EDITORIAL HIGHLIGHTS

19-11-2026

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GS 1/PRELIMS: SPORTS
THE HINDU PAGE: 08

Testing times

India needs to be at its best in Tests against New Zealand

New Zealand at home remains an indomitable cricketing opposition. Even the great West Indian squad led by Clive Lloyd suffered a 0-1 Test series defeat in 1980. Pitches that look lush as English meadows, the wind that is often bone-chilling cold, and fast bowlers relishing their prospects, make any tour of New Zealand a difficult outing. So far, the visiting Indians have done well, having won the T20I and ODI series, but the real contest starts with the first Test at Wellington's Basin Reserve from Thursday. The Shubman Gill-led men's last overseas tour of Sri Lanka ended with a middling 1-0 victory in the two Tests, but more needs to be done against New Zealand in the latest two-Test series. Placed fourth in the ICC World Test Championship (WTC) table, and with hopes of securing a final berth seemingly fragile, India is in a win-all-games situation first up against New Zealand and later when Australia arrives next year. Against current WTC topper New Zealand, the Indian batters have to stay anchored. This is a line-up that no longer has Rohit Sharma, Virat Kohli, Cheteshwar Pujara and Ajinkya Rahane. Gill and company get another opportunity to reiterate their credentials.

For some rugged inspiration they need not look beyond coach Gautam Gambhir in their dressing room. The doughty former India opener batted for 643 minutes while scoring a match-saving 137 in the Napier Test during the 2009 tour. The southpaw will be hoping that the current batting unit, which is high on flair, will remain sober and effectively counter the host. K.L. Rahul, Yashasvi Jaiswal, Devdutt Padikkal and Gill have the onerous task of negating the New Zealand seamers in their backyard. Rishabh Pant and Dhruv Jurel add depth, and if the former can successfully unleash his maverick batting approach, India can upset the host's best-laid plans. New Zealand will miss the retired Kane Williamson but its batters would be comfortable on familiar surfaces. For India, much would hinge on how Jasprit Bumrah bowls. If the spearhead clicks, then it becomes easier for much of his supporting cast that includes the persevering Mohammed Siraj, who was a touch rusty in Sri Lanka. From the squads of the past to the present unit, Ravindra Jadeja remains the link. Whether he will get a role to play or whether the management prefers an all-pace attack, remains a matter of conjecture. The home team led by Tom Latham will depend on Matt Henry, Kyle Jameson and other pacers, to choke the Indian batters. A hard task awaits India, first at Wellington and then at Christchurch.

GS 3: ENVIRONMENT & GOVERNANCE
THE HINDU PAGE: 09

A regulatory fix for India's campuses



Kalaiselvan Periyasamy
environmental and social expert

India's education infrastructure has always been the strongest foundation of its growth and development. However, recent Supreme Court judgments have reaffirmed that educational buildings exceeding 20,000 square metres require prior Environmental Clearance (EC) under the Environment Impact Assessment (EIA) Notification, 2006. Institutions that have already constructed such buildings without obtaining clearance are now left without any procedure to secure it, creating a serious obstacle. The issue has developed because of two major regulatory changes.

Before the EIA Notification, 2006, there was no built-up-area-based EC requirement for educational institutions. The Notification brought large construction projects, including educational campuses, within the prior EC framework. In December 2014, the Union government exempted schools, colleges and institutional hostels from EC, subject to environmental management conditions. The Kerala High Court quashed this exemption in March 2024. The government introduced a fresh exemption in January 2025, but Vanashakti challenged it before the Supreme Court. After staying its operation, the court cancelled the exemption in August 2025. Consequently, large educational buildings again became subject to prior EC requirements.

The second development concerns projects that commenced or completed construction without prior EC. Union government mechanisms introduced in 2017 and 2021 enabled projects categorised as violations to undergo environmental appraisal, damage assessment and remediation, and pay environmental compensation. In May 2025, the Supreme Court struck down these mechanisms. That judgment was subsequently recalled following review proceedings, including a petition by the Confederation of Real Estate Developers' Associations of India. After reconsideration, the court delivered its final judgment on July 29, 2026. The court reaffirmed that prior EC is mandatory and held that no fresh applications could be entertained under the 2017 Notification or the 2021 Office Memorandum. However, it clarified that the government could introduce a tailored, time-bound scheme through a valid statutory notification for categories of non-compliant projects where overriding public interest exists.

The Ministry must act without delay and issue a statutory notification, consistent with the court's judgment, for eligible educational campuses

Compliance gap

An Office Memorandum issued by the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change (MoEF&CC) on September 30, 2026 reiterates that only pending applications may proceed. Consequently, institutions that have constructed buildings exceeding 20,000 square metres without applying earlier have no route to obtain EC.

Most older universities administered by Union and State governments do not possess ECs covering all buildings developed over decades. Nevertheless, where post-2006 construction proceeded without the required EC, further expansion remains uncertain. Planning authorities, local bodies and Pollution Control Boards insist upon EC for additional buildings, revised planning permission, regularisation and other statutory approvals.

Educational infrastructure development is not a one-time activity but a continuous, dynamic process. To meet growing industrial and social needs, educational institutions must expand classrooms, laboratories, libraries, hostels and other facilities, introduce new courses and strengthen research. Delays in such development restrict opportunities for students. A suitable regulatory mechanism is therefore essential. This does not justify a blanket exemption, which could overlook environmental impacts; nor should institutions be left without a way to bring existing development into compliance.

Regulatory remedy

The Ministry must therefore act without delay and issue a statutory notification, consistent with the Supreme Court's judgment, for eligible educational campuses.

The Ministry's new mechanism should prescribe environmental scrutiny, damage assessment, proportionate compensation, remediation and compliance measures to restore environmental quality and green cover. It must also clearly distinguish deliberate violations from developments undertaken without any intention to violate environmental requirements.

Viksit Bharat cannot be achieved without Viksit Shiksha. India's goal of achieving Viksit Bharat by 2047 depends on the quality of its education, research, and educational infrastructure. Therefore, this regulatory gap is not merely an institutional concern; it could hinder India's overall development and aspirations.

GS 3: INDIAN ECONOMY
THE HINDU PAGE: 09

The average cost of a thali has jumped by 16% in 10 months

Food inflation has raised meal costs, forcing households to spend a larger share of their wages on food

DATA POINT

Nitika Francis
Sambavi Parthasarathy

Food inflation in India steeply climbed to 8.9% last month, which is the highest inflation recorded in at least 22 months of the new series and the highest this year.

The prices of several food items have surged by a large margin between January and October this year. For instance, the price of one kilogram of onions increased by over 100% since March this year. Essential commodities like garlic (22%) and rice (11%) also saw a sharp surge in their retail prices **(Chart 1)**.

Much of this can be attributed to the prolonged U.S.-Iran war, which began with the U.S. and Israel's joint attacks on Iran on February 28th. The disruptions in the Strait of Hormuz, an important transit route for energy needs, especially for India, severely impacted the supply of crude oil and fertilizers.

For households, the rise in the prices of food items has translated into costlier meals. The average cost of a vegetarian home-cooked meal has increased by 16% in less than ten months since March this year **(Chart 2)**.

Compared with previous years, data show that Indians are spending 14% more than what they spent a year ago to meet their meal requirements and 35% more than what they spent five years ago **(Table 1)**.

For this analysis, it has been assumed that an average Indian family will be able to meet their daily dietary needs if they consume food equivalent to two *thalis* per day. Non-vegetarian meals were not considered due to lack of past data. *The Hindu* has analysed the impact of inflation using the same methodology earlier as well.

To decode how much two *thalis* cost, on average in India, select ingredients were identified – white rice, toor dal, onion, garlic, red chilli, ginger, tomato, potato, brinjal, atta, cabbage, sunflower oil, and salt– and their respective quantity required for two servings were measured. The average retail cost for buying those ingredients for previous months was collated from data available with the Consumer Affairs Ministry and the National Horticulture Board.

Costlier plate

It will now cost a household more than 2,500 rupees to make two *thalis* for every day of a month. This is much higher than the amount spent on meal requirements in the past. However, wages have not reflected a similar increase.

According to a survey conducted by the Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy, average wages in September 2026 were ₹26,310, a 11% increase since November 2025. The average monthly wage has increased by nearly 12.7% in 2026 compared to the year-ago period. This is higher than the increase in the cost of making two *thalis* every day per month. The increase in the cost of making two *thalis* every day for a month increased by 13.4% in the same period **(Table 2)**.

The analysis does not capture other ingredients required for *thali* preparation, such as spices and ghee. Hence, the cost of making a *thali* would be even higher.

Despite a notable increase of at least ₹3,000 in the average salary in the last year, people are spending a marginally bigger share of their wages on meals. This is assuming that the labourer got paid on all days, including rest days.

This disparity between salaries and expenditure could mean that households with regular salaried people might be cutting back on spending on non-essential items and luxury products.

On the other hand, daily wage-earning households could be struggling to meet the expenditure on food.

Biting hard into the pocket

The data for the charts were sourced from the Consumer Affairs Ministry, the National Horticulture Board and CMIE Industry Outlook

With inputs from Gandla Sneha who interned with The Hindu Data Team



Chart 1: Select items in thali which saw a surge in prices between January and October this year. Cost is per litre for oil. Rest are per kilogram. Figures in ₹

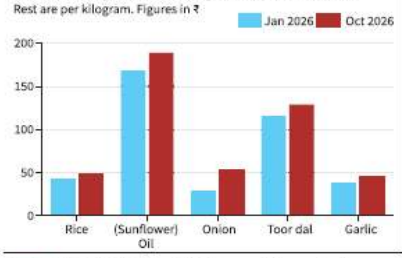


Chart 2: Monthly cost of two thalis per day in 2026. Figures in ₹

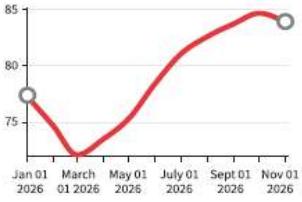


Table 1: The table lists the weight of commodities required to prepare two thalis and its retail prices in ₹

Item	Gram needed for 2 thalis	Buying price five years ago	Buying price one year ago	Nov 1 2026
Rice	125	4.43	5.33	6.00
Atta (wheat)	250	7.76	9.29	9.55
Sunflower oil	36.3	6.07	5.96	6.91
Tomato	100	5.02	3.82	3.67
Onion	100	4.07	2.65	5.18
Salt	12.8	0.23	0.27	0.29
Potato	300	7.34	7.93	6.64
Toor dal	125	13.22	14.32	16.78
Garlic	25	1.46	1.82	4.45
Red chilli	25	0.88	6.86	7.59
Ginger	7.5	0.30	0.50	1.00
Brinjal	250	6.11	8.28	9.38
Cabbage	250	4.67	6.48	5.72
Cost for 2 thalis		61.55	73.51	83.16

Table 2: The table compares the costs of a thali in ₹ in November 2026 as a share of average wages compared to last year and five years ago

	As on Nov 1, 2026	One year ago	Five years ago
Cost of one thali (in ₹)	41.9	36.8	30.8
Cost of two thalis (in ₹)	83.8	73.5	61.6
Cost of two thalis every day for a month (in ₹)	2514.6	2205.2	1846.6
Average wage/salary earnings during the preceding calendar month (in ₹)	26,310	23,622	16,149
Making two thalis every day as a share of wages (%)	9.6	9.3	11.4

To decode how much two thalis cost, on an average , select ingredients were identified — white rice, toor dal, onion, garlic, red chilli, ginger, tomato, potato, brinjal, atta, cabbage, sunflower oil, and salt— and their respective quantity required for two servings were measured

GS 2: HEALTH & SOCIAL JUSTICE
THE HINDU PAGE: 10

The need to expand Jan Aushadhi

The Pradhan Mantri Bhartiya Janaushadhi Pariyojana has put low-cost medicines within the reach of people; however, it has not caught on as widely as a country of India's size and income levels would warrant, pointing to an urgent need to scale up the scheme's reach and ease the medical burden on households

FULL CONTEXT

T.C. Sussel Kumar
R. Sudhakar

The monthly medicines bill for the mother of one of us comes to approximately ₹2,900. This month, a chance visit to the Jan Aushadhi outlet near home came as a pleasant surprise. The bill for the same monthly list of medicines was ₹663, a near 23 per cent of the usual spend. It provokes a question: how does a bill fall by more than three-fourths?

The bill is not a fluke. It is the visible end of a long chain of efforts by the Government of India to make medicines affordable for the common people. The Jan Aushadhi scheme, launched in 2008 and revamped in 2015, has put low-cost medicines within the reach of people across the country. It banks on a manufacturing base that has made India the largest supplier of generic medicines in the world. What remains to be done is increasing health expenditure as a percentage of the GDP to ensure meaningful outreach.



Growing reach: The Government estimates that Jan Aushadhi Kendras receive about 10-12 lakh visitors a day. MOORTHY M.

THE GIST

- The Jan Aushadhi basket now covers 2,110 medicines and 315 surgical items. The government estimates that citizens saved about ₹9,000 crore in 2025-26 on medicines purchased through these outlets
- The scheme, though appearing substantial, with 20,547 Jan Aushadhi Kendras across India, looks small against a reported 12 lakh chemists and druggists in the country, according to the chemists' association
- The Kendras should be promoted as shops for everyone. This can be done through social media promotions and targeted advertisements

Extent of coverage

The scheme presently named the Pradhan Mantri Bhartiya Janaushadhi Pariyojana is run through the Pharmaceuticals and Medical Devices Bureau of India. Its basket now covers 2,110 medicines and 315 surgical items. The network of outlets has grown to 20,547 as at the end of July 2026, up from 17,990 at the end of December 2025, displaying healthy growth. The target set by the Government is 25,000 by March 2027. The Government estimates the number of visitors at 10 to 12 lakh per day. The sales at maximum retail price for 2025-26 were ₹2,252 crore. Because the medicines sell well below the market prices, the Government also estimates that citizens saved about ₹9,000 crore for the year 2025-26 and about ₹45,000 crore over a period of 12 years. These estimates imply an average discount of about 80 per cent, which seems quite believable as seen from the bill cited in the introduction.

Yet, despite its obvious benefits, a scheme launched in 2008 has not caught on as widely as a country of India's size and income levels would warrant, where many households live close to the edge of financial distress. The reasons could be many and merit examination one by one.

The reach and awareness gap

The scheme, though appearing substantial with 20,547 Jan Aushadhi Kendras all over India, looks small against a reported 12 lakh chemists and druggists across India, the figure given by the Chemists' association. That is about 1.7 per cent, a comparison of scale rather than an exact count of shops, as we found no official data on the total number of shops in the country. Moreover, the Kendras may be located in slightly less busy areas, probably owing to their low-cost operating model, which helps save on rentals.

A large portion of the public may not know. In a small study of 200 outpatients in Port Blair, only a third had heard of the scheme, and more than half did not know what the outlets sell. There is also a perception among some that the Jan Aushadhi Kendras are for the poor. Admittedly, the Port Blair example cannot be construed as a national sample, and an informal poll among family members and friends would be no better. That is the very reason we shall discuss why a proper national-level survey is needed.

A patient shows the prescription at the medical store and is handed over her medicines. She is not concerned about the generic description or the active ingredients, nor their proportions and strength within the medicines. It is the doctor who decides all this. When the National Medical Commission ordered prescriptions to be made using generic names, doctors' bodies objected, citing autonomy, accountability and quality, and the order was put on hold. Only 6 per cent of patients in the Port Blair study had ever asked a doctor for generic medicines. We both confess that we have never specifically sought generics until now.

The trust and availability deficit

The doctors' bodies are not wrong when they want assurances about the quality, and the Government has taken measurable steps for ensuring that the standards are met. A 2020 report counted 106 batches recalled over four years, but without stating how many batches were tested. According to the government, suppliers are required to hold WHO-GMP certification, and every batch must be tested. The reported rate of substandard medicines is 0.34 per cent against 3.70 per cent in the open market. The Government does not specify the period or testing method; therefore, transparent testing and reporting methods are what should be aimed for.

A willing buyer loses trust in the scheme when the Kendra is not fully stocked. There are reports of the stores running out of stock and certain medicines not being available consistently. Non-availability costs the customers' trust, leading to fewer customers and a weaker shop, which in turn stocks fewer medicines. We are not sure whether this is indeed the case, which is why measurement is necessary to make informed decisions.

Jan Aushadhi should be promoted for all. This is where the difference between a General Hospital and a for-profit store comes in. When patients from all segments throng the General Hospital, which provides subsidised medical care, the wealthier ones may be crowding out the less fortunate from the queue. By contrast, when the Jan Aushadhi Kendra is frequented by all, demand will rise, followed by an increase in sales, a greater propensity to stock medicines and higher volumes for manufacturers. In a country that supplies one-fifth of the world's generics, scaling up manufacturing should not be the constraint.

The way forward

What should be done? Six steps follow, the first of which is a precondition for the rest.

The Government has data on the number of functioning outlets, estimated footfalls and sales. However, we found no information on why people use or do not use them, no nationally representative survey on how these Kendras are perceived, the level of awareness among the public on the products they sell, or several other measures that can be used for future expansion and quality improvements. The Department of Pharmaceuticals, which runs the scheme, and the Health Ministry, which governs prescribing, should commission a proper survey, with an independent and qualified academic partner. It should cover what households know, what doctors prescribe and what is kept in stock, among many other qualitative questions.

The Indian Pharmacopoeia Commission has agreed to test random batches from the outlets. The results should be published regularly, with the period, the method and the laboratories named, so that the claim of 0.34 per cent becomes verifiable and not merely quoted.

An online stock-tracking system should dynamically optimise reordering so that stores seldom run out of stock. Buyers who leave without what they want may not return.

There is also a need to convince the doctors. Once the quality can be consistently proved, and repeatedly discussed with the doctors' bodies, the mandate to prescribe generics can be brought back. Showing bioequivalence status on labels, which critics want, would be of great help.

The Kendras should be promoted as shops for everyone, not charity counters. This can be done through social media promotions and targeted advertisements, along with efforts to encourage people to download Jan Aushadhi Sugam, the scheme's app. It currently has a functioning store locator with phone dialling facility and links to Google Maps for navigation. It also has a medicine-wise price list. If possible, live medicine stock positions can also be provided to make this a go-to app for the public.

Medicines account for roughly 60 to 70 per cent of the household out-of-pocket expenditure (OOPE) on health in India, and outpatient drug costs are largely untouched by standard health insurance schemes like the Ayushman Bharat Pradhan Mantri Jan Arogya Yojana (AB PM-JAY). Government health expenditure stood at 1.43 per cent of GDP in 2023-24, while the National Health Policy's target of 2.5 per cent of GDP by 2025 remains unfulfilled. As the government works to bridge this fiscal gap, a dedicated allocation should be channelled towards expanding and promoting Jan Aushadhi, thereby directly reducing the medical burden on households.

A bill that fell by 77 per cent in a single visit shows what India has already built. A survey would show why so few families get the same pleasant surprise. The concept's time is now, and evidence and funding will be key to making it an example to emulate.

(T.C. Sussel Kumar is the former Managing Director and Sudhakar is the former Executive Director of LIC. Views expressed are personal. All data are drawn from publicly available sources.)

GS 3: INDIAN ECONOMY & SCIENCE & TECH
THE HINDU PAGE: 11

How AI could reshape global growth and productivity

A key expected impact of AI is an unprecedented rise in labour productivity, as its success as a technological revolution is premised on such an increase; what remains to be seen is how pervasive its impact will be across different sectors of the economy

Rohit Azad
Indranil Chowdhury

Many have likened the artificial intelligence (AI) phenomenon to the inventions of the steam engine or internal combustion engine in the 18th and 19th centuries, respectively. Only time can tell whether AI is epochal of that kind. In this two-part piece, we discuss the possible impact it may have on the global economy as a whole.

The productivity puzzle

A key impact of AI is considered to be an unprecedented rise in labour productivity. In fact, if there is one purpose AI is supposed to serve, it is enhancing labour productivity multifold. Since labour productivity is a key variable in this puzzle, consider what it constitutes of **(Box 1)**. It is a ratio of output and workers employed. Now this ratio can rise in three different ways – a rise in output for a given number of workers employed (rise in the numerator); a loss of jobs which leads to a fall in the denominator; more jobs are created, but the output rises faster than the jobs (while both the numerator and the denominator are rising, the numerator rises faster than the denominator).

There is usually a distinction drawn between a case where there is a net loss of jobs versus one where jobs grow, but the output grows even faster. The latter is preferred over the former. Even though AI may displace white-collar workers, it may generate more jobs for the blue-collar workers, so in the net there may not be a job loss with AI adoption across the economy. However, for the argument we make below, it does not matter which of the three sources leads to a rise in productivity. Why should the rise in labour productivity matter? There are two contrasting takes on this question in the economics discipline.

Two schools of thought on growth

One which argues that productivity growth increases the growth of output in the economy. The idea is simple. Growth of output is a function of its two inputs – labour and capital. Since capital enhances the productivity of labour, the rate at which output can grow is the sum of the growth of the labour force and its productivity. So, if the workforce grows at 2% and productivity at 4%, the economy would stabilise at 6% growth over time. And if the rate of labour productivity rises, according to this framework, growth in the economy rises *pari passu* **(Graph 1a)**.

Between the three variables – output growth, labour growth and productivity growth – output growth adjusts to the other two. This is what Robert Solow, a celebrated economist and a Nobel laureate, showed in a seminal paper on growth theory. What he did not explain though was why and where did this labour productivity rise come from. Much later, his successors argued that the growth of labour productivity depends on investment in human capital, research and development, patent regimes, etc., what came to be known as endogenous growth theories.

The other framework – the heterodox approach to growth – argued that while the above could be a story of how much output can be produced, it does not tell us whether what is produced would also be demanded. And the output which is not demanded is never produced under capitalism; therefore, the above is an incorrect representation of such an economy. So, unless productivity growth increases growth in demand, there is no reason why the two will rise in unison.

Unlike in the previous case, a rise in labour productivity, therefore, affects the rate at which jobs are provided to workers. If demand is growing at 3% and productivity at 4%, jobs will be falling by 1%. Workers take the fall. If, on the other hand, demand grows faster than productivity, more jobs are generated. So, in this case, of the three variables –output growth, labour growth and productivity growth – labour (job) growth becomes the adjusting variable **(Graph 1b)**.

This also implies that output growth is not limited by the total availability of labour. This has historically been true. The transatlantic (Atlantic) slave trade between the 16th and the 19th Century was essentially the adjustment of the supply of labour from one set of colonies to the demand for plantation jobs in another set of colonies. Closer home and in contemporary times, a higher growing State often draws upon labour from poorer States without compromising on the growth of output. If Punjab needs more agricultural workers during the sowing or harvesting season, it draws from the vast labour reserves of Bihar or Uttar Pradesh. This is true for manufacturing as well as service sector growth in some of the richer States in the south.

One may, mistakenly, think that with cross-border restrictions on labour movement, domestic labour may indeed set a limit to growth of output. But even now, if job growth is higher than the domestic workforce, international borders open. If the reverse happens, borders close. The reserve army of labour is not domestic; it is global. When the demand for Silicon Valley jobs rises in California, work visa conditions are relaxed. The anti-immigrant politics of the Far Right in the global North, under current conditions of rising unemployment, becomes clear when seen through this lens.

The productivity dividend

While it may be too early to say anything conclusively, **Chart 1** shows that there has indeed been a dramatic rise in productivity in sectors exposed to AI. This is to be expected because the success of AI as a technological revolution is premised on a rise in labour productivity (which potentially increases profit margins for the capitalists). What remains to be seen is how pervasive the impact of AI on productivity across different sectors of the economy will be. If the current data on productivity growth in AI-affected sectors hold across the economy, AI would indeed be epochal of the kind currently being debated.

In the next piece, we will explore the global macroeconomic implications of such a rise in productivity, which will perhaps give us a more comprehensive perspective on AI.

(The authors are a part of the DevMac [Development Macroeconomics] network, which seeks pluralism in Economics. This article is the first in a two-part series.)

The productivity debate

The impact of productivity growth on jobs depends on whether demand grows faster or slower than productivity

Chart 1: US: Real Output per worker in AI-adopting sectors

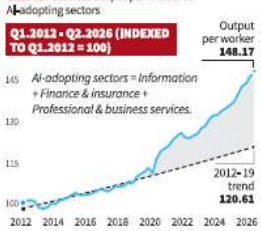


Chart: Azad & Chowdhury • Source: Authors' calculations. BEA, GDP by industry release. BLS, Current Employment Statistics. FRED. John Burn-Murdoch (FT, 2026)

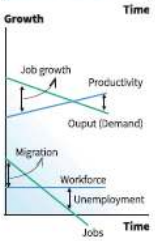
Graph 1 (a): Neoclassical Growth Framework (Supply-side)

Output growth is the sum of the growth of the labour force and its productivity



Graph 1 (b): Heterodox Growth Framework (Demand-side)

A rise in labour productivity affects the rate at which jobs are provided



Box 1: Labour productivity can be estimated as the ratio of output to the number of workers employed

$$\text{Labour productivity} = \frac{\text{Output}}{\text{Workers employed}}$$

GS 2: INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS
INDIAN EXPRESS PAGE: 10

Quad speaks up in a changing Indo-Pacific

IN THE first Quad Leaders' Summit in more than two years, and Donald Trump's first, the heads of government of India, the US, Japan and Australia convened in Manila on Tuesday on the sidelines of regional meetings. In what appeared to be a clear message to China, the joint statement expressed concern about "economic coercion" and committed to "securing critical supply chains, protecting freedom of navigation and overflight" in Asia. It produced new initiatives on maritime collaboration, critical minerals and artificial intelligence. Most of these can be traced back to the foreign ministers' meetings held over the past year. The Fiji port project, part of the Quad Ports of the Future Partnership, was unveiled by the ministers in New Delhi in May. In Atlanta, just over two weeks ago, the US committed to supporting facilities in India and ASEAN countries that recover critical minerals from waste. In Manila, the leaders built on the groundwork the foreign ministers had already laid.

Critics have dismissed the Quad as an informal talking shop that lacks teeth, citing the absence of a mutual defence treaty, diverging national interests, doubts about US commitment and its cautious language on China. These concerns are understandable, but they miss the practical realities. Despite Beijing's repeated characterisation of it as an "Asian NATO", the Quad was never envisioned as a NATO-like alliance. A flexible structure allows India to retain its strategic autonomy while cooperating with partners. The leaders announced a joint exercise involving their patrol aircraft in 2027, a first for the group. On US reliability, Washington's actions cut against the scepticism. US involvement has persisted across multiple administrations with very different approaches to the international system. Further, recall that Secretary of State Marco Rubio was sent to India in May to revive the Quad, where he urged deeper cooperation. That was taken forward in Manila, with President Trump pitching for a stronger security partnership. Finally, on delivery, the old charge that the Quad writes no cheques is harder to sustain. The joint projects may be modest next to China's economic weight, but they support infrastructure and supply-chain diversification in the region.

The Quad's continuing test is to convert coordination into material outcomes that strengthen the economic and security architecture of the Indo-Pacific, whose tectonic plates are shifting as Beijing flexes its muscle with export restrictions and destabilising actions in the East and South China Seas. What matters for the Quad is building the capacity to act collectively in visible and operational ways. New Delhi should also use it as a low-friction channel to improve ties with Washington.

GS 2: POLITY & GOVERNANCE
INDIAN EXPRESS PAGE: 10

ECI's closed-door reversals are no substitute for accountability



THAROORTHINK

BY SHASHI THAROOR

THE RECENT cascade of procedural retreats by the Election Commission of India (ECI) regarding the SIR functions as a tacit admission of institutional overreach, procedural illegality, and administrative failure. Over a 10-day span, the ECI quietly amended or reversed a host of rules and documents connected to the SIR — a last-minute package of concessions that my fellow *Indian Express* columnist Yogendra Yadav aptly characterised as a "Diwali discount" issued just before the festival. Yet this voucher arrived long after its expiration date for the vast majority of the electorate, serving less as genuine relief for ordinary citizens and more as a reluctant confession by an institution caught violating the very statutory framework it is constitutionally mandated to uphold.

For over 16 months, the ECI maintained an uncompromising and punitive stance during the SIR exercise. But now, in the wake of the opposition protests across the country, things have changed. In the seven states where the SIR process remains underway, the Commission has suddenly rediscovered legal provisions it had claimed did not exist. Excluded voters in these states are now permitted to file enumeration forms with an accompanying declaration rather than submitting Form 6, allowing them to retain their original EPIC numbers. Simultaneously, the ECI has conceded that it possesses the authority under Rule 21A of the electoral rules to rectify its own mistakes, that citizens who have relocated need only submit Form 8 to update their residence rather than suffering deletion, and that the window for submitting enumeration forms remains open.

Even more telling is the ECI's retreat on Form 6 itself, a statutory document that the Supreme Court has treated as cast in stone. Beginning in Bihar and West Bengal, and escalating in 2026 across its online portals, the ECI tampered with Form 6 by attaching (and subsequently embedding directly within the digital form) an unauthorised, and therefore illegal, additional "declaration" without which an application could not be completed or uploaded. But altering a statutory form falls exclusively within the domain of Parliament and the central government. Now the Commission has reversed course, implicitly acknowledging that its actions had been illegal.

This capitulation extends deep into the ECI's internal governance, validating the *Indian Express* report that two Election Commissioners had formally dissented at least 14 times against the manner in which the SIR was being conducted. Almost every procedural reform now announced by the ECI reads like a point-by-point confirmation of those internal objections. Under the Representation of the People Act, only the local Electoral Registration Officer (ERO) holds the statutory authority to add or delete names from the electoral rolls. During the SIR, however, that power (and therefore control over the voter database) was centralised in Delhi through the ECINET and ERONET software systems. The consequences were starkly exposed in Goa: When the SC directed state election officers to review 97 questionable deletions, local officials discovered that 90 were indeed erroneous, yet the EROs were powerless because the software had stripped them of the option to reinsert deleted names. The Commission's belated decision to return inclusion and deletion powers to EROs, alongside appointing a committee to audit its IT systems for legal compatibility, amounts to admitting that it deployed unverified software to purge millions of voters before bothering to check whether the technology complied with the law.

> An institution entrusted with safeguarding the world's largest democracy cannot preside over a legally flawed disenfranchisement exercise, rewrite its rules once exposed, and expect the matter to be closed without consequence

Equally troubling is the ECI's new pledge to circulate formal agendas and record minutes for future meetings, confirming that crucial decisions were taken without basic institutional records. Indeed, Right to Information disclosures obtained by activist Anjali Bhardwaj, and confirmed on appeal by the ECI's Principal Secretary, revealed that the ECI possesses no signed formal order on file initiating the nationwide SIR exercise, nor was any such order produced within the ECI's 240-page affidavit before the SC.

While these reversals thoroughly vindicate critics of the SIR, they fall far short of delivering justice — because the damage has already been inflicted on an immense scale. For roughly 75 per cent of India, including major states like Bihar, West Bengal, and Karnataka, the SIR is already closed, meaning the new procedural concessions offer zero relief to unfairly excluded citizens. Voters in Bengaluru, where massive deletions occurred due to residence shifts and slum demolitions, remain deprived of remedies now extended to voters in Delhi. Moreover, rampant inaccuracies have survived the revision process, including hundreds of cases of duplicate voter IDs, mocking the ECI's claim that the SIR "purified" voter rolls. Alarming evidence of targeted disenfranchisement, especially of Muslim voters in West Bengal, remains unaddressed.

With the nationwide shortfall of registered voters relative to India's adult population widening dramatically from 2 crore to 15 crore following the SIR, the ECI must extend opportunities for remedial enrolment, error-correction mechanisms, and EPIC restoration retroactively to the 75 per cent of states where the exercise has already concluded. It must conduct a transparent audit to purge fraudulent Form 7 deletions and resolve the stalled West Bengal appeals (91 per cent of which have so far proved to involve wrongful deletions). True restitution requires that citizens unlawfully stripped of their constitutional franchise be restored to the rolls before further elections are held.

Ultimately, procedural reversals behind closed doors cannot substitute for accountability. An institution entrusted with safeguarding the world's largest democracy cannot preside over a legally flawed disenfranchisement exercise, quietly rewrite its rules once exposed, and expect the matter to be closed without consequence. At a minimum, the ECI owes the country a candid public explanation and an unconditional apology for the hardship inflicted upon millions of rightful voters. Restoring institutional credibility demands personal accountability at the very top. Because the unilateral, centralised decisions that defined the SIR were driven from the helm of the institution despite repeated internal objections from fellow Commissioners, the Chief Election Commissioner must take moral and constitutional responsibility and resign. Only through full restitution for excluded citizens and decisive accountability at the leadership level can the ECI begin to repair the profound damage done to its once-enviable global reputation.

The writer is a fourth-term Congress MP from Thiruvananthapuram

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Importance of measuring women's unpaid work

NEETHA N

THE REASONS behind women's low labour force participation rates have been an intriguing subject of research and policy concern for many decades. While it has shown an increase over the past few years in rural areas, the urban picture is still a concern. Lack of employment opportunities and sex-based labour market segmentation are often constraints that are accepted as demand-side issues. On the supply side, apart from poor education and skillsets, social and cultural norms and women's household responsibilities, especially care work, are noted as factors that prevent women from taking up employment.

Of these, one of the most highlighted reasons for women's low participation is the gendered social responsibility of housework and care work. Women with young children are noted to have a low participation rate, and found to prefer sectors of employment where paid work can be combined with unpaid care responsibilities. The literature has also documented women's preference for home-based work and workspaces that are closer to their homes. The concentration of women in the informal sector and in employment with flexible working hours, resulting in gendered pay gaps, is also highlighted as a result of compromises that women are forced to accept due to their social roles.

Though housework and care work have assumed significance in the discussion on women's employment, the link with women's employment is yet to be established at the macro level. The two macro data sets on women's work, the Labour Force Survey (LFS) and the Time Use Survey (TUS) are sometimes analysed to understand the linkage between the two dimensions. Thus, the number of children across various age groups in the household and women members' work participation rate are used as a proxy to understand the relationship. Data from TUS suggests that women in households with children, especially those with small children, are more time-poor. These are broad outlines and are not always amenable to further disaggregation.

> Many women who are in employment are also not free from care work. Do the nature or sectors of employment influence women with care work in terms of their decisions?

The data sets of the two surveys are also not comparable; their objectives are different, and therefore, so are the concepts and definitions followed. Although the National Industrial Classification, 2008 is used in both, the TUS follows a restricted version — the data is available only at the two-digit level, and the occupational classification is absent. On the other hand, the LFS only captures the labour force-related dimensions, except for a few generic questions to those outside the labour force on the reasons for their absence.

Interestingly, the LFS does not ask any questions to the employed to understand their labour-market behaviour and constraints, if any. Many women who are in employment are also not free from care work. Do the nature or sectors of employment influence women with care work in terms of their decisions? Why are some women, possibly with the same housework and care constraints, able to enter the labour market while others are not? These are questions that can inform policy interventions. The limitations of the existing data sets do not help in understanding the linkage between women's employment, its sectoral and occupational specificities, and how it interacts with women's housework and care work.

This is where MoSPI's initiative of adding new questions on unpaid work to the Periodic Labour Force Survey needs attention. Combining data on housework and care work with regular LFS will help not only in the regular collection of data on care work but also in opening up the scope of engagement with women's work and its linkages to women's employment. Such combined analyses will help in formulating the right policies. They will also help in monitoring and promoting gender equality in the workplace and addressing gender pay gaps. The combined data set will also help in the ongoing valuation exercises of unpaid work, and count those who are in the periphery or subsistence sectors and are thus likely to be missed out in standard labour force surveys.

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What did India bring home from Manila?

SOUMYA BHOWMICK

THE QUAD first met in Manila in 2007 and faded soon after, until its officials met again in the same city in November 2017, on the sidelines of the East Asia Summit, and brought it back to life. This week, its leaders met there as guests, just ahead of US President Donald Trump's onward journey to Shenzhen for the APEC summit.

The Quad's headline was critical minerals, with Trump announcing agreements to protect members from "coercion by any single foreign supplier", though without naming China. The announcement echoed what I heard repeatedly in Washington earlier this year: That the Trump administration had eased its tariff confrontation with China because Beijing still held the minerals card, and that its later bilateral deals, including with India, had yet to add up to a strategy. Others drew a different lesson from Beijing's April 2025 curbs on seven rare-earth elements and related magnets imposed in response to US tariffs, which showed every major economy the leverage that comes from dominating processing.

This month, both views look right. Beijing has extended its pause on wider rare-earth controls by just two months, to 10 January, and the IEA reckons that, if fully applied, those controls would put $6.5 trillion a year of downstream production outside China at risk. A pause renewed every two months is a truce in which both sides buy time, and the Quad's minerals commitments, made days before Trump and Chinese President Xi Jinping meet in Shenzhen, are best read as insurance for all stakeholders.

So what did India take home? Manila's clearest gains were practical: A maritime surveillance collaboration, including a first joint patrol-aircraft exercise in 2027, and a Quad Business Leaders' Forum in Mumbai. On critical minerals, the harder task is building processing capacity, and much of that lies in Southeast Asia, where Malaysia's expanded output has helped bring China's share of global rare-earth refining down from above 90 per cent to 85 per cent.

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Meanwhile, ore from loosely regulated mines along Myanmar's borders still flows largely to China. This is where the second table, the ASEAN-India Summit, came in, with Prime Minister Narendra Modi's offer of cooperation on critical minerals and civil nuclear energy extending the Quad's supply-chain agenda to where many of these minerals are mined and refined.

The harder part remains trade. India's deficit with ASEAN widened to $51.6 billion in 2025-26, and the trade agreement review is still unfinished. Free e-visas and a maritime cooperation plan will bring people and coast guards closer, but the gap is in commodities, where co-investment in processing offers Indian firms a way into the region's supply chains rather than simply sourcing from them.

At the East Asia Summit, where the US, China and Russia all sit, India put forward a seafarers' safety initiative and an offer to help Russia and Ukraine set up Black Sea corridors for grain and fertiliser, proposals that serve India as much as the region, given how much fuel and fertiliser moves by sea. The limits of regional diplomacy were on show too, with the ASEAN-China code of conduct for the South China Sea still unfinished and its legal force unsettled.

Taken together, the three meetings show that India is a valued partner in a Quad adapting to a more transactional US, a welcome one in an ASEAN where the trade relationship still needs rebalancing, and a trusted voice in a forum that works by consensus rather than commitment.

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• GEOPOLITICS

Why world is watching Trump-Xi-Putin meet



SHUBHAJIT ROY



(From left) US President Donald Trump, Chinese President Xi Jinping with his wife Peng Liyuan, and Russian President Vladimir Putin in Shenzhen. AP

AS US President Donald Trump, Chinese President Xi Jinping and Russian President Vladimir Putin prepare to sit across the table for their first-ever trilateral meeting in Shenzhen, the world, and India, will be watching the summit's outcomes, and potential consequences, closely.

Many have compared the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation summit with the historic Yalta conference of February 1945, when US President Franklin D Roosevelt, British Prime Minister Winston Churchill and Soviet Union premier Joseph Stalin struck a deal that effectively divided post-war Europe into spheres of influence (see story alongside). At that time, World War II was coming to an end. In this case, the two wars in Russia-Ukraine and in West Asia against Iran appear rather intractable.

Before the trilateral, the Quad

Ahead of the trilateral meeting, Trump met the leaders of fellow Quad countries, India, Japan and Australia. All of them have long flagged China's belligerence in the Indo-Pacific region, and conveyed the concern at their meeting.

This was reflected in the joint document issued after the meeting of all four Quad leaders. It said the members strongly opposed any destabilising or unilateral actions that seek to change the status quo, including by force or coercion, which escalate tensions and undermine regional peace and stability.

The grouping flagged economic coercion, arbitrary export restrictions, choking of critical supply chains, freedom of navigation and overflight, deployment of trusted artificial intelligence (AI), resilient maritime transit corridors. Each of these are key challenges posed by Beijing. If that were not enough, the Quad leaders agreed to hold a maritime military exercise next year, double down on AI development and organise a business forum, signalling that they are keen on sticking together — even as Trump sups with XI and Putin.

So, the worries of countries including India, Japan and Australia have been conveyed to Trump, despite him being soft on China in his second term. The question is, will he be able to hold the line?

China, to be sure, has always rejected the Quad, calling it a bloc that promotes confrontation and likening it to "sea foam".

The meeting of the strongmen

With XI and Putin at the table, the temptation for Trump will be to cut a grand bargain with the two strongmen who face little to no challenge domestically.

Trump, however, is a democratically elected leader who has just been delivered a massive setback in the midterm elections. He may not be able to deliver the goods in the same way that both XI and Putin can in their respective political contexts.

XI would want his way in the South China Sea and Taiwan. Putin would want his way in Ukraine, where the war has now crossed World War I in duration. The Europeans will be watching Putin's actions more closely since it affects their security. Those in Southeast Asia, meanwhile, will be monitoring XI.

Trump, as part of his strategic calculation, would want their help in stopping both the wars in Ukraine and West Asia. But for XI, this is a golden opportunity. He wouldn't want to stop a war that has stretched American military, economic and diplomatic bandwidth.

Spectacle or substance

So, for many in the world watching the summit of the "big 3", or "group of 3", this would look like another spectacle — high-decibel, high on optics and without substantive outcomes. This playbook has happened before, from Trump's high-voltage meetings with North Korean leader Kim Jong Un and bilateral meetings with both XI and Putin.

When Trump met XI last year in October, the US President was able to buy time for the world. He had postponed the problem of the Rare Earth magnets and brought home the point of managing resilient supply chains when it comes to critical sectors.

The world had come to notice the dependencies on China during the Covid-19 pandemic, and the leverage that Beijing had over the world's supply chain systems. Washington had managed to buy more time for the world to develop their own supply chain, and diversify from China. So, from that perspective, this was an important win for the US and the world.

For China, Trump's acknowledgement of it as part of a "group of 2" was a recognition of its status as a global power. Under XI, Beijing has been pursuing the goal of becoming the world's foremost power.

That will be the bigger question in New Delhi. India stands to be affected if China is emboldened to take more aggressive actions without facing consequences. Trump's power play with XI is particularly consequential for India, given its border with China, which has become "more active", as External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar said last weekend. This has required India to maintain a much larger troop presence along the frontier on a sustained basis.

New Delhi will be hoping that this G-3 moment is short-lived and does not take India back to 2020, when it had to significantly increase its force deployment along the China border in just 10 days.

The message from Quad

Trump met leaders of fellow Quad members ahead of the trilateral.

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They flagged economic coercion, export curbs and choking of supply chains.

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Each of these are key challenges posed by Beijing.

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• ARCHAEOLOGY

What ancient 'elephant' fossil reveals about Narmada Valley's past

Anand Mohan J
Bhopal, November 18

A FOSSILISED jaw exposed by erosion along the Narmada in Madhya Pradesh's Raisen district could belong to one of the largest elephant species ever — the extinct *Palaeoloxodon namadicus*, a prehistoric straight-tusked elephant that researchers believe may have roamed the region around four to five lakh years ago.

The preliminary assessment at Patai Ghat is based on the jaw's structure, the arrangement of its molars and the geological layers where it was found.

The fossil was examined by a five-member group of researchers that included Dr Hitkishor Goswami, a retired Barkatullah University scientist who has worked on human evolution, Dr Ravi Upadhyay , and Dr Kunwar Wajahat Shah, who has previously investigated fossil-like structures near Patai Ghat. A separate four-member Geological Survey of India (GSI) team inspected the site on November 13. The GSI team will soon submit its final report to the administration.



The fossilised jaw is 75 cm in length and 25 cm in width, the size of a small suitcase.

The discovery

Dr Upadhyay said: "This is the jaw of an elephant-like creature or, rather, the complete jaw of an ancient elephant. The possibility of it belonging to Palaeoloxodon is high. The possibility of it being Stegodon, an elephant-like animal, is somewhat lower." Both are types of extinct genus.

The fossil measures approximately 75 cm in length and 25 cm in width. Its molars have seven to nine parallel ridges, with prominent raised teeth and visible grooves. Upadhyay said the molars suggested the animal might not have been fully grown.

He also said the fossil was found in yellowish soil belonging to the Baneta Formation, a geological layer in the Narmada Valley known to contain animal fossils. Geological layers help scientists determine when an animal lived

"The yellow soil indicates the Pleistocene period. Most elephant fossils found from this period belong to a genus called Palaeoloxodon. These were enormous elephants. Their fossils have been found in geological deposits dating from around seven lakh to 30,000 years ago," he said.

Exploring the Narmada region

Upadhyay said other bone fragments and mineralised remains had also been noticed in the vicinity, raising the possibility that further excavation could uncover more of the animal. He said the surrounding area also deserved attention because its geological layers could preserve remains of different prehistoric animals.

"Even within a radius of about one kilometre, there could be different kinds of fossils because the strata are different. There is a possibility that horse fossils could also be found here. The entire Narmada region was once a marshy landscape. Rhinoceros fossils have been found here before, hippopotamus fossils have been found, and horse fossils have also been found," he said.

Dr Goswami said the Narmada Valley deserved a much more systematic investigation. He said the valley could hold important evidence about early human history.

Dr Shah said the latest discovery should also be seen in the context of earlier investigations around Patai Ghat. He recalled finding unusual fossil-like structures approximately a kilometre from the present site. He said the area needed a coordinated research programme rather than investigations limited to individual discoveries.

"This is a very rich site. If a proper project is undertaken here, many things that are buried beneath the ground could come to light. The Narmada Valley is mysterious in that sense. There is much that remains unexplored," he said.

Dino hotspot

- India has long been a hotspot for dinosaur fossils. The first dinosaur bones in the country were discovered in 1822, near Jabalpur in MP.
- Evidence of many kinds of dinosaurs has been found in states like Rajasthan, Gujarat, Andhra, Maharashtra, Telangana, Karnataka and Tamil Nadu.
- Fossilised dino eggs, too, have been found in central India. Experts believe around 17 kinds of dinosaurs, including the Rajasaurus, were present in the region.