The underlying intent, though, may only be to curtail demand and push farmers to use fertilisers judiciously — which is sensible and necessary. Fertilisers supply essential nutrients to crops like nitrogen (N), phosphorus (P), potassium (K) and sulphur (S) for them to yield harvestable produce. Unfortunately, India has very little natural gas and hardly any rock phosphate, potash or elemental sulphur reserves to produce fertilisers, forcing heavy reliance on imports. That's being tested now by the conflict in West Asia and closure of the Strait of Hormuz, through which up to 30 per cent of global fertiliser trade passed till recently.

Successive governments have erred by not just subsidising fertilisers — which entails outflow of scarce foreign exchange — but also encouraging the overuse of high-analysis products, especially urea and di-ammonium phosphate (DAP), causing severe soil nutrient imbalances. Farmers were initially applying fertilisers such as ammonium sulphate (containing 20.5 per cent N and 23 per cent S) and single super phosphate (16 per cent P and 11 per cent S). These gave way to urea and DAP, having very high (46 per cent) content of N and P respectively, with no other macro or micro nutrients. The nutrient use efficiency of the latter fertilisers is low; only around a third of the N in urea is absorbed by the plants, with the rest lost through volatilisation as ammonia gas or leaching underground after conversion into nitrate. Farmers require products that deliver nutrients more efficiently.

The government should simply free or raise the retail prices of fertilisers to their import parity levels. It can replace the existing product-wise subsidy regime with a per-acre payment of, say, Rs 5,000 for all cultivating farmers. The monies from both the fertiliser subsidy savings and PM-Kisan could be redirected towards a direct income support scheme. The West Asia crisis has made the present system of subsidy and price controls on fertilisers unsustainable both fiscally and physically. When product availability is itself a problem, how much can one subsidise? Either way, it opens up space for reform that cannot wait any longer.

KEY HIGHLIGHTS:

Context

- PM Narendra Modi advocated "natural farming" and reduced dependence on chemical fertilisers.
- West Asia conflict and Strait of Hormuz disruptions exposed India's vulnerability due to heavy fertiliser import dependence.
- Debate revived on:
 - Fertiliser subsidy rationalisation
 - Balanced nutrient usage
 - Sustainable agriculture

Key Exam Points

- India imports:
 - Almost entire potash requirement
 - Major phosphatic raw materials
 - LNG for urea production
- Excessive use of:
 - Urea (46% Nitrogen)
 - DAP (46% Phosphorus)
- Causes:
 - Soil nutrient imbalance
 - Decline in micronutrients
 - Soil degradation
 - Groundwater pollution
- Nitrogen Use Efficiency (NUE) of urea:
 - Only ~30–35% absorbed by crops
 - Remaining lost through:
 - Volatilisation
 - Leaching
 - Runoff

- Current subsidy structure:
 - Urea → price controlled
 - Non-urea fertilisers → Nutrient Based Subsidy (NBS)
- Major concern:
 - High fiscal burden of fertiliser subsidy
 - Import vulnerability during geopolitical crises

Important Static Points

- Fertilisers provide:
 - Nitrogen (vegetative growth)
 - Phosphorus (root development)
 - Potassium (disease resistance)
 - Sulphur (protein synthesis)
- Nutrient Based Subsidy (2010):
 - Subsidy based on nutrient content
 - Objective: balanced fertilisation
- Soil Health Card Scheme:
 - Scientific nutrient management
 - Soil testing-based fertiliser recommendation
- Excess nitrogen use leads to:
 - Eutrophication
 - Nitrous oxide emission (greenhouse gas)
- Green Revolution increased dependence on:
 - HYV seeds
 - Irrigation
 - Chemical fertilisers

Critical Analysis

Advantages of Reform

- Reduces subsidy burden
- Promotes balanced fertilisation
- Improves soil health
- Reduces import dependence
- Encourages sustainable farming

Challenges

- Higher fertiliser prices may hurt small farmers
- Natural farming may reduce yields initially
- Political sensitivity of fertiliser pricing
- Low farmer awareness regarding balanced nutrient use

Way Forward

- Gradual subsidy rationalisation
- Shift towards direct income support
- Promote nano urea and precision farming
- Strengthen Soil Health Card implementation
- Encourage organic carbon restoration
- Diversify fertiliser import sources
- Increase domestic fertiliser production