

EDITORIALS HIGHLIGHTS

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1. A timely reset for the Food Security Act (THE HINDU PAGE NO 8)

1. GS II (Social Justice) & GS III (Economy)
2. Topics: Welfare schemes for vulnerable sections; Issues of buffer stocks and food security.
3. Concepts: Dietary diversification, National Food Security (Amendment) Bill 2026, PDS reform, hidden hunger/malnutrition.

A timely reset for the Food Security Act

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India's food security debate has entered a new phase. Estimates based on India's latest household consumption survey suggest that the share of households unable to afford the ICMR-National Institute of Nutrition (NIN) recommended diet fell from about 52% in 2011-12 to about 25% in 2023-24, affecting 25% of rural and 21% of urban households. This is substantial progress, but scores of households still cannot afford an adequate healthy diet. Poverty, hunger and inability to afford a healthy diet overlap; a modern food-security policy must recognise that they are not identical.

The draft National Food Security (Amendment) Bill, 2026 links Antyodaya Anna Yojana (AAY) entitlements to household size. The policy challenge is to correct inequity without reducing existing foodgrain access, while creating a pathway towards nutrition security.

Designing a fairer entitlement
Priority Households receive 5 kg of foodgrains per person per month, while AAY households receive a flat 35 kg per household. The latter protects smaller and highly vulnerable families but provides progressively less per person as household size grows; a seven-member household receives 5 kg per person and an eight-member household about 4.4 kg, below the Priority Household entitlement. The draft proposes 7 kg per person, capped at 35 kg. This would reduce support for households with one to four members by 20% to 80%, leave those with five or more unchanged, and provide no AAY household with additional foodgrain.

Tamil Nadu illustrates the potential impact. The State government reports that 15.75 lakh of its 18.64 lakh AAY households (84.5%) have fewer than five members. It estimates that the proposal would reduce the monthly AAY allocation from 65,261 tonnes to 42,040 tonnes, a fall of about 35.6%. Although specific to Tamil Nadu, these projections show why household composition and vulnerability must be considered: a smaller household may include an older person living alone, a widow or a person with disability.

As the proposal is taken forward, the existing 35 kg entitlement should be preserved through an explicit no-loss safeguard. Because retaining 35 kg as both the minimum and maximum would leave the per-person formula with no practical effect, support beyond 35 kg for larger or highly dependent households should be examined as a separate policy question using household-consumption evidence, nutritional requirements and transparent fiscal costing.

Entitlement reform must also address coverage. Although the NFSA allows coverage of up to 75% of the rural and 50% of the urban population, its 81.35-crore beneficiary ceiling remains based on Census 2011; about 80 crore people receive free foodgrains. Against the estimated population of 146.4 crore in 2025, this ceiling covers only 55.6%. It should be recalculated when the Census 2027 figures become available. Meanwhile, updated population estimates and deprivation criteria could support a transparent review, with accessible inclusion and appeal mechanisms.

Protecting grain while diversifying diets
Protecting the grain entitlement does not mean preserving a cereal-only understanding of food security. NFHS-6 (2023-24) found that stunting among children under five fell from 35.5% to 29.3%, but wasting and underweight barely changed, from 19.3% to 19.0% and 32.1% to 31.8%, respectively. Only about 15% of children (six-23 months) receive a minimally adequate diet. Meanwhile, the ICMR-India Diabetes (INDIAB) study estimated that 101 million Indians had diabetes and 136 million had prediabetes in 2021. These figures reflect India's double burden of malnutrition. Maternal undernutrition and low birth weight are associated with greater risk of non-communicable diseases (NCDs) later in life, while present-day diet and other behavioural factors add further risk.

Foodgrain entitlement should not itself be equated with diabetes risk. The concern is that a predominantly cereal-based food basket, when combined with diets already high in carbohydrates and low in protein-rich foods, may reinforce dietary imbalance. The solution is not to reduce essential cereal entitlements, but to finance dietary diversification alongside.

The dietary evidence favours balance over simply increasing or substituting cereals. A 2025 ICMR-INDIAB study of 18,090 adults found carbohydrates supplied 62.3% of daily energy nationally and protein 12%. Adults with the highest carbohydrate intake had 30% higher odds of newly diagnosed type 2 diabetes than those with the lowest intake. Replacing refined cereals with whole-wheat or millet flour was not linked to lower risk when the carbohydrate share remained high. Modelling suggested greater benefit from replacing some carbohydrate calories with protein-rich foods.

These observational and modelled findings cannot establish that changing the Public Distribution System (PDS) basket will prevent diabetes, but caution against treating more grain or millets alone as a complete nutrition policy. The ICMR-NIN's 2024 guidelines recommend that cereals and millets provide at most 45% of energy, with greater contributions from pulses, beans, milk, nuts, vegetables, fruits and other protein sources.

The PDS cannot supply the entire healthy plate; it can best provide affordable, shelf-stable foods. States should be supported to offer pulses, local rice, wheat and millet choices and, where feasible, healthy edible oils. Local production and consumption should guide supply chains and effective Minimum Support Price (MSP) procurement for pulse, millet and oilseed growers. Sustained public investment should link food, nutrition and health systems through complementary programmes: the PDS, Anganwadi services for young children and pregnant or lactating women, and Pradhan Mantri Poshan Shakti Nirman (PM POSHAN) for schoolchildren. These programmes could provide eggs, milk or suitable alternatives where locally acceptable and feasible. Dietary diversification must be separately budgeted, not financed by reducing cereal entitlements. The 2026-27 Union Budget allocates ₹2,27,629 crore to food subsidy, underscoring the need for transparent costing. Additions should be tested through phased State pilots assessing actual consumption, dietary diversity, anaemia and glycaemic risk, household spending, wastage, exclusion and supply feasibility. Pilot evidence can guide fiscally sustainable expansion and help assess potential longer-term health and fiscal benefits.

Linking food access with nutrition support
The NFSA's strength lies in guaranteeing reliable, dignified food access. India has built a formidable delivery network. By the end of 2025, 5.50 lakh of 5.51 lakh fair price shops used electronic point-of-sale devices, while One Nation One Ration Card covered nearly all NFSA beneficiaries. These systems support portability and monitoring but must include reliable offline alternatives, assisted or doorstep access for people with limited mobility, and a clear guarantee that authentication failure will not lead to denial of entitled foodgrains.

Fair price shops could support last-mile nutrition information and referral. Simple multilingual receipt, display, voice and mobile messages could promote dietary diversity, appropriate cereal portions, pulses, healthier oils, and less salt and added sugar. Where feasible, trained health workers could undertake periodic outreach through India's primary-health infrastructure, linking willing adults to government diabetes, hypertension and other NCD services. By June 2026, India had over 1.86 lakh Ayushman Arogya Mandirs, while government data recorded 41.3 crore diabetes screenings. Fair price shop dealers should facilitate information and referral, not diagnose or counsel. Participation must be voluntary, confidential and unrelated to ration eligibility or authentication.

The amendment should therefore be situated within a broader architecture for food and nutrition security, anchored in three safeguards. First, any per-person formula should preserve the existing 35 kg monthly entitlement for every AAY household through an explicit no-loss guarantee. Second, the adequacy of the 35 kg ceiling should be reviewed periodically for larger households and those with high dependency or nutritional needs, using consumption, nutritional and fiscal evidence. Third, dietary diversification must be separately financed and progressively implemented without reducing existing cereal entitlements.

India's next food security reform must protect people from hunger while also addressing the dietary drivers of diabetes and other NCDs. Its success should be judged not only by the tons of grain moved, but by whether vulnerable families can eat enough, eat healthier and obtain their entitlements with dignity.

The proposed amendment offers an opportunity to preserve the 35 kg AAY entitlement, assess the needs of larger households, and finance a gradual transition toward more diverse and nutritious diets

2. Military transformation, intellectual leadership (THE HINDU PAGE NO 8)

1. GS III (Security) & GS II (Governance)
2. Topics: Security challenges and their management; Various Security forces and agencies and their mandate.
3. Concepts: Civil-military relations, Professional Military Education (PME), Higher Defence Organisation reform, military transformation.

Military transformation, intellectual leadership

When Prime Minister Narendra Modi came away from his first Combined Commanders Conference in 2014, it is common knowledge within the strategic establishment that he was disappointed with the vision placed before him by the combined cohort of tri-service military commanders. His direction to them was to fast-track reform within the armed forces with an emphasis on improving operational effectiveness by enhancing synergy and concentrating on cutting flab.

Obstacles to transformation
To be fair to the armed forces' leadership, much effort has gone in to achieve these objectives. However, the results have not been transformational – the first is the top-sided reform of the Higher Defence Organisation, which places the onus solely on the armed forces to reform, rather than restructuring the entire national security architecture through a top-down approach. The second is the lack of consensus among the three services over integration in the absence of meaningful higher direction. The third is the snail's pace at which senior military leadership has upgraded and expressed itself cogently in the intellectual domain to draw the attention of the political leadership to the complexities of integration and transformation.

At the heart of the post-colonial military legacy left behind by the British was a strong anti-intellectual flavour, which suggested that tradition, ethos, spit and polish, and tactical acumen were sufficient to sustain and develop a modern military. It was almost four decades before General K. Sundarji attempted an intellectual transformation in the Indian Army in the late 1980s, reverberations of which were felt in the other two services too. His intellectual capacity allowed him to engage meaningfully with the apex strategic and political leadership on



Arjun Subramaniam
Retired
Air Vice Marshal

India's military reform must be driven by deeper intellectual engagement

issues as wide-ranging as nuclear strategy and civil-military relations. Air Commodore Jasjit Singh emerged as the intellectual flag-bearer of air power in the 1990s, playing an important role in raising the air power consciousness within the larger strategic and political establishment. He was a prolific writer and spoke fearlessly on both air power and nuclear strategy. Rear Admiral Raja Menon from the Indian Navy advocated for sea power and raised the maritime consciousness within the nation. This trio teamed up with K. Subrahmanyam as the flag-bearers of intellectual advocacy in the realm of military affairs.

Over the last two decades, despite the quantum jump in the number of PhDs acquired by senior military officers, there has been an intellectual vacuum within the top echelons of India's military leadership for three reasons. The first is the 'upward mobility trap' that snares senior military leaders at the two-star rank and above into an operational cocoon and penalises dissenting professional and intellectual views in an environment where 'company policy and being politically correct' is important. Speaking truth to power can only come about with serious intellectual depth.

The second is in the realm of personal development wherein there is a significant whole-of-government knowledge deficit that comes from the inability to put in serious intellectual work (reading and writing) side-by-side with a taxing senior operational assignment. All the great generals from history, from B.L. Montgomery, E. Rommel, K.S. Thimayya and K. Sundarji spent hours of solitude reflecting and writing on various dimensions of soldiering, strategy and statecraft. In today's complex multi-dimensional security environment, intellectual reflection within the larger security ecosystem draws respect from other stakeholders. When was the last time a paper proposing a disruptive but doable military

idea, authored by a colonel, brigadier, or general, found its way to the top echelons of the country's national security leadership?

The third is a need for elements of the Higher Defence Organisation including the Ministry of Defence and the political establishment to foster a more enabling intellectual environment within the armed forces that facilitates professional debate, innovation and accelerated reform. Maybe the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Defence can reflect on this issue. India's armed forces are highly professional and understand that they are instruments of the state with a clear constitutional mandate. Giving them greater intellectual bandwidth and freedom will not come with any downside risk.

Unlocking existing potential
On a positive note, the Professional Military Education (PME) system within India's armed forces is on a solid footing though there is scope for greater focus on the complexities of a whole-of-government approach towards national security. The existing PME flow, with a little bit of innovation and greater academic rigour, offers much potential for conversion into solid senior-leadership intellectual potential. The quality of writing and the ability to generate ideas in India's war colleges is good and reflects the enthusiasm of youth and hope.

A sure-shot way of enabling transformation within India's armed forces in the current geopolitical environment is through a vibrant intellectual route. If the government can accelerate and enable economic reform, it can do the same with military reform. The challenge will be to enhance intellectual productivity in an elephant-paced, conservative and hierarchical armed forces. It is the senior leadership that must show the way.

The views expressed are personal

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Regional parties, hurdles
Regional political parties in India have never lost their strong and fundamental voter base. However, they face organisational and seat-winning challenges in a national political landscape increasingly dominated by

national parties. Data from research groups show that regional parties secured roughly one-third of the total vote share in the last general election. However, their independent governance footprint has shrunk as national parties

have expanded their reach ('Data Point', August 12). Regional parties independently govern fewer States today than they did during the peak coalition eras of the 1990s and 2000s. The voting pattern, however, has not changed

significantly: voters generally choose regional parties in State elections to prioritise local needs and issues, while leaning towards national parties in parliamentary elections.

R. Sivakumar,
Chennai

Stance that affects peace
Israel Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is digging his heels in, as evidenced by his rejection of Donald Trump's peace plan. He appears intractable, with even the U.S. struggling to exert

influence over him. Unless he relinquishes his obstinate stance, it will be tough for peace to hold.

Aanya Singhal,
Noida, Uttar Pradesh
Letters emailed to
letters@thehindu.co.in
must carry the postal address.

3. Promise of gender equality must be upheld (THE HINDU PAGE NO 9)

1. GS I (Indian Society) & GS II (Polity/Social Justice)
2. Topics: Role of women and women's organization; Salient features of the Representation of People's Act.
3. Concepts: Universal adult franchise, gender electoral equality, women's political participation, online abuse of female protestors.

Promise of gender equality must be upheld

Indian independence was an audacious bet on hope. Audacious not because Winston Churchill was remotely correct in declaring that India 'was no more a united nation than the Equator' (Churchill always was bilious about India). No, it was audacious because the freedom that the nationalist leaders fought for was to be bestowed on all citizens of India, regardless of caste, creed, class, political allegiance or gender. Overnight, all women and all men were equal before the law. This really was a nation built on the simple premise of equality for all. That hope powered India through the turbulent early decades where, by any markers of history, or diplomatic weight, or economics, or brute power, India should have failed. India did not fail, but today, those promises of equality shine somewhat less brightly after the misogynistic response to the Cockroach Janta Party (CJP)-organised protests at Jantar Mantar last month.

An old promise

On the eve of independence, the landmass of the subcontinent was divided between British India and the princely states. The trauma of Partition and the pressing need to home the millions who came across the Radcliffe Line, was followed immediately by the need to integrate the princely states into the union. And then there were the challenges that came with the extreme poverty of a colony that had been milked by the colonial power. Everything was in short supply – money, education, health, housing, industry – everything apart from hope.

Against that backdrop, the Constituent Assembly decided to give universal franchise to all Indians above the age of 21; every woman or man over 21 was eligible to vote in the first elections held in independent India in 1952 (it took Switzerland until 1990 to give every woman the right to vote). When the Election Commission fanned out to register voters



Priyanjali Malik
writes on nuclear
politics and security

before that first election, they faced a major challenge in getting all 80 million eligible women to come out in order to be registered. Then, they had to persuade them to not identify themselves as 'the daughter of X' or 'the wife of Y'. Getting each woman to register as an individual in her own right, with her own name was a mammoth task. Yet, the workers of the Commission persisted because the promise of equality was more than just nice words in the wind. They worked to include. It was in stark contrast to the current Special Intensive Revision (SIR) which appears to work on the presumption of exclusion.

Even so, in 1952, 2.8 million women were eventually struck off the rolls since they would not identify themselves by name. It is a measure of how far India has travelled in gender equality that in 2019, the gender gap in voting closed. Since 1952, India has made progress in turning electoral equality into a lived equality for women and men, and the idea of identifying women by the male head of the household is largely for the history books. Yet, ownership of one's own name, which announces gender electoral equality, has been weaponised against women – most recently in the online attacks against female protesters at Jantar Mantar.

Gendered expectations

Several women who participated in the protests were doxxed in the days following the protest being called off. Their names, numbers, addresses and other personal details were uploaded; they faced vile online abuse. To add fuel to the fire, the Prime Minister, in an Instagram reel on July 31 spoke of 'forgiving' the 'misguided daughters' who swore (some of them, at him). In singling out the behaviour of women, he divided the protesters sharply along gendered lines. The 'daughters' of the nation who used 'abusive' language were transgressive and their behaviour was a 'cultural shock'. The men who used exactly

the same language were not even noticed. Same protest, same demands, same aspirations, but gendered expectations.

The very same women whose great grandmothers or grandmothers had been registered as voters because the government of the day considered them capable of choosing their representatives have now been reduced to 'misguided children' who need counselling by a paternalistic Prime Minister, who incidentally would not identify the protests for what they were (he referred instead to 'what happened at Jantar Mantar'). Since he was reluctant to recognise the protests, the Prime Minister perhaps also missed something else found at Jantar Mantar: hope. It may have been the weakest of echoes, but it was there – that old hope, kindled 79 years ago, that whatever the challenges facing India, a better future was possible.

However, by making that reel about personal grievance, the Prime Minister's message turned a protest over democratic accountability into a cult of personality. In his telling, this was not a protest, just a mistake, and he was prepared to move on with a gentle chiding. Perhaps the Prime Minister had not noticed the doxxing of the women protesters. Perhaps it was not brought to his attention that many among his huge following on social media routinely employed that same vile language, which he found so offensive coming from the mouths of young women, against anyone who dares to disagree with him. As for those 'misguided daughters', the sadly inevitable threats of rape and murder they received by 'nationalist' cyber warriors have become their lived experience on the eve of India's 79th Independence day.

This is the reality of gender equality in India today. Against all odds, India did not fail after independence and held on to hope. We cannot let that hope of equality falter today.

The ownership of one's own name, which announces gender electoral equality, has been weaponised against women

4. How sustainable is India's E20 push? (THE HINDU PAGE NO 10)

1. GS III (Economy/Environment)
2. Topics: Infrastructure: Energy; Conservation, environmental pollution and degradation.
3. Concepts: Ethanol Blending Programme (E20), biofuels vs. food security, flex-fuel vehicles, energy security.

How sustainable is India's E20 push?

In August, the government told the Lok Sabha that the ethanol blending programme had helped save around ₹2 lakh crore in foreign exchange. However, Opposition leaders, including Rahul Gandhi and Arvind Kejriwal, have launched campaigns against E20, saying it harms vehicles and that the government is forcing it on people

EXPLAINER

M. Kalyanaraman

The story so far:

Opposition leaders such as Rahul Gandhi and Arvind Kejriwal have launched campaigns against E20 saying it harms vehicles and that the government is forcing it on people. Mr. Kejriwal alleged that India has "yielded" to pressure from U.S. President Donald Trump to buy ethanol from the United States.

What is the status of production?

The government's target was to produce 10-11 billion litres of ethanol so that 20% of petrol used in transport vehicles could come from ethanol produced in India, with the money being funnelled into the Indian economy rather than becoming a foreign exchange outgo through crude oil imports. Taking advantage of the policy push, India's distillery capacity has ramped up and is now capable of producing some 18-20 billion litres from some 500 distilleries. For this ethanol year, which runs November to October, the oil companies have contracted to procure some 10.5 billion litres of ethanol.

Will it spur corn imports from U.S.?

There is no evidence of a surge in ethanol or maize (corn) imports in Ministry of Commerce statistics. In any case, direct ethanol import for petroleum blending is banned, though the U.S. corn lobby has been pushing for India to increase corn imports. Government figures for this ethanol year show that 45% of the ethanol for petrol blending will come from maize, FCI rice some 22%, sugarcane juice 16%, B-heavy molasses some 10%, damaged foodgrains around 4.5% and C-heavy molasses 1.1%. India's maize output grew by 45% in three years to 55 million tonnes in 2025-26, with more than 20% of it going into ethanol, says Shankar Lal Jat of Indian Council of Maize Research, adding that there is no need to import it.



Policy push: A billboard promoting E20 fuel policy at a fuel station in New Delhi. AP

Sugarcane juice and B-heavy molasses go into sugar production and they are now being diverted to ethanol. The Indian Sugar Manufacturers' Association reported that the closing stock of sugar in September of 2025 was around 5 million tonnes, and this year too, the closing stock is expected to be 5 million tonnes. This indicates the diversion to ethanol has not affected sugar availability or stocks. Yet, in the event of a monsoon failure, crop losses and foodgrain shortages, the diversion of FCI rice, sugarcane juice and B-heavy molasses to ethanol production will come under stress, raising the possibility of corn imports.

Should we be worried about using E20 in our vehicles?

If you bought your vehicle after April 2023, you can fill your petrol tank with E20, shut it and forget it because that's when the Bharat Stage 6 Phase 2 (Real Driving Emissions) mandate took effect. Vehicles built after this deadline were factory-engineered for E20 – with ethanol-resistant elastomers, fluorinated fuel lines, upgraded pump seals and recalibrated engine control units. These roughly 70 million vehicles, about 23% of India's active petrol fleet, face little cause

for concern.

The remaining 77% – nearly 240 million legacy two-wheelers and cars built for E5 or E10 – are the genuine worry. Ethanol is a polar solvent that degrades older rubber compounds and plastics, hardening and cracking fuel hoses over time. It is also hygroscopic: it absorbs atmospheric moisture, and in vehicles left parked for extended periods, the ethanol-water mixture separates and settles, forming an acidic layer that corrodes tanks, damages fuel pumps and clogs filters with sludge. Consumer surveys by LocalCircles found 66% of pre-2023 owners reporting mileage losses exceeding 10%, and 55% reporting increased maintenance.

ITT Kanpur's Engine Research Laboratory maintains that E20 causes no notable damage, with efficiency loss under 5% – attributing most complaints to driving habits and traffic conditions. But independent mechanics and automotive communities dispute this, citing real-world fuel pump and injector failures traced to ethanol's solvent and low-lubricity properties.

The government told Parliament in August that one leading automobile manufacturer had serviced 2.84 crore

vehicles in FY 2025-26, including about 1.5 crore legacy vehicles, without finding E20-linked engine damage. Another two-wheeler maker reported similar findings. On mileage, it said government and manufacturer studies showed an efficiency penalty of about 2 to 6% in some vehicles designed for E10, though this too was influenced by driving conditions, habits and maintenance.

A transparent and more phased rollout such as in Brazil, where the transition to high levels of ethanol along with modifications to vehicles happened over several decades in a stable manner, would have taken the people into confidence. In India, the 10% milestone was reached in 2022. Within three years, the blending was ramped up to 20% with very little information and advisories coming from manufacturers.

Has ethanol blending helped mitigate oil supply crisis?

In August, the government said in Lok Sabha that so far, the ethanol blending programme has led to saving of around ₹2 lakh crore of foreign exchange and substituting of some 32 million tonnes of crude oil imports. Substituting 10 billion litres of petrol with ethanol would mean dispensing with a month of crude imports.

The government also told Parliament that while crude oil prices had gone up 70% during the war in West Asia, petrol prices at the pump had gone up by only 7 to 8% although under-recoveries had also increased. The OMCs procure ethanol at around ₹70 per litre for blending, compared with a pump price of around ₹105 per litre of petrol. The base price of petrol, which includes the cost of production, transportation and OMC margins, is typically 55-60% of the petrol pump price. On the surface, it appears that ethanol is not less costly than petrol but the issue is complex. Ethanol and petrol follow different costing and tax regimes, and it would be difficult to make an independent inference on whether ethanol has helped keep prices down, as the government claims.

THE GIST

The government's target was to produce 10-11 billion litres of ethanol so 20% of petrol used in transport vehicles could come from ethanol produced in India, with the money being funnelled into the Indian economy.

Vehicles built after this April 2023 were factory-engineered for E20, with ethanol-resistant elastomers, fluorinated fuel lines, upgraded pump seals and recalibrated engine control units.

5. Supreme Court clarifies scope of police custody under BNSS (THE HINDU PAGE NO 10)

1. GS II (Polity & Governance)
2. Topics: Structure, organization and functioning of the Executive and the Judiciary.
3. Concepts: Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha Sanhita (BNSS), police remand rules, right to legal counsel during interrogation, default bail.

Supreme Court clarifies scope of police custody under BNSS

Court held that Section 187(2) of BNSS enlarges the window during which police custody may be sought

R.K. Vij

The story so far:

The Supreme Court recently held in *The State of Andhra Pradesh vs Suda Suresh Veera Venkata Naga Raju* that Section 187(2) of the Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha Sanhita (BNSS), enlarges the window during which police custody may be sought by the investigating agency. Such custody, under the BNSS is now available in parts, though in aggregate not exceeding 15 days during the first 40 or 60 days of the total permissible period of detention, rather than being confined to the first 15 days of remand alone.

Case under consideration by the SC
In a case of custodial death in which the dead body of the deceased-victim remained untraced, the original hard disks of the CCTV system were yet to be

discovered, and discoveries under the Bharatiya Sakshya Adhiniyam (BSA) were imminent, the judicial magistrate granted eight days of police custody, and allowed the accused to nominate two advocates of his choice to be present during custody. Out of the two advocates, one was allowed to be present at any given point of time during investigation. The order stated that 'under no circumstances shall the period of police custody granted under this order be extended'.

While on appeal, the Andhra Pradesh High Court modified some conditions pertaining to the period of police custody and presence of an advocate throughout the probe. The State therefore challenged the above conditions in the Supreme Court on the premise that these directly impinged upon the rights of the investigating officer to conduct unhindered investigation.

The Supreme Court held that the

apprehensions expressed by the investigating agency were justified and the statutory scheme under the BNSS which enlarges the window of police custody, must also be borne in mind. A magistrate or a court cannot place an absolute and non-extendable outer limit on custody, since such a limit forecloses recourse to Section 187(2) of the BNSS.

The Court therefore permitted 7 days of (additional) police custody so that the total period of police remand would not exceed 15 days.

Current law on police remand

Section 58 of the BNSS provides that any person arrested by the police without warrant cannot be detained for more than 24 hours, unless authorised by a magistrate under Section 187.

Section 187(2) of the BNSS provides that in case it appears to the investigating officer that the probe cannot be

completed within 24 hours, and there are grounds for believing that the accusation is well founded, the magistrate may authorise the detention of the accused for a period not exceeding 15 days in the whole, or in parts, at any time during the initial 40 days or 60 days out of the detention period of 60 days or 90 days.

Section 187(3) provides that the magistrate may authorise the (judicial) detention of an accused person beyond the period of 15 days, if he is satisfied that adequate grounds exist for doing so, for a period exceeding - (i) 90 days, where the investigation relates to an offence punishable with death, imprisonment for life or imprisonment for a term of 10 years or more; (ii) 60 days, where the investigation relates to any other offence. Thus, in case the probe is not completed within the above stipulated time period, the accused person may be released, which is widely known as default bail.

The Supreme Court in the *Suda Suresh* case held that this legislative change was intended to meet situations where fresh facts, discoveries or leads may emerge during the course of investigation.

Therefore, the window of police remand was enlarged beyond the initial 15 days, up to 40 days or 60 days of investigation.

Previously, Section 167 of the CrPC provided that the detention of an accused in police custody could not be granted beyond the initial 15 days in the whole.

However, during this first period of 15 days the magistrate could alter the nature of the custody from judicial custody to police custody and vice versa.

On the presence of an advocate

Section 38 of the BNSS provides that 'when any person is arrested and interrogated by the police, he shall be entitled to meet an advocate of his choice during interrogation, though not throughout interrogation'.

The top court held that a plain reading of the provision makes it clear that it does not contemplate the continuous, ongoing physical presence of an advocate for the entirety of each interrogation session.

The Court held that an unqualified entitlement to continuous presence, would travel beyond what Section 38 BNSS itself contemplates. The Court therefore modified the condition imposed by the High Court, and held that such a lawyer shall only be allowed to remain present within the site of interrogation where he can see the respondent-accused.

The Court also held that instead of uninterrupted videography of the transit of the accused between locations, the audio-visual recording of the actual interrogation, and of any proceedings of discovery or recovery undertaken with the accused, will satisfy the requirement. (R.K. Vij is a former IPS officer.)

6. Coexisting with the water: learning to live with the floods (THE HINDU PAGE NO 11)

1. GS I (Geography) & GS III (Disaster Management)
2. Topics: Important Geophysical phenomena; Disaster and disaster management.
3. Concepts: Flood plain zoning, Brahmaputra river ecology, anthropogenic causes of flooding, embankment infrastructure.

Coexisting with the water: learning to live with the floods

Every year, the monsoon brings rainfall, overflowing rivers and devastation to Assam, though the scale and causes of flooding differ. Three books explore the crisis, including human interventions which aggravate it and the stories of people who live through the disaster and rebuild their lives

Debasree Purkavastha

"As the floodwaters roared and raged all around, they swept away my village, my happy home. In the blink of an eye, the cattle were washed away. In a single moment, I've lost everything."

These lines, translated from the Assamese, are from Zubeen Garg's song, "Keufale gujori gunori baan (From all sides, the roaring and rumbling floodwaters have arrived)," and capture how floods alter a family's life in a matter of moments.

This year, more than 100 people have been reported dead and over 1.26 lakh people are still reeling from monsoon floods in Assam. Every year, the monsoon brings with it rainfall, overflowing rivers, and devastation in the State, though the scale and the reasons for the flooding differ. The rest of India has grown so accustomed to this cycle that we often fail to look beyond the headlines at the lives radically altered each year.

Assam is shaped by its rivers, the hills that surround it, and its rich flora and fauna. Its history, people, and culture are all intertwined with this landscape. This year's deluge has been driven largely by the overflowing Dikhow river, a tributary of the Brahmaputra. Residents and officials have blamed illegal coal mining across the border in Nagaland, which they allege has worsened the flooding and inundated areas that were previously not prone to floods.

Dual nature

Academic research, stories of the people,

and poems have time and again explored where human intervention must end and where we must instead listen to the rivers.

In *River Traveller: Journeys on the Tsangpo-Brahmaputra from Tibet to the Bay of Bengal* (Speaking Tiger Books), journalist and writer Sanjoy Hazarika revisits the devastation caused by the 1950 Assam earthquake, after which the Brahmaputra altered its course, carved out new channels, and created fresh river islands. He poignantly points to the river's dual nature: how it takes with one hand and gives with the other. "This assumption that the Brahmaputra is flooding and destroying everything is erroneous. There are many factors to flooding, and not just one," he says over a phone call.

Hazarika argues that part of the current crisis is man-made, pointing to road building without proper drainage, deforestation of hills, extraction of rocks and soil from rivers and river banks, as well as the clogging of the river's natural drainage channels. "When the natural streams are filled with silt, the water spills over. Many streams [and] rivulets... are covered by silt and that contribute to the phenomenal energy of this wall of water and mud," he says.

Hazarika also reflects on the need to better understand the river instead of trying to tame it. Referring to China's mega dam project on the Yarlung Tsangpo (another name for the Brahmaputra), he cautions against a reactive approach, saying, "Just because China is building this monster dam doesn't mean we have to respond by building one of our own."

Asked what he hopes readers take

away from his book, he pointed to a renewed sense of humility towards nature. "These are greater entities than us," he says. "We must be a bit humbler and more respectful towards nature."

Altered calendars

People's lives are shaped by both the river's generosity and its fury. Banamallika, editor of *Riverside Stories: Writings from Assam* (Zubaan), writes, "We as people who live with floods every year have learnt to live with and make lives out of floods." By "we," she means people living in the low-lying areas of the Brahmaputra and Barak Valley.

Rashida Tapadar's story, *Manowara's Library*, in *Riverside Stories* takes us into a village where the annual flood is not simply a disaster but a force around which the calendar itself is organised. The *phurna mashtor* (refers to old teacher in Sylheti, a dialect widely spoken in the Barak Valley) from Shundorgram wishes for floods every year as they add more days to his summer vacation, the only break he gets to be with his family.

Although he recites *Ashtafagulla* (seeking forgiveness) at least 100 times a day and about 500 times on weekends as penance for his annual wish for floods, he finds redemption by building a floating library on a boat, giving up his own summer vacation in the process.

A longer view

If *Riverside Stories* captures this reality through lived experience, historian Arupjyoti Saikia's *The Unquiet River: A Biography of the Brahmaputra* takes the longer view, placing the river at the heart of Assam's history from pre-historic times

to the present and viewing events through the vantage point of the river.

Saikia draws on geology, archaeology, and historical records to show how the river shaped settlement, agriculture, trade, and migration.

He shows how colonial expansion, the growth of plantations, roads and railways, and later dams and other attempts to harness the river have transformed its ecology.

At the same time, the Brahmaputra has consistently defied control, breaching embankments time and again. The book is a landmark work in environmental history.

Rebuilding home

Every monsoon, the rivers swell and rage. The intensity of floods may vary, but the devastation returns without fail; as Banamallika notes, "they change everything they leave". And yet, people continue to live in these areas – they choose to stay, rebuild, and carry on – because it is home.

Hazarika's account of the river's dual nature – taking with one hand and giving with the other – is perhaps also true of the people who live along it: weathering loss, yet rebuilding each time. As he says, flooding is rarely the result of one cause alone. And if human intervention has worsened the problem, part of the solution must lie with the authorities addressing the very factors that contribute to it each year.

But the frequency and intensity of these floods, and the lives they claim each year, remain a cautionary tale that asks us to pause, listen to the river, and learn to respect its force.

7. What was promised by NREGA's new version, where it falls short (INDIAN EXPRESS PAGE NO 10)

1. GS II (Social Justice) & GS III (Economy)
2. Topics: Welfare schemes for vulnerable sections; Employment.
3. Concepts: Rural employment guarantee (MGNREGA vs. VB-G RAM G), Centre-State financial relations, mandatory state contributions, digital attendance exclusions (NMMS).

What was promised by NREGA's new version, where it falls short

ALL IT took was one newspaper article with hard facts to puncture the BJP government's mythical narrative on its flagship VB-G RAM G law. The Centre says that the Viksit Bharat-Guarantee for Rozgar and Aajeevika Mission (Gramin) (VB-G RAM G) is an "enhanced" version of the now-repealed Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA). It claims an increase in the days of "guaranteed work", universal rollout across rural India, and the "highest ever" monetary allocation by the Centre, complemented by an additional 40 per cent allocation secured from the states. It would be natural to assume that workers are flocking to work sites to claim their full 125 days of work. The reality is quite the opposite.

An Indian Express report ('In its first month, VB-G RAM G sees almost 50% y-o-y dip in rural jobs', IE, August 10) reveals that in the first month of the VB-G RAM G's implementation, the government's own statistics show a sharp decline in work being provided — almost 50 per cent less than the same period last year. The number of households reporting for work has also reduced by 50 per cent.

At a press conference last month by the NREGA Sangharsh Morcha, department statistics were cited to show that in a comparison of the work provided from January to June 2026 with the same period in 2025, total person-days fell from approximately 335.4 million to 215.2 million, a decline of 35.8 per cent. A similar decline can be seen when compared to the average of the previous three years. This is in a country reeling

from pervasive unemployment and distress from drought. The idea of 125 days of guaranteed employment is a "jhumla", and the human cost of this deprivation, especially in rural households, is hard to imagine. Every day of work matters. Every household demanding work matters. Converting this reality into data and statistical debate running into lakhs and crores allows us to paper over the pain.

The new law was not welcomed by anyone except the ruling party. It was bulldozed through Parliament, with the entire Opposition appealing for consultation and re-examination, if not for its withdrawal. The government asserted that this was, in fact, an improved version of the landmark MGNREGA, and that VB-G RAM G would provide 125 days of guaranteed employment at enhanced wages with better digital and tech-based monitoring and delivery.

There are at least five myths being propagated that have undermined the guarantee that served as an imperfect but critically important lifeline for India's rural workforce. These myths help the BJP claim that it is strengthening the work entitlement, even as it deliberately and cynically weakens it.

First, the government has advertised the enhanced number of days it is providing under VB-G RAM G. However, in most parts of the country, people are being turned away from work, and there is little evidence of guaranteed employment being provided. The Centre has cleverly passed a law making it obligatory for the state government to "guar-



NIKHIL DEY



ARUNA ROY

The Centre has cleverly passed a law making it obligatory for the state government to 'guarantee' 125 days of work without making provisions for the resources needed to service this guarantee

antee" 125 days of work without making provisions for the resources needed to service this guarantee.

Second, the Centre has asserted that it has made the largest allocation of Rs 95,000 crore this year. Along with the mandatory allocation of 40 per cent by the states, the available resources would be a total of Rs 1,55,000 crore. But this is in the realm of fantasy. If work is not provided in the first place and the state is not incentivised to run the programme, then whatever the notional allocation, it will only be on paper. The objective of this notional allocation with complex and untenable cost-sharing arrangements is that the Centre will have succeeded in creating an impression that it is either the state or the people who don't want the programme.

Third, the Centre has recently notified a floor-level wage of Rs 300 per day. This remains below the minimum wage in most states and is far below the BJP-appointed Satpathy Committee's recommendation of Rs 375 per day at June 2018 prices. But even this is notional. Wages are paid as per measurement, and in any case, if you don't give work, you don't have to pay wages at all.

Fourth, the tech-driven VB-G RAM G implementation system has caused immense exclusion and pain for workers across India. E-KYC requirements have led to crores of job cards being deleted, which might explain in part why the number of households coming to work has dropped so dramatically. The NMMS facial recognition app, where workers' photos

have to be matched twice a day, causes subsequent exclusion even for those who do manage to find a way to get work.

Finally, by mandating a 40 per cent contribution by states to VB-G RAM G, the government claims to have ushered in a new era of cooperative federalism. In fact, without consulting the states, the funding mechanism imposed under the VB-G RAM G is a violation of Article 258 of the Indian Constitution, a safeguard that requires the Centre to pay for any financial burden that may have to be borne by states for the implementation of a central law. While Opposition-led states did object in the beginning, they have all seemingly fallen in line.

The Opposition seems to have also absolved itself of its moral obligation to stand with the working poor and has done woefully little. The states have not legally challenged the VB-G RAM G. Nor have they tried to enact an alternative guarantee for work in their states. All this while India's most vulnerable workers, most of whom are women, are paying the price and losing even this imperfect but critically important lifeline of the right to work. The ruling party would do well to remember that behind the protest of India's young is their desperate need for employment. VB-G RAM G has undermined the only framework of guaranteed employment that India had. Who benefits from this is a question that India's political and economic ruling elite needs to answer.

Dey and Roy are social activists and founding members of the Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan

8. With new agreement, Islamabad is upping the ante (INDIAN EXPRESS PAGE NO 10)

1. GS II (International Relations)
2. Topics: Effect of policies and politics of developed and developing countries on India's interests.
3. Concepts: Mecca Joint Defence Agreement, collective security alliances, Pakistan's West Asia diplomacy, NATO charter (Article 5) parallels.

With new agreement, Islamabad is upping the ante



AJAI SHUKLA

ISRAEL HAS demonstrated through its bombing campaign of Iran-linked targets that it would accept no restraints in protecting what it regards as its legitimate security interests. Meanwhile, the US has made clear the limits on its security guarantees to its West Asian allies. In this new security landscape, three key players — Riyadh, Ankara and Islamabad — have come together to sign a mutual defence pact. The "Mecca Joint Defence Agreement" marks a shift away from the US security umbrella and towards greater self-reliance. This landmark pact borrows elements of Article 5 of the NATO charter, including its collective security clause.

Both treaties mandate that an armed attack against any one of their member countries will be regarded as an attack against them all. However, there has been no clarification from Brussels or Ankara on how they will reconcile their collective security responsibilities under the Atlantic Charter with simultaneous responsibilities that may arise from the Mecca Agreement. For example, if Israel strikes a Saudi nuclear fuel enrichment facility, Turkey will be required by the Mecca Agreement to respond. If that leads to hostilities between Turkey and Israel, will the 32 NATO countries be treaty-bound to militarily support Turkey against Israel? Such a matrix of interlocking military alliances triggered World War I; it would be odd if this blunder were to be repeated.

The Mecca Agreement brings together the strengths of three Asian power centres. First, a South Asian declared nuclear power, Pakistan, contributes a powerful conventional military and a functional nuclear arsenal, though it is unclear whether Islamabad has offered a nuclear umbrella. Of the two West Asian powers, Saudi Arabia provides political and financial clout as leader of the Sunni world and controller of one of the world's largest oil reserves. Finally, Turkey, the successor of the Ottoman Empire, brings in a powerful military and a highly capable defence industry. The unstated targets of the allies are the other two West Asian power centres: Iran, leader of the Shia world and a major influence in Houthi-controlled Yemen, Iraq, Syria and Lebanon through its proxies, including Hezbollah and Hamas; and Israel, a military and intelligence powerhouse and an undeclared nuclear power.

Much of this is old wine in a new bottle. Pakistan has provided military training and technical assistance to the Saudi Arabian defence forces for decades. In September 2025, Riyadh and Islamabad signed a bilateral "Strategic Mutual Defence Agreement", which has evolved with the participation of Ankara in the trilateral Mecca Agreement. Last May, Pakistan deployed some 8,000 troops, a squadron of JF-17 fighter aircraft, drones and HQ-9 air defence systems to Saudi Arabia. Riyadh, in turn, has repeatedly provided financial bailouts to Islamabad. Turkey and Pakistan have exchanged warships and training aircraft.

India's foreign ministry says it is tracking the situation carefully. It must do so, given Pakistan's long Cold War record of hitching its wagon to pacts, alliances and treaties to oblige Western governments to derive a geopolitical advantage against India. In 1954, Pakistan obliged the US by joining the Southeast Asia Treaty Organisation (SEATO), ostensibly to act as a regional bulwark against the spread of communism. In fact, it did so to obtain advanced weaponry and economic aid from America for the struggle against India for J&K. Today, Saudi Arabia and Turkey are piggybacking on Pakistan in seeking a bigger strategic role in Asia, especially to challenge India's ambition to lead the Global South.

Similar motivations are probably driving Pakistan's current play in West and South Asia, that is, its initiative to mediate between Washington and Tehran and its high-profile role in the Mecca Agreement. There is little need for Islamabad to up the ante in this manner. Since 2019-2020, when the Chinese military intruded into Indian territory in eastern Ladakh, New Delhi has taken steps to de-escalate military tensions with Rawalpindi. The Indian Army has converted a 60,000-man strike corps that was configured for the terrain on the India-Pakistan border into a mountain strike corps configured for the China border. Two more mountain divisions raised in the last two decades were assigned entirely to the China border. Whereas 70 per cent of the Indian Army was once earmarked for the Pakistan border, only about 55 per cent is today. Pakistan's West Asia initiative, therefore, provides an opening for India to use the changing military balance on the border as a springboard for further de-escalation.

The writer is a retired Army officer and journalist

Pakistan has a long Cold War record of hitching its wagon to pacts, alliances and treaties to oblige Western governments to derive a geopolitical advantage against India

9. The next step to the Moon(INDIAN EXPRESS PAGE NO 10)

1. GS III (Science & Tech) & GS II (International Relations)
2. Topics: Awareness in the fields of Space; Bilateral agreements involving India.
3. Concepts: Artemis Accords, Moon Base programme, lunar resource governance (1979 Moon Agreement), ISRO-NASA human spaceflight cooperation.

The next step to the Moon

AMID THE volatility of India-US relations, the one aspect of the partnership that has continued to make steady progress is space cooperation. The two space agencies, ISRO and NASA, have never worked so closely together. Now, NASA has asked ISRO to join its Moon Base programme, an ambitious project to establish a permanent research station on the Moon, where astronauts can live, work and carry out experiments for extended periods of time. Humans haven't been to the Moon since 1972, and efforts have now begun to stage a return, this time to prepare the ground for longer stays. Unsurprisingly, the effort is being spearheaded by the US, through its Artemis programme, which aims to land humans on the Moon before 2028. The Moon Base programme is the logical follow-up. NASA realises this goal could be achieved much faster, and more efficiently, if other partner countries and private companies join the effort. ISRO, which has its own plans to land human beings on the Moon by 2040, will get valuable hands-on experience in executing complex crewed missions, and access to technologies. India has already signed up to the Artemis Accords, a US-led coalition of space-faring countries. India and the US have also agreed to develop a "strategic framework for human spaceflight cooperation".

The exploration of the Moon is no longer just a scientific enterprise. Over the next few decades, the Moon could become strategically and economically very important, as countries begin to extract lunar resources. But there are potential pitfalls as well. The Artemis Accords are increasingly being seen as a US-led alliance. Two major space powers, China and Russia, are not part of it. The Accords sidestep, and seek to replace, the 1979 Moon Agreement, which seeks to develop a multilateral governance framework for use of lunar resources.

India has been wary of joining such international structures. Having signed on to the Artemis Accords, however, it has made a choice. Accepting the offer to join the Moon Base programme could be the next logical step forward. But it is extremely important that ISRO does not get locked into NASA's technology ecosystem. That would once again make ISRO vulnerable to technology denial. The cooperation on the Moon Base programme should help ISRO to achieve its own goals faster and more efficiently, and not abandon or delay them in the service of someone else's goals.

10. On Mecca accord, let's keep our eyes peeled, ears cocked, and powder dry (INDIAN EXPRESS PAGE NO 11)

1. GS II (International Relations)
2. Topics: Effect of policies and politics of developed and developing countries on India's interests.
3. Concepts: Middle East security architecture, collective deterrence umbrella, counter-terrorism diplomacy, strategic hedging.

On Mecca accord, let's keep our eyes peeled, ears cocked, and powder dry



THAROORTHINK

BY SHASHI THAROOR

THE SIGNING of the Mecca Joint Defence Agreement by Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Pakistan represents a significant realignment in West Asian security architecture that has raised eyebrows in India. By formally introducing a mutual defence provision, the pact establishes a tripartite axis combining Saudi capital and Islamic heft, Turkish military technology and NATO experience, and Pakistan's military manpower and nuclear status. Should India worry that this gives Islamabad a free pass to unleash terrorist attacks on us, believing that any retaliation from New Delhi will trigger the alliance's wrath? While headlines inevitably invoke the collective defence framework, calling the agreement an "Islamic NATO" at this stage is premature. NATO's efficacy relies on a unified command structure, pre-assigned forces, and deep technological interoperability, whereas the Mecca pact currently lacks an integrated military headquarters, joint command mechanisms, and institutionalised doctrine. Unless these evolve at a future stage, we are not looking at a formal, viable military alliance.

And the signatories hold divergent strategic priorities. Saudi Arabia is primarily focused on hedging against Iranian regional aggression, Houthi missile threats from Yemen, and perceived vulnerabilities in the Islamic world, and maintain operational autonomy while managing its delicate balances with NATO, Iran, and Russia. Pakistan seeks external economic bailouts, diplomatic leverage against India, and technological upgrades for its military. Rather than a tightly integrated military alliance, the agreement seems to be conceived as operat-

ing primarily as a collective deterrence umbrella for West Asia, specifically the fallout of regional conflicts involving Iran.

The fear that Pakistan can now sponsor cross-border terrorism against India under a Saudi-Turkish shield misreads both the text of the agreement and the geopolitical realities of Riyadh and Ankara. Mutual defence treaties under international law apply strictly to unprovoked external aggression. Terrorism originating from Pakistani soil, even if ostensibly conducted by "non-state actors", followed by targeted Indian counter-terrorism strikes, does not constitute unprovoked aggression, and it seems unlikely that either Riyadh or Ankara would view Indian retaliatory action against terror infrastructure as a trigger for military intervention. It is true that Turkey provided Pakistan with diplomatic and rhetorical support in analogous circumstances during Operation Sindoor, but aside from the sale of drones, it stopped short of tangible military assistance.

Riyadh's relationship with New Delhi has evolved into a multi-billion-dollar strategic partnership spanning energy, trade, and intelligence-sharing. Saudi Arabia has consistently refused to allow its bilateral ties with Pakistan to dictate its relations with India, and Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman has no desire to imperil his nation's long-term economic vision by getting dragged into a South Asian military conflict on behalf of the generals in Rawalpindi. Pakistan's lack of operational

While headlines inevitably invoke the collective defence framework, calling the agreement an 'Islamic NATO' at this stage is premature

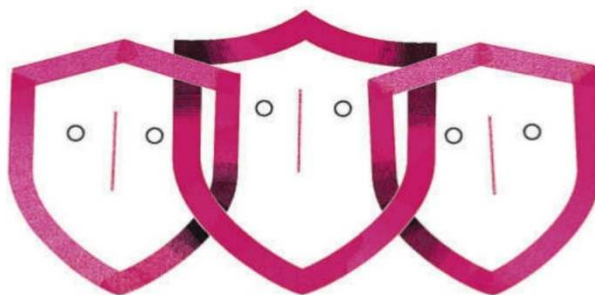


ILLUSTRATION: CR SASIKUMAR

involvement when Saudi Arabia faced Iranian and Houthi strikes despite their existing bilateral defence pact, and Saudi Arabia's passivity when Pakistan was embroiled in conflict with Afghanistan, suggest that transactional defence agreements in the region often feature high-level political rhetoric hand-in-hand with operational hedging. It is also instructive that, unlike Turkey, Saudi Arabia was silent during Operation Sindoor, signalling careful neutrality despite decades of military co-operation with Pakistan.

Still, even if the pact does not offer Pakistan a blank cheque for terrorism, India (and Pakistan's other neighbours) cannot write it off as mere grandstanding. The real military substance of this trilateral arrangement lies in potential technology integration. Turkey's advanced defence industry, funded by Saudi capital and co-produced or deployed in Pakistan, enhances Rawalpindi's conventional military capabilities in areas such as UAVs, electronic warfare, and naval platforms. A deepened intelligence-sharing framework enhances Pakistan's operational capacity, while creating a formal political bloc that can coordinate positions in international forums like the UN and the Organisation of Islamic

Cooperation on issues of vital security interest to us, including Kashmir and maritime security.

So what should New Delhi do? India's studied official silence since the pact was announced is instructive. We should neither panic over the trio's collective defence rhetoric

nor brush off a year-long negotiated agreement as inconsequential. We should, to recycle a trifecta of clichés, keep our eyes peeled, our ears cocked, and our powder dry.

A calibrated Indian strategy requires engaging Saudi Arabia candidly but discreetly, via high-level diplomatic channels, to seek clear reassurances that the Mecca pact's defensive clauses apply exclusively to the dynamics of the West Asian theatre and cannot be weaponised by Pakistan to cover sub-conventional warfare. Concurrently, New Delhi must maintain a firm deterrence doctrine, making it clear that Indian responses to state-sponsored terrorism will remain resolute and unaffected by third-party arrangements. India should also double down on its bilateral economic, trade, and strategic partnerships with Saudi Arabia and the broader GCC, highlighting its role as the primary anchor of stability in the Indian Ocean region.

Finally, Indian defence intelligence and procurement planning must closely monitor military-industrial co-development between Turkey and Pakistan, ensuring that indigenous defence research prioritises neutralising advanced drone technologies, electronic warfare systems, and joint naval platforms. This may require us to seek partners who are well ahead of us in these areas. The process should not be delayed and should be fast-tracked despite the labyrinthine bureaucratic procedures through which defence procurement has been laboriously conducted ever since the Bofors scandal.

Ultimately, the Mecca pact should be understood less as a binding warfighting pact and more as a sophisticated instrument of strategic hedging tailored to a volatile region. By fusing Saudi capital, Turkish military technology, and Pakistani operational manpower into a framework of collective deterrence, the three signatories have created a valuable political and economic shield, without assuming the burdens of a true military alliance. For India, a pragmatic strategy that combines firm counter-terrorism deterrence with deep economic engagement in the Gulf, and targeted defence innovation at home, should be response enough.

The writer is a fourth-term MP (Lok Sabha) for Thiruvananthapuram and chairman of the Parliamentary Standing Committee on External Affairs

11. Higher education faces three challenges (INDIAN EXPRESS PAGE NO 11)

1. GS II (Social Justice & Governance)
2. Topics: Issues relating to development and management of Social Sector/Services relating to Education, Human Resources.
3. Concepts: Higher education governance, institutional autonomy and accountability, academic leadership, merit-based faculty recruitment, challenges of uniform policies across diverse institutions.



SUDHIR K JAIN

Higher education faces three challenges

WHY DO Indian institutions not feature among the world's top universities in major global rankings? Why have universities in China, Singapore and Hong Kong climbed to the top in these lists even though only a few decades ago they were on par with India?

There is considerable discussion about the poor state of our higher education system, as well as the low employability of many college graduates. The usual explanations cite inadequate funding, excessive regulation, poor infrastructure and flawed policies. These factors do not fully explain the problem. Indians in and outside of India have demonstrated world-class capability in science, technology, medicine, entrepreneurship and research. Our challenge is not a lack of talent, nor simply resources. The real barriers, in my view, lie deeper. They can be understood through three challenges: **Intention, concept, and execution.**

The first is whether we consistently place merit, integrity, fairness, and the long-term interests of institutions above other considerations. In too many cases, appointments, promotions and admissions are swayed by factors that should have no place in decision-making. **We cannot appoint favourites, regardless of merit, to responsible positions and expect good results.** Students can sense favouritism and dishonesty, and they learn not only from what we teach but also from how we conduct ourselves.

A culture driven by fear of failure discourages initiative; a culture that learns from failure fosters innovation and experimentation

We must ensure that we are solving the right problems in the right way. Universities are neither government departments nor corporate offices. They are unique learning communities and therefore require distinct governance models. **Misunderstanding the nature of a university can lead to well-intentioned policies that are ultimately counterproductive.** For instance, **faculty members at many of our public universities are appointed on a one-year probationary basis. One year is inadequate to assess a candidate's suitability.**

Universities cannot develop responsible adults if they treat students as children. **Institutions cannot be expected to excel if they are denied autonomy while being held accountable for outcomes. Academic excellence is unlikely to flourish under excessive control; it requires trust, responsibility and a shared commitment to institutional goals.**

Similarly, it is difficult to justify applying the same faculty recruitment and promotion policies across diverse institutions and disciplines. **Policies should recognise differences among large and small institutions, among teaching-focused and research-focused institutions, and among universities in favourable environments and those in difficult geographies.** A faculty member in the sciences cannot always be assessed by the same criteria as one in the liberal arts, while the performing arts may require an entirely different framework.

If universities are to nurture excellence, their governance systems must recognise the distinctive nature of academic work, institutional contexts, disciplinary cultures, and local realities. Even with the best intentions, we still face the challenge of ensuring effective execution. Building great academic institutions requires capable leaders, robust processes, continuous learning, and the humility to learn from mistakes. A culture driven by fear of failure discourages initiative; a culture that learns from failure fosters innovation and experimentation. We must also invest in developing academic leaders through systematic coaching and mentoring. Good ideas do not implement themselves. Leaders need the knowledge, skills, confidence, and institutional support to translate sound ideas into effective practices.

Higher education cannot improve through isolated islands of excellence. Weak institutions tend to pull down stronger ones, partly because policies are often designed to address the weakest institutions and then imposed uniformly across the system, and partly because faculty, non-teaching staff, and students move across the system.

We need to take a serious look at how we govern and support our higher education institutions. **Funding, infrastructure, and regulation matter, but they will not be sufficient unless we also address the deeper challenges of intention, concept, and execution.**

The writer was V-C, Banaras Hindu University and founder-director, IIT Gandhinagar