



DAILY NEWS PAPER ANALYSIS

DATE - 19/05/2026

**SOURCE : THE HINDU & INDIAN
EXPRESS**

**CIVILS WITH AKASH
SECTOR 25 CHANDIGARH**

SC has 'reservations' on its own bail decision

Judgment in a narco-terrorism case refers to Delhi riots case involving Umar Khalid, Sharjeel Imam

Court says an accused cannot be held indefinitely because prosecution faces a low bar under UAPA

If State shows accusations were 'prima facie' true, bail would be 'absolutely impermissible'

Krishnadass Rajagopal
NEW DELHI

The Supreme Court on Monday voiced "serious reservations" about "various aspects" of its January judgment refusing bail to former JNU student leader Umar Khalid and co-accused Sharjeel Imam in the Delhi riots 'larger conspiracy' case, including the foreclosing of their right to seek bail for a year.

The rare act of self-reproach came over a year after the court condemned Mr. Khalid and Mr. Imam as "alleged masterminds" who hatched the conspiracy behind the 2020 Delhi riots. At the time of the rejection of his bail plea, Mr. Khalid had already spent over five years in prison as an undertrial.

The Delhi Police had

booked Mr. Khalid and other activists under the anti-terror law, the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act or the UAPA, for their involvement in organising protests over the Citizenship (Amendment) Act.

'Not an empty slogan'
On Monday, a Bench of Justices B.V. Nagarathna and Ujjal Bhuyan said bail was indeed the rule in UAPA cases too.

Justice Bhuyan, who authored the judgment, said the catchphrase "bail is the rule and jail is the exception" was not just an empty slogan, but a constitutional principle flowing from the fundamental rights to life, speedy trial and freedom from arbitrary arrests and detentions.

The apex court's observations on Monday came

Once it is obvious that a timely trial would not be possible and the accused has suffered incarceration for a significant period of time, the courts would ordinarily be obligated to enlarge the accused on bail.

The presence of statutory restrictions... per se does not oust the ability of the courts to grant bail.

JUSTICE UJJAL BHUYAN refers to K.A. Najeeb judgment



in a judgment allowing bail to a Jammu and Kashmir man accused in a narco-terrorism case in which he had been incarcerated as an undertrial under the UAPA for five years.

It said an accused cannot be indefinitely incarcerated merely because the state was able to "satisfy" the low bar to refuse bail in UAPA cases. Justice Bhuyan said the right to

personal liberty and speedy trial cannot become "subordinate" to the draconian bail provision, Section 43-D(5), of the UAPA.

He said that the UAPA had drawn the threshold for denying bail so low that the state had to only show that the accusations against an accused were "prima facie" true.

Once that was done, bail would be "absolutely im-

permissible" for him.

"The state need only satisfy a low prima facie threshold while the trial may continue for years with the result that pre-trial incarceration begins to acquire a post-trial punitive character, and even then, no court could ever grant bail no matter the length of period of such incarceration because the case stood prima facie made out against the accused," Justice Bhuyan noted.

He said the potency of Section 43-D(5) should be "muted" down by constitutional courts intervening and granting bail in UAPA cases in which the accused had already suffered prolonged incarceration due to delayed trial. A point in case was that of Mr. Khalid.

"Constitutional courts can always intervene to

grant bail despite satisfaction of the 'prima facie' threshold under Section 43-D(5). The Section need not control the grant of bail if the accused person's liberty is infringed for a prolonged period of time," Justice Bhuyan observed.

Section 43-D(5)
The power of a constitutional court to protect the right to life of a UAPA accused against arbitrary detentions cannot be diminished merely by a provision like Section 43-D(5) in a statute, the Bench highlighted.

"Section 43-D(5) remains subordinate to Article 21 (fundamental right to life) at all times. A constitutional court need not hold back bail to the accused in the garb of Section 43-D(5)," the Supreme Court underscored.

Justice Bhuyan said the basic principle that a person was presumed innocent until proven guilty was the "cornerstone of any civilised society governed by the rule of law".

Section 43-D(5) converted delay in trial itself into punishment.

The court said statutes like the UAPA may calibrate the manner in which the presumption of innocence was applied, particularly in cases involving national security or terrorist offences, but they cannot altogether invert the constitutional relationship between liberty and detention. The court expressed deep concern about certain of its verdicts "bollocking out" larger Bench verdicts like in the K.A. Najeeb case, which championed personal liberty against state abuse.

KEY HIGHLIGHTS:

Context

- The Supreme Court expressed reservations over its earlier judgment denying bail to Umar Khalid and Sharjeel Imam in the Delhi riots conspiracy case under UAPA.
- The Court observed that prolonged incarceration without completion of trial violates Article 21.
- The observations came while granting bail to a Jammu & Kashmir accused imprisoned for nearly five years under the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act.
- Supreme Court reiterated that "Bail is the rule, jail is the exception" even in UAPA cases.

Key Points

- Section 43-D(5) of UAPA restricts bail if allegations appear "prima facie true".
- Supreme Court held:
 - Article 21 overrides statutory restrictions if incarceration becomes excessive.
 - Speedy trial is a fundamental right.
 - Long undertrial detention cannot become punitive detention.
 - Constitutional courts can grant bail despite UAPA restrictions.
- Court reaffirmed principles laid down in the K.A. Najeeb Judgment case.
- Judgment strengthens judicial scrutiny over anti-terror laws.

Static Linkages

- Article 21 – Right to life and personal liberty.
- Article 22 – Protection against arbitrary arrest and detention.
- Presumption of innocence is a basic principle of criminal jurisprudence.
- Speedy trial recognised in Hussainara Khatoon case.
- Maneka Gandhi case expanded scope of personal liberty under Article 21.

- Rule of law and judicial review are part of the basic structure doctrine.
- Preventive detention and national security laws require constitutional safeguards.

Critical Analysis

Significance

- Protects civil liberties against misuse of stringent laws.
- Reaffirms constitutional supremacy over statutory provisions.
- Strengthens right to speedy trial.
- Prevents indefinite detention of undertrials.

Concerns

- Security agencies fear weakening of anti-terror framework.
- Delay in investigation and trial remains a major issue.
- Broad provisions of UAPA may enable misuse.
- Balancing national security and liberty remains challenging.

Way Forward

- Ensure time-bound trials in UAPA cases.
- Reform Section 43-D(5) to prevent excessive detention.
- Increase capacity of special courts.
- Strengthen safeguards against arbitrary arrests.
- Maintain balance between national security and fundamental rights.

Modi meets Norwegian PM as they upgrade their ties to Green Strategic Partnership

Suhasini Haidar
OSLO

India and Norway have differences, but they must unite against countries that “weaponise” diplomacy, trade, and technology, said Norwegian Prime Minister Jonas Gahr Støre here on Monday after talks with Prime Minister Narendra Modi, as the two countries upgraded ties to a “Green Strategic Partnership”.

In statements to the media, both leaders emphasised their discussions on geopolitical conflicts in Ukraine and West Asia, with Mr. Modi contrasting the “instability and uncertainty” brought by the conflicts while India and Europe are entering a “new golden era” in ties.

“Both India and Norway believe in a rules-based order, dialogue, and diplomacy. We are unanimous that no issue can be resolved through military conflict. Whether it is Ukraine or West Asia, we support, and will continue to support, an early end to conflict and every effort toward peace,” he said.

He said that the Trade and Economic Partnership Agreement signed last year with Norway and three EFTA countries – Switzerland, Iceland, Liechtenstein – as well as the Green Strategic Partnership announced on Monday, would combine India’s scale, speed, and talent with Norway’s technology and capital.

“From the Arctic to outer space, from green shipping to the blue economy, and from energy security to food security, our cooperation is touching new frontiers,” Mr. Modi added, saying that the EFTA deal



Vital meeting: Prime Minister Narendra Modi with his Norwegian counterpart in Oslo on Monday. ANI

would aim to create \$100 billion in investment and “one million jobs in India”.

Mr. Støre called India “a leading global force in technology, innovation, and renewable energy”.

In a possible reference to the Russia-Ukraine war, Mr. Støre acknowledged there were differences between India and Norway, but that it was necessary to work through them. Norway, which has urged India to condemn the Russian invasion of Ukraine in the past and to reduce its intake of Russian oil, is also hoping to offer India alternative supplies of oil and gas that Norway is a major exporter of.

“Trade weaponisation”

“We have to stand up against those who weaponise diplomacy, who weaponise trade, and who weaponise technology. At a time of rising protectionism and more tense geopolitical dynamics, it is more important than ever to stand together for a rules-based order,” Mr. Støre said, possibly referring not only to Russia, but also the U.S. and China on unilateralism and protectionism, as well as Iran for the Strait

of Hormuz blockade that has held up energy trade.

Mr. Støre said that Norway and India “do not always see eye to eye on all issues”, which was common. “We are both respectful democracies who handle those issues in ways that live up to democratic standards,” he added.

As the two leaders completed their statements, the event saw an unusual moment when a Norwegian journalist stood up to protest the fact that the Prime Ministers did not take questions from the media from both countries present. At Mr. Modi’s earlier stop in the Netherlands too, local Dutch media had objected to the lack of a press conference as is customary there. While Mr. Modi did not respond to the question, PM Støre returned to the media room afterwards, and gave interviews to local media.

The two Prime Ministers will join leaders of Sweden, Denmark, Iceland and Finland for the Nordic-India summit on Tuesday.

(The reporter is in Norway at the invitation of the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs to cover the Nordic Summit)

- Technology transfer
- Investment inflows.

Green Strategic Partnership

Focus areas include:

- Green hydrogen
- Offshore wind energy
- Maritime decarbonisation
- Sustainable ocean economy
- Climate cooperation
- Clean technology partnerships.

Geopolitical Importance

- Reflects India’s policy of:
 - Strategic autonomy
 - Multi-alignment.
- Europe sees India as a key democratic and economic partner amid:
 - Russia-Ukraine conflict
 - Global supply-chain disruptions
 - Rising protectionism.

Arctic Cooperation

- Norway is a major Arctic nation.
- India’s Arctic interests:
 - Himadri Research Station (Svalbard)
 - Arctic Policy 2022.
- Relevance:
 - Climate change research
 - Shipping routes
 - Resource governance.

Blue Economy

Includes:

- Fisheries
- Marine trade
- Offshore energy
- Coastal infrastructure
- Sustainable ocean resource use.

Static Points

- Article 51 of DPSP:
 - Promotion of international peace and security.
 - Respect for international law.
 - Peaceful settlement of disputes.
- EFTA:
 - Established in 1960.
 - Intergovernmental trade organization.
- Norway:
 - Not a member of European Union.
 - Member of European Economic Area (EEA).
- India’s Net Zero target:
 - By 2070.
- National Green Hydrogen Mission:
 - Aims to make India a global hub for green hydrogen.
- Sagarmala Programme:
 - Port-led development initiative.

KEY HIGHLIGHTS:

Context of the News

- India and Norway upgraded bilateral ties to a Green Strategic Partnership.
- Discussions held between PM Narendra Modi and Norwegian PM Jonas Gahr Støre.
- Focus areas:
 - Renewable energy
 - Green shipping
 - Blue economy
 - Arctic cooperation
 - Technology and innovation
 - Energy security
- India highlighted implementation of the India-EFTA Trade and Economic Partnership Agreement (TEPA).
- Both nations supported:
 - Rules-based international order
 - Diplomacy over military conflict
 - Peaceful resolution of Ukraine and West Asia conflicts.

Key Points

India-EFTA TEPA

- Signed between India and EFTA countries:
 - Norway
 - Switzerland
 - Iceland
 - Liechtenstein
- Expected outcomes:
 - \$100 billion investment
 - Around 1 million jobs in India.
- Importance:
 - Market access

Critical Analysis

Advantages

- Strengthens India–Europe strategic ties.
- Supports India’s clean-energy transition.
- Increases foreign investment and employment.
- Enhances maritime and Arctic cooperation.
- Diversifies energy partnerships.

Challenges

- Differences over Russia–Ukraine conflict.
- High cost of green technologies.
- Global protectionism may affect trade flows.
- Implementation challenges in TEPA commitments.
- Geopolitical instability affecting energy and shipping routes.

Way Forward

- Fast-track TEPA implementation.
- Increase joint investments in green technologies.
- Expand Arctic scientific cooperation.
- Strengthen maritime sustainability initiatives.
- Build resilient supply chains and energy partnerships.
- Promote technology transfer and skill development.

CAA applicants must declare passport status, surrender foreign passports: Ministry

Vijalta Singh
NEW DELHI

Applicants seeking citizenship under the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), 2019 will have to submit an affidavit declaring whether they hold a valid or an expired passport from Pakistan, Afghanistan or Bangladesh, according to an amendment to the Citizenship Rules notified by the Union Home Ministry on Monday.

The move comes days after the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) came to power for the first time in West Bengal where a large number of the Matua community, the intended beneficiaries of CAA, reside.

Most of the Matuas, who migrated from neighbouring Bangladesh during different time periods, do not have sufficient documents to apply for citizenship under the CAA. The 2019 legislation, which became effective on March 11, 2024 through the notification of

CAA Rules, requires an applicant to declare that they are foreigners along with a document issued by any government authority in Afghanistan, Bangladesh or Pakistan establishing their roots in the three countries.

The CAA Rules also enable local priests or a "locally reputed community institution" to issue the mandatory certificates certifying the faith of an applicant.

CAA facilitates citizenship to six non-Muslim communities – Hindu, Sikh, Parsi, Jain, Buddhist and Christian – from the three countries of Pakistan, Bangladesh and Afghanistan who entered India before December 31, 2014.

On Monday, the Ministry inserted a paragraph in Schedule 1C of the CAA application form where the applicant must declare if he/she is "not in possession of a valid and/or expired passport(s) issued by

the Government of Pakistan/Afghanistan/Bangladesh." The form requires the applicant to provide the date and month of their entry to India and adds that they can be deprived of citizenship if the information is found to be incorrect.

The inserted paragraph added that if the applicant is "in possession" of a valid or expired passport, then details such as the passport number, date and place of issue, date of expiry are to be provided and the passport is to be surrendered before the Senior Superintendent of Post or Superintendent of Post within 15 days of approval of citizenship application, the notification said.

Before the Assembly elections were declared in West Bengal, the MHA, in the months of February and March, notified four committees headed by Central government officials to clear the citizenship applications.

- CAA Rules allow:
 - Religious certificates from local priests/community institutions.
- Exemptions:
 - Sixth Schedule areas.
 - Inner Line Permit (ILP) areas.

Important Constitutional & Legal Points

- Articles 5–11 deal with citizenship.
- Article 11 empowers Parliament to regulate citizenship.
- Citizenship Act, 1955 governs acquisition and termination of citizenship.
- Article 14:
 - Equality before law applies to both citizens and non-citizens.
- India follows:
 - Single citizenship.
- Assam Accord (1985):
 - Cut-off date for illegal migrants in Assam: March 24, 1971.
- Related laws:
 - Foreigners Act, 1946.
 - Passport (Entry into India) Act, 1920.

Critical Analysis

Significance

- Provides fast-track citizenship to persecuted minorities.
- Addresses long-pending refugee concerns.
- Introduces documentary clarity through affidavit mechanism.

Concerns

- Excludes persecuted Muslim sects.
- Criticism regarding Article 14 and secularism.
- Documentation challenges for poor migrants.
- Concerns in North-East regarding demographic changes.
- Fear of linkage with NRC process.

Way Forward

- Ensure transparent and non-discriminatory implementation.
- Simplify documentation for vulnerable migrants.
- Strengthen constitutional safeguards.
- Develop a comprehensive refugee law.
- Balance humanitarian concerns with national security.

KEY HIGHLIGHTS:

Context

- Union Ministry of Home Affairs amended Citizenship Rules under the Citizenship Amendment Act, 2019.
- Applicants under CAA must now file an affidavit declaring whether they possess a valid/expired passport of Pakistan, Afghanistan, or Bangladesh.
- If passport exists:
 - Passport details must be disclosed.
 - Passport must be surrendered within 15 days after grant of citizenship.
- Amendment gains importance due to large Matua population in West Bengal seeking citizenship benefits.
- Many applicants reportedly lack documentary proof required under CAA Rules notified in March 2024.

Key Provisions of CAA

- Applicable to:
 - Hindus
 - Sikhs
 - Buddhists
 - Jains
 - Parsis
 - Christians
- Migrants from:
 - Pakistan
 - Afghanistan
 - Bangladesh
- Eligibility:
 - Entered India before December 31, 2014.
- Naturalisation period reduced:
 - From 11 years to 5 years.

India's scientific ambitions are increasingly visible in space missions, pharmaceutical research, and peer-reviewed scholarship. Yet, its institutional culture that sustains this continues to marginalise many researchers. Women in academia, especially in mid-career stages, face a convergence of professional and domestic responsibilities that their male peers rarely experience to the same extent. Age relaxation provisions in research grants were introduced to address this gap, but as these policies evolve, they require closer scrutiny to improve their effectiveness rather than weaken them.

The legal foundation for gender-sensitive research policy in India is not merely permissive; it is, in important respects, directive. Article 15(3) of the Constitution allows the state to make special provisions for women and children, and this has long been read as enabling affirmative measures in employment and public opportunity. Article 16 ensures equality of opportunity without precluding measures that correct historical disadvantage and read alongside the Directive Principles which provide equal right to an adequate means of livelihood. There is a coherent constitutional argument that funding agencies have not just the authority but also a degree of responsibility to ensure women researchers are not structurally penalised for caregiving.

Article 51(a), the fundamental duty to renounce practices derogatory to the dignity of women, adds another dimension. A policy environment that routinely produces grant cohorts with negligible female representation is not a neutral outcome – it reflects accumulated disadvantages that the constitutional framework obliges institutions to address.

The legislative gap at heart of the problem The Maternity Benefit (Amendment) Act, 2017 remains the most substantive legal protection available to women. The 2017 amendment extended paid maternity leave to 26 weeks for women with fewer than two surviving children and introduced provisions for crèche facilities in larger establishments. For women in academic research, this matters – but imperfectly. Many researchers at the postdoctoral or early career stage are employed on fellowships, project positions, or contractual appointments that fall outside the clear ambit of the Act. Equally overlooked in current frameworks is the return to research after childbirth. Women returning from maternity leave often face disrupted laboratory work, changed ecosystems must be addressed.



Nabeha Siddiqui
Assistant Professor,
Vidyalakshmi's
Law School, VIT
Vellore
Vidyalakshmi's
Research
Foundation (VIT
University), Chennai

with little formal support for reintegration or reduced workload. The expectation of immediate full productivity after childbirth is unrealistic and requires clear policy intervention rather than informal goodwill from supervisors.

India has no central legislation on paternity leave. Central government employees receive 15 days under the Central Civil Services (Leave) Rules, 1972, but this is administrative rather than statutory, and no comparable entitlement exists for researchers funded through extramural grants. This legislative asymmetry – generous maternity protection, minimal paternity provision – is not incidental. It shapes how institutions and funding agencies think about caregiving, and it partly explains why age relaxation policies have been designed exclusively around women rather than around the act of caregiving itself.

The case for women-specific support in research funding is supported by persistent data, not assumption. The All India Survey on Higher Education (2021-22) shows that the higher education system had nearly 16 lakh faculty in 2021-22 with 57% male and 43% female. Women remain underrepresented in faculty positions across central universities and especially in science and technology institutions. The Science and Engineering Research Board (SERB) has also reported consistently lower application and success rates among women researchers.

The pattern is clear. Women who complete doctoral degrees in their mid to late twenties enter postdoctoral work at the same time as peak domestic responsibilities. Balancing grant cycles, publication pressure, travel, and childcare is not shared equally in academic households. Studies on dual-career faculty, including at the Tata Institute of Social Sciences, show that women typically bear a greater share of domestic work regardless of professional status. The consequences are measurable: delayed publications, gaps in grant records, and reduced international visibility. Age relaxation, in this context, is a partial remedy for a documented structural disadvantage.

What the courts have suggested The Supreme Court of India's reasoning in *Vijay Lakshmi vs Punjab University And Others* (2003) is relevant here. Addressing preferential provisions for women in service matters, the Court drew a clear distinction between formal equality and substantive equality, which accounts for unequal outcomes.

It held that measures favouring women are constitutionally valid when they address demonstrated disadvantages. This logic applies to

research grants as well: extending eligibility windows for women is not preferential treatment, but a corrective to structural disadvantage.

None of this implies that current policy is adequate. Age relaxation policies such as those under SERB address eligibility at the application stage but not the everyday conditions of research. A five-year extension to the upper age limit may allow women to apply for grants they would otherwise miss, but it does not provide childcare support during proposal writing, institutional support during maternity leave, or re-entry funding after career breaks.

There is also the question of who the policy excludes. A single father or a man caring for an ailing parent may also face significant career disruption, but the policy does not recognise him. This is not an argument to weaken protections for women, as evidence shows that caregiving burdens are not equal in Indian academia. Rather, it calls for an additional layer of support for documented caregiving responsibilities, while retaining and strengthening women-specific provisions that address the more widespread disadvantage.

What more considered policy would be The National Education Policy 2020 gestures toward institutional flexibility and faculty wellbeing, but these commitments have not yet translated into binding research funding policy. That gap is overdue to be addressed. Funding agencies should consider no-cost grant extensions for documented caregiving periods, re-entry fellowships for women returning to research, and flexible milestone reporting for researchers with caregiving responsibilities. Several European research councils have implemented similar measures, showing that gender-neutral caregiving support, alongside gender-specific provisions, can improve equity without appearing arbitrary.

Gender-based age relaxation in Indian research grants is constitutionally grounded and empirically justified. The disadvantage it addresses is real, documented, and persistent. Amending it in the name of gender neutrality would be a policy error not supported by evidence. What is needed instead is a layered approach that retains support for women researchers while adding provisions for other caregivers. India's research institutions owe their women scholars not just formal access to grants but the structural conditions in which a sustained research career is genuinely possible. Age relaxation is a beginning. It should not be mistaken for an ending.

- NEP 2020 supports institutional flexibility and faculty wellbeing.

Static Linkages

- Substantive Equality vs Formal Equality.
- Fundamental Rights and Affirmative Action.
- DPSP related to equal livelihood opportunities.
- Gender Budgeting.
- Human Capital Development.
- Scientific Research & Innovation Ecosystem.
- Women Empowerment and Inclusive Governance.
- Labour Welfare and Social Security.

Critical Analysis

Advantages

- Promotes women's participation in research ecosystem.
- Addresses structural disadvantages due to caregiving burden.
- Constitutionally valid under affirmative action principles.
- Improves diversity in STEM institutions.
- Supports long-term scientific capacity building.

Challenges

- Age relaxation alone insufficient.
- Lack of childcare and reintegration support.
- Contractual researchers excluded from protections.
- Weak institutional support after maternity leave.
- Absence of statutory paternity leave reinforces gender imbalance.
- Limited women representation in higher academic leadership.

Constitutional Dimensions

- Reflects substantive equality approach.
- Linked to dignity and social justice principles.
- Balances equality with corrective discrimination.

Way Forward

- Introduce re-entry fellowships for women researchers.
- Provide no-cost grant extensions during caregiving periods.
- Institutionalize childcare and crèche facilities.
- Extend maternity protections to fellowship researchers.
- Introduce statutory paternity leave.
- Flexible research timelines and evaluation mechanisms.
- Improve women representation in research leadership.
- Gender-sensitive reforms in funding agencies.

KEY HIGHLIGHTS:

Context

- Debate over age-relaxation provisions for women researchers in research grants and fellowships.
- Women researchers face career disruptions due to caregiving responsibilities, maternity, and unequal domestic workload.
- Concern that existing measures are insufficient for ensuring substantive equality in academia and research institutions.

Key Points

- Article 15(3): State can make special provisions for women and children.
- Article 16: Equality of opportunity in public employment with scope for corrective measures.
- Article 51A(e): Duty to renounce practices derogatory to dignity of women.
- Maternity Benefit (Amendment) Act, 2017:
 - 26 weeks paid maternity leave.
 - Crèche facilities mandated for larger establishments.
- Fellowship and contractual researchers often remain outside full legal protection.
- No statutory paternity leave in India.
- AISHE 2021-22:
 - 57% male faculty.
 - 43% female faculty.
- Women underrepresented in STEM and senior academic positions.
- SERB reported lower application and success rates for women researchers.
- Supreme Court in *Vijay Lakshmi vs Punjab University And Others* upheld substantive equality approach.

The structural gender gaps in India's research ecosystem must be addressed

Strategic spark in India-South Korea defence ties

The visit of the Indian Defence Minister to Seoul (May 19-20), following the South Korean President's visit to India (April 19-21, 2026), underscores the growing momentum and strategic significance of the India-South Korea partnership in recent years. What began as limited defence engagement has evolved into a multidimensional partnership in defence manufacturing, technology transfer, and military modernisation. The K9 Vajra-T programme, developed under the 'Make in India' initiative, has become the flagship project of India-South Korea defence cooperation, paving the way for several other successful initiatives.



Lakshinder Singh
Director of Peace and Security Studies at the Asia Institute in Seoul, South Korea

Project areas

Today, bilateral defence cooperation is expanding rapidly, with several new projects under consideration. Submarine collaboration has emerged as a key focus area, driven by South Korea's expertise in conventional submarines, lithium ion battery systems, and air-independent propulsion technologies through companies such as Hanwha Ocean. South Korea's advancing aerospace sector, including the KF-21 fighter programme and the FA-50 light combat aircraft, has opened new avenues for collaboration in fighter technologies, engines, avionics, missile integration, and maintenance systems.

As one of the world's leading shipbuilding powers, South Korea can significantly contribute to India's growing maritime ambitions in the Indo-Pacific through cooperation in destroyers, logistics vessels, submarine support systems, smart shipyards, and naval propulsion technologies.

Discussions are also progressing in areas such as light tanks, utility helicopters, future ready combat vehicles, military lithium batteries, and defence electronics. Indian and Korean defence firms are pursuing joint ventures and industrial partnerships across multiple sectors. Importantly, the partnership is evolving

Expanding defence cooperation will reflect shared regional security priorities

beyond conventional weapons systems toward innovation-driven cooperation. Both countries are promoting defence innovation ecosystems linking startups, universities, research institutions, incubators, and investors. The proposed Korea-India Defence Accelerator (KIND-X) reflects this future-oriented approach.

At the strategic level, military exchanges, naval exercises, coast guard cooperation, and defence dialogues are strengthening interoperability and mutual trust. For India, South Korea offers advanced technology and manufacturing expertise, while India provides a large market, strategic geography, and long-term industrial opportunities. Together, the two countries have the potential to build one of Asia's most significant defence partnerships.

Cooperation in the defence industrial sector represents a significant indicator of the growing maturity and strategic depth of bilateral relations. However, it would be a serious strategic miscalculation for both countries to confine this partnership solely to these domains.

An evolving Indo-Pacific environment

The rapidly evolving Indo-Pacific geopolitical environment requires India and South Korea to expand their defence cooperation beyond industrial ties toward a broader strategic partnership focused on regional stability and shared security goals.

The next phase of defence engagement should, therefore, focus on formulating an institutionalised and forward-looking defence road map encompassing emerging security threats across the wider Indo-Pacific region. Such a framework must move beyond the current primarily defence-industrial focus of cooperation and evolve into a multidimensional partnership grounded in shared security concerns, geopolitical stability, and regional resilience.

The geopolitical landscape around the Korean Peninsula is changing rapidly. North Korea's

growing missile and nuclear capabilities continue to pose a serious threat to South Korea, while expanding Russia-North Korea military cooperation is reshaping Northeast Asia's security architecture.

China's growing naval assertiveness around the Korean Peninsula has created new strategic concerns for South Korea. Beijing's expanding influence and military presence in the South China Sea also carry major implications for South Korea, as a significant share of its energy imports and maritime trade passes through these waters.

South Korea is also facing serious structural challenges. Its declining demographic profile and shrinking pool of military recruits are weakening the long-term sustainability of its conventional defence posture. Combined with a rapidly changing security environment, these internal vulnerabilities create a complex strategic situation requiring urgent and sustained policy attention from countries seeking long-term strategic cooperation with Seoul.

Need for a strategic convergence

In this context, it is essential for India's strategic thinkers and defence planners to pay closer attention to changing geopolitical realities in South Korea. Ignoring these developments could undermine both South Korea's security and India's broader Indo-Pacific interests.

If India seeks to substantially expand its defence-industrial cooperation with South Korea, it must recognise that such cooperation depends on South Korea's security, stability, and strategic resilience. Strengthening South Korea's ability to address its security challenges should be central to this partnership.

The Indian Defence Minister's visit to Seoul should lead to the beginning of a new phase in India-South Korea defence cooperation – one that moves beyond defence-industrial ties toward a broader partnership grounded in shared security interests and Indo-Pacific stability.

- India seeks:
 - Defence indigenisation
 - Technology transfer
 - Diversification of defence partners
- South Korea seeks:
 - Strategic diversification
 - Defence export markets
 - Indo-Pacific partnerships

Static Linkages

- Act East Policy
- SAGAR doctrine
- Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI)
- Atmanirbhar Bharat in defence
- Make in India programme
- Defence Acquisition Procedure (DAP)
- UNCLOS and freedom of navigation
- Sea Lines of Communication (SLOCs)
- Air-Independent Propulsion (AIP) technology
- QUAD and Indo-Pacific strategy
- SIPRI reports on global arms imports
- Strategic autonomy in foreign policy

Critical Analysis

Advantages

- Boosts defence indigenisation.
- Enhances India's maritime capability.
- Reduces dependence on traditional defence suppliers.
- Strengthens Indo-Pacific strategic balance.
- Supports defence manufacturing ecosystem.
- Encourages advanced technology transfer.

Challenges

- Possible limitations in critical technology transfer.
- Procurement and implementation delays.
- Strategic pressure from China.
- Different strategic priorities of India and South Korea.
- Dependence on imported defence components.
- Financial and operational constraints.

Strategic Concerns

- China's growing naval presence in Indo-Pacific.
- North Korea's nuclear and missile threats.
- Security of South China Sea trade routes.
- Need for resilient supply chains in critical technologies.

Way Forward

- Develop long-term India-South Korea defence roadmap.
- Increase joint R&D and co-production.
- Expand naval and maritime cooperation.
- Strengthen semiconductor and battery supply chains.
- Promote defence startup partnerships.
- Enhance interoperability through joint exercises.
- Focus on emerging domains:
 - Cyber security
 - AI warfare
 - Space security
 - Autonomous systems

KEY HIGHLIGHTS:

Context

- Indian Defence Minister visited South Korea (May 19-21, 2026) after the South Korean President's India visit in April 2026.
- Defence cooperation has expanded from limited engagement to strategic partnership in:
 - Defence manufacturing
 - Technology transfer
 - Military modernisation
- K9 Vajra-T project under "Make in India" is the flagship India-South Korea defence collaboration.
- Cooperation is now expanding into submarines, aerospace, shipbuilding, defence electronics, and innovation ecosystems.

Key Points

- South Korea's expertise:
 - Conventional submarines
 - Air-Independent Propulsion (AIP)
 - Lithium-ion battery systems
 - Advanced shipbuilding
 - Aerospace technologies
- Important cooperation areas:
 - Submarines
 - Fighter aircraft technologies
 - Naval propulsion systems
 - Utility helicopters
 - Defence electronics
 - Military batteries
- Proposed Korea-India Defence Accelerator (KIND-X):
 - Startup collaboration
 - Defence innovation ecosystem
 - R&D partnerships
- Strategic drivers:
 - China's naval assertiveness
 - North Korea's missile programme
 - Russia-North Korea military cooperation
 - Indo-Pacific maritime security

Unlearnt lessons

India's inadequate strategic petroleum and gas reserves stand exposed

Last week, the Centre hiked retail petroleum product prices after a gap of four years. This was expected, since the government had been warning about high crude prices, and how public sector oil marketing companies (OMCs) had been bleeding heavily due to under-recoveries. It was also expected that this would happen after the results of the five Assembly elections. But the Prime Minister's appeal for austerity due to the drain on foreign exchange, the sharp depreciation of the rupee in recent months and the April's inflation prints point to a much deeper problem that India could have addressed decades earlier – the country's inadequate strategic petroleum and gas reserves. India did build out a strategic petroleum reserve (SPR) of about 36.7 million-39 million barrels, a programme conceived following the post-1991 vulnerability and formalised in the early 2000s. But today, this covers about seven days of consumption demand at 5.5 million barrels per day (mbpd). Combined with inventories of OMCs and import cover, this amounts to more than 70 days of stock. But over the years, India has emerged as the world's third-largest automobile market after the U.S. and China, and a comparison with those nations reveals the scale of India's vulnerability.

While the U.S. built its SPRs in the aftermath of the 1973 oil shock – which, at 714 million barrels, is 18 times larger than India's – China's roughly 900 million barrels is even larger. The U.S. has about 400 million barrels currently in its reserve system, providing it with roughly 20 days of consumption. The country has emerged as the world's largest oil producer in the past 10 years with an output of about 13 mbpd and a commercial system wide inventory, pushing it above the 90 day-mark recommended by the International Energy Agency for reserves. The same applies to China, which is comparable with India as a more oil import-dependent nation. These numbers become even starker when compared with reserves for liquefied petroleum gas (LPG) and liquefied natural gas (LNG), where India is most exposed. India has about 1.4 lakh tonnes of LPG storage, while its daily consumption is about 80,000 tonnes – more than half its reserve capacity. As for LNG, India largely relies on stocks at regasification facilities of Petronet LNG and BPL, without any underground storage for a fuel vital to produce fertilizers. Both the U.S. and China have heavily invested in underground LNG storage. The EU was quick to adapt following the Russia-Ukraine war as it drew down its dependence on Russian gas. These reserves have enabled advanced economies to hedge against supply disruptions by relying on long-term contracts at times of supply disruptions, cushioning them from spot market spikes. As for China, its defiance of American sanctions against Russian oil has paid off handsomely. India would have benefited too, had it maintained greater strategic autonomy.

KEY HIGHLIGHTS:

Context of the News

- The Union Government recently increased retail fuel prices after nearly four years due to rising global crude oil prices.
- Public Sector Oil Marketing Companies (OMCs) were facing heavy under-recoveries because of high import costs.
- Rising crude prices, rupee depreciation, and inflation highlighted India's inadequate Strategic Petroleum Reserves (SPR) and weak gas storage infrastructure.
- India's SPR capacity currently covers only about 7 days of crude oil consumption.
- The issue gains significance amid geopolitical disruptions such as the Russia-Ukraine conflict and volatility in West Asia.

Key Points

- India imports nearly:
 - 85% of crude oil demand
 - 50% of natural gas demand
- India is the:
 - 3rd largest oil consumer
 - 3rd largest oil importer
- Existing SPR capacity:
 - About 5.33 MMT
 - Roughly 36.7–39 million barrels
- SPR facilities located at:
 - Visakhapatnam
 - Mangaluru

- Padur
- Managed by:
 - Indian Strategic Petroleum Reserves Limited (ISPRL)
- IEA recommends:
 - Minimum 90 days of net import cover
- India's total reserve cover (SPR + commercial stocks):
 - Around 70 days
- LPG storage:
 - Around 1.4 lakh tonnes
- India lacks underground LNG storage facilities.
- China and the U.S. possess significantly larger petroleum and LNG reserves.

Static Linkages

- Energy security is essential for economic sovereignty.
- Rising crude prices increase:
 - Current Account Deficit (CAD)
 - Imported inflation
 - Fiscal burden
- Rupee depreciation increases oil import costs.
- Strategic reserves act as buffers during global supply shocks.
- Diversification of energy sources reduces external vulnerability.
- Long-term energy contracts enhance supply stability.
- Natural gas is considered a transition fuel for low-carbon growth.
- Geopolitical conflicts directly affect energy markets and inflation.

Critical Analysis

Significance of SPR

- Protects against:
 - Supply disruptions
 - War-related shocks
 - Sudden crude price spikes
- Helps stabilize:
 - Inflation
 - Domestic fuel prices
 - Economic growth
- Enhances strategic autonomy in foreign policy.
- Allows crude purchase during periods of low prices.

Challenges

- India's SPR capacity remains inadequate compared to consumption needs.
- Heavy dependence on imported crude continues.
- Absence of underground LNG storage increases vulnerability.

- SPR expansion requires:
 - High capital investment
 - Advanced infrastructure
- Limited fiscal space constrains rapid expansion.

Concerns

- High fuel prices increase:
 - Transportation costs
 - Food inflation
 - Fertilizer subsidy burden
- OMC losses affect public finances.
- Global geopolitical instability creates long-term energy insecurity.

Way Forward

- Expand Phase-II SPR projects rapidly.
- Develop underground LNG storage infrastructure.
- Diversify crude oil import sources.
- Increase investment in:
 - Renewable energy
 - Green hydrogen
 - Biofuels
- Promote electric mobility and public transport.
- Strengthen domestic hydrocarbon exploration.
- Build long-term strategic energy partnerships.
- Improve energy efficiency across sectors.

Waiting for the storm

Despite the predictability of weather events, India remains vulnerable

Last week, a pacy pre-monsoon weather system barrelled into Uttar Pradesh, bringing a compound of thunderstorms, dust storms, lightning, heavy rain, and thundersqualls to multiple districts at once. By May 14, the toll was 111 deaths and 72 injuries across 26 districts, rendering the storms among the deadliest weather-related disasters in Uttar Pradesh in recent times. The State has experienced similar weather events in May-June since 2018, if not before. The distinction this year seems to have been the intensity, with winds capable of uprooting trees. The storm appears to have been driven by a pre-monsoon convective system, with a fresh western disturbance over the northwest further destabilising conditions. The India Meteorological Department (IMD) had issued thunderstorm and lightning alerts before the event and the Uttar Pradesh government reportedly issued more than 34 crore red and orange alert messages via the SACHET portal. However, it is not clear whether these warnings were sufficiently geographically precise or reached their intended beneficiaries in time – and in fact if they simply warned of impending adverse weather or carried instructions for people to act on.

Indeed, advance preparation is pertinent for two reasons. The State is sometimes in a convergence zone as the hot, dry, 'loo' winds from the Thar move east over the plains while moisture-laden winds from the Bay of Bengal push in from the southeast. Second, over the undulating Vindhya hills in Mirzapur and Sonbhadra, the convergent air masses may lift rapidly, producing thunderstorms over specific parts of the State. Effectively, while no authority could have predicted the storms' local intensity, the underlying risk was hardly unforeseeable. Their recurrence at this time of the year and place should raise sharp questions about why so many deaths still occurred. Part of the answer is surely the proximate causes of death and damage, including housing and public infrastructure. Uttar Pradesh has a large number of structurally vulnerable rural and peri-urban households. If a storm strikes at dusk or later, people are often indoors or resting under fragile roofs. In addition, people are also vulnerable to improperly placed or poorly installed hoardings, electrical wiring, and public signage. The State was aware of the kinds of damage such storms could cause as it announced separate relief packages depending on the type of farming, crop, and loss. The underlying risk was foreseeable, yet the vulnerability was high.

KEY HIGHLIGHTS:

Context

- Severe pre-monsoon thunderstorms, dust storms, lightning, heavy rainfall and thundersqualls struck multiple districts of Uttar Pradesh in May 2026.
- Around 111 deaths and 72 injuries were reported across 26 districts.
- IMD issued thunderstorm and lightning alerts before the event.
- Uttar Pradesh government disseminated warnings through the SACHET portal.
- Despite warnings, large-scale casualties highlighted gaps in:
 - Last-mile warning systems
 - Rural infrastructure resilience
 - Disaster preparedness

Key Points

- Storms were caused by:
 - Pre-monsoon convective activity
 - Western Disturbance over northwest India
 - Interaction of:
 - Hot dry "loo" winds
 - Moisture-laden Bay of Bengal winds
- Vulnerable regions:
 - Mirzapur
 - Sonbhadra
 - Vindhyan hill region

- Major causes of deaths:
 - Lightning
 - Roof collapse
 - Falling trees
 - Electrocutation
- India Meteorological Department (IMD):
 - Provides Impact-Based Forecasting (IBF)
 - Uses Doppler Weather Radar
 - Issues nowcast warnings
- SACHET:
 - Integrated alert dissemination platform for disaster warnings.
- India increasingly faces:
 - Extreme weather events
 - Climate-induced disaster risks

Static Points

- Western Disturbances:
 - Extra-tropical storms originating near the Mediterranean region.
- "Loo":
 - Hot and dry local summer wind over northern India.
- Thunderstorms form due to:
 - Convection
 - Moisture instability
 - Rapid uplift of warm air
- Lightning occurs due to:
 - Charge separation inside cumulonimbus clouds.
- Disaster Management Act, 2005:
 - Establishes NDMA, SDMA and district disaster authorities.
- Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction (2015–2030):
 - Focuses on preparedness, resilience and early warning systems.
- NDMA guidelines:
 - Lightning safety
 - Urban flooding
 - Heatwave management

Critical Analysis

Issues

- Lack of hyper-local forecasting.
- Weak last-mile delivery of warnings.
- Poor public awareness regarding lightning safety.
- Vulnerable rural housing and infrastructure.
- Inadequate regulation of unsafe hoardings and electrical systems.

Significance

- Highlights increasing climate variability in India.
- Shows need for disaster-resilient infrastructure.
- Demonstrates importance of community-based disaster management.
- Underlines role of technology in disaster mitigation.

Way Forward

- Strengthen hyper-local weather forecasting.
- Expand Doppler Weather Radar coverage.
- Improve actionable warnings instead of generic alerts.
- Conduct community awareness and lightning safety campaigns.
- Promote disaster-resilient rural housing.
- Integrate disaster preparedness into local governance plans.
- Improve coordination between IMD, NDMA and State agencies.

In federalism challenges, consensus is the solution



EXPERTS EXPLAIN
DEVESH KAPUR &
ARVIND SUBRAMANIAN

CONTENTIOUSNESS HAS marked discussions around the recently defunct Constitutional Amendment Bill. But that has been true of the evolution of federalism since Independence, not least because federalism has been a critical instrument of nation-building. From the centralisation turn in the constitutional design in the aftermath of the horrors of Partition, to the ever-ending debates on vertical and horizontal devolution in fiscal federalism, to the centralising effects of the Finance Commission, to the misuse of Article 356 and dismissal of state governments by the Centre and imposition of President's Rule, to the partisan role of Governors, the language imbroglio, delimitation and the distribution of seats in Parliament, federalism has been a work in progress and never set in stone.

Our recent book, *A Sixth of Humanity*, which looks back on 75 years of India's development journey, sheds light on some of these issues. It quantifies two proximate challenges, identifies the two deeper causes and ends with one anecdote that is both revealing and instructive for India's politicians.

Proximate challenge 1: Rising democratic deficit

In democratic, equal citizenship requires that each citizen's vote should have the same weight. As populations shift, periodic adjustments in the distribution of seats, both across states (between states with slower and more rapid growing populations) as well as within states (between slower growing rural areas and faster growing urban areas) are needed to ensure this equality. But principles in the abstract need to be adorned with the pragmatism of political wisdom. Constitutional amendments in 1976, and again in 2002, froze political representation on the basis of the 1971 Census until the first Census after 2026. As a result, as Figure 1 indicates, the "democratic deficit" — the gap between a state's population share and its seat share — had grown from a relatively small amount in 1991 to such an extent that even in the 2024 elections, the four Southern states (Andhra Pradesh, Kerala, Tamil Nadu and Telangana) would have had 23 fewer seats and the four Northern states (Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, and Uttar Pradesh) 31 additional seats had these been determined by the latest population estimates.

Changing populations, changing representation

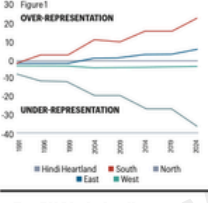


Figure 1 highlights that the problems are most acute between the Southern states (and to some extent the East) on the one hand and the Hindi heartland on the other, because fertility has diverged most sharply between these groups (the South and West Bengal are at or below replacement fertility rates). The West and North have had a stable share of the overall population, while that of the South has declined and that of the Hindi heartland has increased.

Proximate challenge 2: Rising fiscal transfers

In a federal polity, fiscal resources would be generated and allocated across states in line with economic size and performance. In reality, this will and should never happen, and some redistribution will be essential. Since 1980, per capita gross domestic product (or GDP, proxy for standards of living and economic performance) in the South, West and Haryana has grown almost as rapidly as China and for as long and they have pulled away from the Hindi heartland states and West Bengal. Any federal system would find it challenging to address such divergence, because the high states touch upon political representation and economic redistribution and are not easily reconcilable. The challenge is further heightened by the perception that contributing states are being penalised for their over-performance (on demography and economics) while the receiving states are being rewarded for their under-performance (as shown in Figure 2).

It is important to note that the biggest contributors are not the Southern states but Gujarat, Maharashtra and Haryana, and that Odisha and West Bengal are also important beneficiaries.

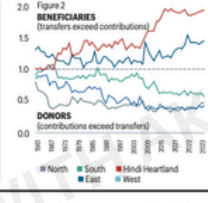


Figure 2 shows that the biggest contributors are not the Southern states but Gujarat, Maharashtra and Haryana, and that Odisha and West Bengal are also important beneficiaries. The growing democratic deficit and rising fiscal transfers are in some ways only symptoms or manifestations of the challenges. There are two, deeper causes.

Deeper cause 1: Divergent performance

One of the key, underlying problems affecting federalism discussions has been the sharply divergent performance of the states, relating to fertility and economics. Since 1980, per capita gross domestic product (or GDP, proxy for standards of living and economic performance) in the South, West and Haryana has grown almost as rapidly as China and for as long and they have pulled away from the Hindi heartland states and West Bengal. Any federal system would find it challenging to address such divergence, because the high states touch upon political representation and economic redistribution and are not easily reconcilable. The challenge is further heightened by the perception that contributing states are being penalised for their over-performance (on demography and economics) while the receiving states are being rewarded for their under-performance (as shown in Figure 2).

Deeper cause 2: Erosion of democratic sensibility

The elephant in the room, aggravating the challenges of fiscal federalism, is the growing divisiveness of Indian politics. From democratisation to farm laws to the Citizenship Amendment Act, 2019 to the replacement of the Indian Penal Code with the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita to the Special Intensive Revision electoral changes and the introduction of the recent Constitutional Amendment Bill, the ruling party has acted unilaterally with minimal consultation and little respect for the democratic processes of wide consultation, accommodation, compromise and self-restraint.

Instead of treating politics as electoral competition, it is increasingly viewed as an existential battle to vanquish enemies. Cooperative federalism — the bedrock of nation-building — is curdling into contentious, even combative, federalism. This has led to mounting grievances — in Kashmir, Ladakh, Manipur, the South, and amongst religious minorities.

The single biggest casualty is the erosion of the most potent and indispensable, if elusive, force of nation-building — trust — whether among citizens, between the state and citizens, between the Centre and states, and between states.

What is democratic sensibility? In 2016, the Finance Minister of Kerala, T.M. Thomas Isaac, politely asked to walk out of the GST (Goods and Services Tax) Council meeting because he was in a minority of one relative to the consensus on gambling taxation. The Council could easily have moved forward because it was the Centre plus 28 states against one state, and that too a state in opposition to the ruling party at the Centre.

Instead, the then Union Finance Minister, Arun Jaitley, went out of his way to cajole him back and accommodate his position even while juggling to maintain the delicate compromise amongst the other 28 finance ministers. Kerala came on board. Unanimity was preserved. India thrived!

Solutions galore — in some compact, grand bargains, complex voting principles, revised fiscal transfer arrangements — have been offered in the last few weeks to address the serious challenges of Indian federalism. But if performance diverges within India, no solution will succeed without the embrace of a basic democratic sensibility, especially on the part of the Central government which has the preponderance of power. With it, workable solutions will be possible for even the most exigent challenges. Without it, even simple problems risk spiralling into crises. Democratic sensibility prevents a dominant government from becoming domineering.

This is the first of two pieces on the federalism debate. It draws upon the authors' recent book *A Sixth of Humanity: Independent India's Development*. Odysseus, especially Chapter XIV and XV.

Devesh Kapur is a political scientist and the Starr Foundation Professor of South Asia Studies at the Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies, Washington DC.

Arvind Subramanian is an Indian economist and the former Chief Economic Advisor to the Government of India (2014-18). He is currently a Senior Fellow at the Peterson Institute for International Economics, Washington DC.

• Debate over “rewarding inefficiency” vs “ensuring equity”.

• Southern and Western States seek performance-based devolution.

Divergent State Performance

- Southern/Western States:
 - Lower fertility rates.
 - Higher economic growth.
 - Better human development indicators.
- Hindi heartland:
 - Higher fertility.
 - Lower per capita income.
 - Greater dependence on Union transfers.

Cooperative Federalism Concerns

• Increasing unilateral policymaking by Centre criticised.

- Need for wider consultation with States.
- GST Council cited as successful federal consensus model.

KEY HIGHLIGHTS:

Context of the News

- Debate on Centre-State relations has intensified over:
 - Delimitation after 2026.
 - Fiscal devolution among States.
 - Increasing centralisation by the Union government.
- Southern States fear reduction in Lok Sabha representation due to successful population control.
- Concerns raised regarding rising imbalance between:
 - Political representation.
 - Fiscal contribution and redistribution.
- Article highlights growing shift from “cooperative federalism” to “combative federalism”.

Key Points

Democratic Deficit

- Lok Sabha seat allocation frozen based on 1971 Census.
- Freeze extended till first Census after 2026.
- Southern States may lose parliamentary seats after delimitation.
- Hindi heartland States likely to gain representation due to higher population growth.

Fiscal Federalism

- Finance Commission transfers increasingly favour poorer States.
- Developed States contribute more taxes than they receive.

Static Linkages

- “Union of States” concept.
- Federal system with unitary bias.
- Seventh Schedule:
 - Union List
 - State List
 - Concurrent List
- Article 246 – Legislative relations.
- Article 280 – Finance Commission.
- Article 263 – Inter-State Council.
- Article 356 – President’s Rule.
- Article 279A – GST Council.
- Delimitation Commission.
- Basic Structure Doctrine.
- Sarkaria Commission recommendations.
- Punchhi Commission recommendations.
- Fiscal federalism.
- Cooperative federalism.
- Demographic transition theory.

Critical Analysis

Positives

- Fiscal redistribution promotes balanced regional development.
- Supports poorer States in welfare delivery.
- Cooperative federalism strengthens national integration.
- GST Council demonstrates consensus-based governance.

Concerns

- Developed States perceive fiscal injustice.
- Population-control-performing States may lose political influence.

- Excessive centralisation weakens State autonomy.
- Growing regional grievances may affect national unity.
- Trust deficit between Centre and States increasing.

Constitutional Dimension

- Federalism is part of Basic Structure.
- Balance needed between:
 - Equity,
 - Representation,
 - National integration.

Way Forward

- Adopt balanced delimitation formula considering:
 - Population,
 - Demographic performance,
 - Development indicators.
- Strengthen Inter-State Council.
- Increase transparency in Finance Commission criteria.
- Promote performance-linked incentives.
- Institutionalise regular Centre–State consultations.
- Strengthen cooperative federalism mechanisms.
- Ensure fiscal autonomy of States.

NEET paper leak raises larger questions, calls for honest reckoning

FOR THE third time in recent years, the NEET examination has been marred by a paper leak—a phrase that has become, with grim predictability, a seasonal feature of India's medical admissions calendar. The hopes of 22 lakh students are once again temporarily dashed. They go home, not relieved of a burden but still high-strung, facing a repeat examination and all the uncertainty that lies beyond it. Young men and women who have spent years in relentless preparation—after school coaching, sleepless nights, the full weight of family expectation—have met their first roadblock before their journey even began. The frustration on their faces, visible in images circulating on social media, is not the frustration of a single bad morning. It is the accumulated anguish of years.

The paper leak raises questions that ought to disturb us deeply. In an era of digital encryption, blockchain-secured communication, and multi-layered cybersecurity protocols, how does a national examination of this magnitude remain so porous? The answer points, regrettably, toward structural corruption. Well-organised networks—often traceable to the commercial interests of large coaching institutions anxious to demonstrate the success rates of their students—appear to have cultivated contacts within the examination ecosystem itself. Those involved in question setting, collation, or distribution. It must also be said that NEET has provided an unintended but powerful impetus to the mushrooming of coaching centres across the country, several of them operating in conditions of overcrowding, unrelenting stress, and performance pressure that exceed reasonable human limits, driving a distressing number of aspirants toward de-



SUNIL CHANDNI

pression, and some to suicide. It is worth returning to first principles. NEET was introduced in 2013 to ensure uniformity in assessing eligibility for medical education, to uproot the menace of capitation fees, to end corruption in seat allocation, and to establish merit as the sole criterion for selection. These were not small ambitions. A decade later, each of these objectives deserves honest appraisal, not institutional self-congratulation. Capitation fees have not been uprooted. Several private medical colleges continue to collect substantial sums above prescribed limits from candidates who possess the grades but not the means. More troublingly, the structure of NEET cut-offs has produced a perverse outcome: Low qualifying percentages now favour the less meritorious but financially resourceful candidate over the more meritorious but economically constrained one. The student, compelled to borrow in order to capitalise on a hard-earned rank, enters medicine carrying a debt that reshapes every professional decision thereafter. The ethic of debate that might have taken root at the threshold of a career is lost through moral failure—it is fleeced by financial obligation. Such graduates are driven, almost by design, into early private practice and commercially induced clinical behaviour. Albeit, there is not one but two further examinations—NEET Postgraduate and NEET Super-specialty—with the same rigour. This repetitive cycle leaves doctors burnt out and diminished in their zeal to serve. The consequences extend further. The middle-class graduate is pushed toward revenue-generating practice. Many of the most talented, meritorious graduates—drawn by better professional environments and more

enabling systems abroad—leave at the first opportunity. Both outcomes represent a loss the country can ill afford. India's doctor-to-population ratio in several states remains dangerously below acceptable benchmarks. Community health centres across Tier 2 and Tier 3 districts report chronic vacancies. This is not a future concern—it is a present emergency. An admissions system that consistently diverts talent away from public service is not a neutral administrative arrangement; it is a structural problem with direct health consequences. None of this is to say that NEET has produced nothing of value. The creation of a common national platform, the reduction in the multiplicity of competing entrance examinations, and some improvement in transparency within government college admissions are real. If partial, achievements that deserve acknowledgement. But partial success does not excuse systematic failure, and the failures are now too numerous and too consequential to be addressed by incremental adjustment. The time has come for a rigorous, multi-pronged retrospective appraisal. Have the objectives set at conception in 2013 been met? Has NEET produced better medical graduates for the nation? Has it meaningfully curbed capitation, quantitatively and qualitatively? Has it increased the supply of doctors available to serve in health-impaired geographies? Has it brought greater equity in the allocation of medical seats for economically disadvantaged and tribal communities? Has it, in any measurable sense, produced a generation of doctors who place the patient above self-interest? These are not rhetorical questions. They are the terms on which this examination

The writer is former director, CMC Vellore

KEY HIGHLIGHTS:

Context of the News

- Allegations of paper leak and irregularities in NEET-UG have raised concerns over transparency and credibility of national-level examinations.
- Around 22 lakh aspirants were affected, reviving debate over the effectiveness of centralized medical entrance examinations.
- Questions have emerged regarding the functioning of the National Testing Agency (NTA), coaching industry influence, and commercialization of medical education.

Key Points

- NEET was introduced in 2013 to:
 - Ensure uniform standards in medical admissions.
 - Reduce multiple entrance examinations.
 - Curb corruption and capitation fees.
 - Promote merit-based selection.
- Major issues highlighted:
 - Repeated paper leaks undermine institutional credibility.
 - Coaching-centre dominance increases inequality.
 - Mental stress and student suicides linked to high-pressure exam ecosystem.
 - Private medical colleges continue indirect capitation practices.
 - Rural healthcare system continues to face shortage of doctors.
- Concerns regarding NTA:
 - Weak examination security mechanisms.
 - Lack of accountability in conduct of exams.
 - Need for transparent investigation and reforms.

Static Linkages

- Education in Concurrent List.

- Right to Equality in public examinations.
- Directive Principles related to public health.
- Doctor-population ratio and healthcare accessibility.
- Commercialization of education.
- Transparency and accountability in governance.
- Cybersecurity in digital examination systems.
- Ethical issues in public administration.
- Mental health concerns among youth.

Critical Analysis

Positives

- Single-window medical admission system.
- Reduced multiplicity of entrance exams.
- Greater uniformity in eligibility assessment.

Challenges

- Repeated leaks reduce trust in meritocracy.
- Coaching industry creates socio-economic inequality.
- Commercialization of medical education persists.
- High exam pressure affects mental health.
- Weak regulation of private medical colleges.
- Poor rural healthcare staffing despite centralized admissions.

Governance Concerns

- Institutional accountability of NTA.
- Need for stronger cyber and logistical security.
- Questions over fairness and transparency.

Way Forward

- Strengthen digital security and encrypted exam systems.
- Create independent examination oversight mechanism.
- Ensure strict punishment for paper leak networks.
- Regulate private medical college fees effectively.
- Expand affordable government medical seats.
- Provide mental health support for aspirants.
- Improve incentives for rural medical service.
- Increase transparency and accountability in NTA functioning.

For WTO to matter, it needs to recognise politics behind trade



AMRITA NARLIKAR

IT IS impossible not to smile darkly when the results of a G2 summit are discrepant readouts: It seems that presidents Donald Trump and Xi Jinping cannot agree on what was agreed on during their recent talks. The good news: They seem not to be colluding to divide up the world into new spheres of influence. But global instability is not about to diminish. For the rest of the world, multilateral institutions matter more than ever. So it is fair to ask: What does the latest ministerial conference of the World Trade Organisation (WTO) — MC 14 — held in Yaoundé, Cameroon, mean for development?

For some time, development talks in the WTO have focused on streamlining Special and Differential Treatment. But four other aspects demand urgent attention.

First, the “needs and interests” of developing countries should be placed “at the heart of the WTO.” Unfortunately, the Doha Development Agenda (DDA) of 2001, the unprecedented trade round according centrality to development concerns, died a slow death.

The second challenge derives ironically from a WTO success: China became a full member in 2001, swiftly learning how to use/play the rules. Add to this its political system, state-led investment and industrial policy, and overcapacity in Chinese manufacturing and cheap exports followed. Despite some advantages that accrue to developing countries, their manufacturing base in key areas gets undercut by China, while depressed prices globally deliver a double whammy. If the US and China strike a bilateral deal on this, developing countries will be even worse hit.

Third, economic interdependence can now be weaponised. How does a developing country manage access to food and energy, when strategic chokepoints are affected by war? Or, protect its citizens and national defence systems against cybersecurity threats, surveillance and data misuse? These dangers hit developing countries more because of the difficult choices they face. To address them, national security needs to be factored into trade equations more systematically.

Fourth, “development” can no longer be restricted to humans. Recognition is slowly growing that anthropocentric per-

spectives on development have caused immense damage to the environment. Pandemics caused by keeping innocent animals in brutal conditions in wet markets, or transporting them as “live exports” on journeys that maim and kill, are deadly examples. We need models of growth and trade that honour the deeply intertwined existence of all beings.

On all four levels, MC 14 has not delivered. The old DDA-related concerns remain unaddressed. Chinese overcapacity cannot be solved by trade measures alone. National security barely features in WTO discussions. Planetary rights are scarcely present in trade debates. Ideally, one organisation should be mandated to handle these interlinked trade problems. But such a mandate far exceeds that of the WTO’s. What can it do to address these existential concerns?

First, the sooner the WTO and its members recognise that “politics” is here to stay, the greater the chance that they will be able to acknowledge differences and develop innovative solutions. These could include taking a tiered approach to MFN and plurilaterals.

Second, just how disengaged the global public is from trade debates is clear from the perfunctory media coverage MC 14 received. A big mistake at MC 14 was to kick the can back to Geneva — a sure-shot recipe to take trade matters even further away from the public eye. Without political support from the organisation and member countries, and buy-in from a global citizenry, technically sound solutions to development problems will not fly.

Third, for the WTO to catch up with altered empirical realities, it must become intellectually inclusive. A disciplinary dominance of Economics and Law in its secretariat no longer suffices. Prioritisation of efficiency and compliance, at the expense of fundamental questions of power and ethics, is one of the reasons for the mess it is in today. Interdisciplinary research, which also includes historians, political scientists, philosophers, and natural scientists, will enable the needed paradigm shift.

The writer is distinguished fellow, O&F, and honorary fellow of Darwin College, University of Cambridge

The old DDA-related concerns remain unaddressed. Chinese overcapacity cannot be solved by trade measures alone. National security barely features in WTO discussions. Planetary rights are scarcely present in trade debates

KEY HIGHLIGHTS:

Context of the News

- The 14th Ministerial Conference (MC14) of the World Trade Organization highlighted growing concerns regarding the future of multilateral trade governance.
- Discussions occurred amid increasing geopolitical tensions between the United States and China.
- The article critiques WTO’s inability to adequately address development concerns of developing countries.
- Key issues raised include:
 - Failure of Doha Development Agenda (DDA),
 - Chinese manufacturing overcapacity,
 - Weaponisation of trade and supply chains,
 - Lack of environmental and ethical considerations in trade governance.

Key Points

- Doha Development Agenda (2001) aimed to place developing countries at the centre of global trade negotiations.
- China’s WTO entry in 2001 significantly altered global manufacturing and export patterns.
- Cheap Chinese exports have adversely affected manufacturing sectors in developing countries.
- Increasing use of:
 - Economic sanctions,
 - Export controls,
 - Supply-chain disruptions,

- has made trade a geopolitical tool.
- WTO discussions inadequately address:
 - National security concerns,
 - Cybersecurity and data misuse,
 - Environmental sustainability.
- Growing demand for reforming WTO to reflect present geopolitical and developmental realities.

Static Linkages

- Multilateralism in global governance.
- Most Favoured Nation (MFN) principle.
- Special and Differential Treatment (S&DT).
- Globalisation and trade liberalisation.
- Comparative advantage theory.
- Supply-chain resilience and energy security.
- Sustainable development.
- National security exceptions under GATT.
- Environmental ethics and climate justice.

Critical Analysis

Concerns

- WTO has failed to resolve long-pending developmental issues.
- Consensus-based decision-making delays reforms.
- Chinese overcapacity distorts global markets.
- Developing countries face deindustrialisation risks.
- Trade weaponisation threatens food and energy security.
- Environmental concerns remain peripheral in trade negotiations.

Significance for India

- India supports a rule-based multilateral trading system.
- Protection of policy space for agriculture and MSMEs remains crucial.
- India advocates Special and Differential Treatment for developing countries.
- Supply-chain diversification creates opportunities for India under “China+1” strategy.

Way Forward

- Reform WTO dispute settlement mechanism.
- Revive development-focused trade negotiations.
- Strengthen protection for vulnerable developing economies.
- Integrate sustainability into trade frameworks.
- Promote resilient and diversified supply chains.
- Enhance representation of Global South in trade governance.
- Balance free trade with strategic and national security concerns.

No quick-fixes, weak rupee problem runs deep

THE INDIAN currency continues to be under pressure. On Monday, the rupee was hovering around 96.3 against the dollar — since the beginning of this year, it has fallen by around 6.5 per cent. According to a report in this paper, some policymakers view this fall as the market pricing in the depreciation that may have occurred before 2025, a time when the central bank's interventions increased sharply, leading to an "artificial stabilisation" of the rupee. While market interventions designed to keep the currency at a particular level may delay the adjustments required to fix underlying imbalances in the economy, the problems with the rupee run deeper.

The currency's weakness comes at a time when the Indian economy has been growing at a relatively healthy pace, with both inflation and the current account deficit being low. The rupee has also fallen against the dollar when the greenback has itself weakened — in 2025, the rupee fell by 4.7 per cent against the dollar when the dollar index fell from 109 to 98. The problems have been due to pressure on both the capital and current accounts. Capital has been flowing out of the country, with both foreign and domestic investors exploring alternatives. Investors seem more exuberant about the prospects of East Asian economies, which are benefitting from the China+1 play and the AI boom. And on the current account side, the steep rise in global crude oil prices is exerting pressure, financing which will be challenging.

In response, there have been appeals to curb foreign travel and gold purchases in order to conserve forex, with the RBI also intervening in the markets to stem the rupee's slide. Its net short forward position had widened considerably, and it had earlier also restricted activity in the non-deliverable forwards market. The relief to the currency from the central bank's steps was, however, short-lived. But the temptation to intervene in the currency markets through various instruments, when the rupee is facing both depreciation and appreciation pressures, is not new. The central bank has in the past repeatedly intervened in the markets. The approach should, however, be to allow the currency to move freely. The rupee should work as a shock absorber. At the current juncture, the focus should be on addressing the pain points in the economy. Steps need to be taken to attract foreign capital, raise domestic competitiveness and boost merchandise exports. The structural impediments to growth need to be tackled urgently.

KEY HIGHLIGHTS:

Context

- Indian Rupee has depreciated against the US Dollar despite:
 - Stable GDP growth,
 - Moderate inflation,
 - Manageable Current Account Deficit (CAD).
- RBI interventions in forex markets increased to prevent excessive volatility.
- Rising crude oil prices and capital outflows have intensified pressure on the rupee.
- Concerns emerged regarding "artificial stabilisation" of the currency through sustained intervention.

Key Points

- India follows a Managed Float Exchange Rate System.
- Rupee depreciation increases:
 - Import costs,
 - Imported inflation,
 - External debt burden.
- Higher crude oil prices worsen:
 - Trade deficit,
 - Current Account Deficit.
- Capital outflows occur due to:
 - Better investment opportunities abroad,
 - Global risk aversion,
 - Stronger returns in East Asian economies.

- RBI tools for forex management:
 - Forex reserve intervention,
 - Forward market operations,
 - Liquidity management measures.
- Forex reserves help:
 - Stabilize currency markets,
 - Maintain investor confidence,
 - Finance imports.

Static Linkages

- Balance of Payments (BoP)
- Current Account Deficit (CAD)
- Capital Account Flows
- Managed Floating Exchange Rate
- Foreign Exchange Reserves
- Imported Inflation
- Purchasing Power Parity
- FEMA, 1999
- Role of RBI in exchange rate management
- Trade deficit and energy imports

Critical Analysis

Advantages of Currency Depreciation

- Improves export competitiveness.
- Encourages domestic production.
- Supports remittance inflows.

Challenges

- Imported inflation rises.
- Petroleum import bill increases.
- Fiscal pressure through subsidies may rise.
- External debt servicing becomes costly.
- Investor confidence may weaken during volatility.

Concerns with Excessive RBI Intervention

- Delays market-based adjustment.
- Can deplete forex reserves.
- Creates artificial currency valuation.
- May distort external sector competitiveness.

Way Forward

- Allow gradual market-driven exchange rate adjustment.
- Enhance export competitiveness.
- Diversify export basket and markets.
- Reduce crude oil import dependence.
- Promote renewable energy transition.
- Attract stable long-term FDI.
- Strengthen manufacturing under Make in India.
- Maintain adequate forex reserves.
- Improve ease of doing business and logistics efficiency.

On Saranda forests, Jharkhand must heed SC

IN NOVEMBER last year, the Supreme Court asked the Jharkhand government to notify 314 sq km of the Saranda forests in the state's West Singhbhum district as a wildlife sanctuary. The order came after the apex court had pulled up the state government on at least two occasions for failing to comply with its directives on checking illegal mining in the biodiverse forests. However, after assuring the Court of compliance, the Hemant Soren government has dilly-dallied over protecting one of Asia's largest sal forest ecosystems. It has missed the February deadline for declaring the Saranda forests a wildlife sanctuary and instead filed two review petitions before the SC — the last on April 30. The state government's argument — according protected area status to the forests would curtail the rights of indigenous people — flies in the face of the SC's clarifications. The Court has repeatedly said that individual and community rights under the Forest Rights Act will remain protected and traditional livelihoods will not be displaced by conservation efforts.

The Saranda forests are among the country's most important elephant corridors. Mining operations have, over the past two decades, altered the ecosystem's integrity. They have disrupted the migratory routes of elephants and forced them to move through human settlements and fields, leading to increased human-animal conflict across Jharkhand and neighbouring Odisha and West Bengal. A study published last year in *Ecology and Evolution* reported that rampaging elephants had killed more than 1,300 people in Jharkhand between 2000 and 2023. Deforestation also weakens watershed systems, accelerates soil erosion, hampers local climate resilience, and affects agriculture and people's livelihoods. The Jharkhand government is, therefore, ill-advised in framing conservation as a choice between forests and indigenous communities. It should see the protection of the sal forests as a matter of long-term ecological security.

Jharkhand's prevarication reflects a deeper and troubling pattern — a widening chasm between judicial directives and executive action on environmental matters. Whether in the inadequate response to Delhi's deteriorating air quality, the bypassing of Court orders aimed at protecting the fragile Himalayan ecology, or dilution of safeguards within coastal zones, the executive has too often failed to match the judiciary's interventions with meaningful enforcement. Public faith in environmental governance is undermined when governments offer assurances before courts and then delay or dilute implementation. The Jharkhand government should course correct and listen to the SC.

KEY HIGHLIGHTS:

Context

- Supreme Court directed Jharkhand government to declare around 80,000 hectares of Saranda forest (West Singhbhum district) as a Wildlife Sanctuary.
- Jharkhand government failed to meet the deadline and filed review petitions.
- State argued sanctuary status may affect tribal rights and livelihoods.
- Supreme Court clarified that rights under Forest Rights Act (FRA), 2006 will remain protected.
- Issue linked to illegal mining, forest degradation, and rising human-elephant conflict.

Key Points

- Saranda is one of Asia's largest sal forest regions.
- Important elephant corridor connecting Jharkhand, Odisha, and West Bengal.
- Mining activities have fragmented habitats and disturbed migration routes.
- Increased human-elephant conflict in eastern India.
- Forest degradation impacts:
 - Biodiversity,
 - Watersheds,

- Soil fertility,
- Local climate resilience.
- Highlights conflict between:
 - Conservation,
 - Mining-led development,
 - Tribal rights.

Static Linkages

- Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972.
- Forest Rights Act, 2006.
- Article 48A – Protection of environment.
- Article 51A(g) – Fundamental duty for environmental protection.
- Fifth Schedule areas and tribal protection.
- Sustainable Development Principle.
- Precautionary Principle.
- Public Trust Doctrine.
- Project Elephant (1992).

Critical Analysis

Importance of Sanctuary Status

- Protects biodiversity-rich sal forests.
- Conserves elephant corridors.
- Reduces ecological degradation.
- Improves climate resilience.

Challenges

- Fear of restrictions on tribal livelihoods.
- Mining pressure and economic interests.
- Weak implementation of environmental laws.
- Conflict between conservation and development.

Governance Concerns

- Delay in implementing Supreme Court directives.
- Weak enforcement of environmental safeguards.
- Increasing executive-judiciary gap in environmental governance.

Way Forward

- Time-bound declaration of sanctuary.
- Ensure FRA rights remain protected.
- Community-led conservation through Gram Sabhas.
- Scientific management of elephant corridors.
- Regulate illegal mining strictly.
- Strengthen compensation for human-wildlife conflict.
- Promote sustainable development approach.