EDITORIAL HIGHLIGHTS

20-11-2026

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GS 1: INDIAN SOCIETY & POLITY
THE HINDU PAGE: 08

The changing dynamic of nationalism in India



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Many social science scholars had argued that nationalist and ethnic feelings would become weaker in the context of developed capitalism and modernity. However, we now know that nationalism continues to remain an implacable force. There is no dearth of literature about what nationalism means and how one makes sense of it. Here, we will look at two forms of nationalism and contextualise it by looking at the changing dynamic of nationalism in India.

Two forms of nationalism

Broadly speaking, one can refer to two kinds of nationalisms – civic and ethnic nationalism. The former is based on shared respect for values of liberty, equality, justice and fraternity and an unshakeable faith in the constitutional framework. It is inclusive, progressive, liberating and democratic. It seeks to bring together people who are otherwise extremely diverse in terms of their religions, social practices, languages, food habits, cultures etc. It takes special care to ensure that the marginalised and historically oppressed groups are accommodated within the nationalist framework. It also gives space to every identity to nurture itself unhindered.

On the contrary, ethnic nationalism focuses on essentialising and privileging one single identity via religion, language, or ethnicity and is therefore exclusionary, regressive, destructive and undemocratic. It poses physical and epistemic danger to those identities which do not fall within the dominant understanding of what nationalism is. Hitler clearly espoused ethnic nationalism (superiority of Germanic Aryan race) which led to unspeakable atrocities being committed against Jews in Nazi-era Germany.

The nationalism that grew in India during the freedom struggle was largely civic in nature. It was an inclusive, liberating, and democratic project. There was a strong conviction that what was being sought was worth fighting for and morally and ethically justified. There was almost a touch of romance; one could not but fall in love with the ideals of justice, equality, freedom and secularism which were the guiding principles of the nationalism that was experienced during the freedom struggle. It was an open invitation to explore. In this endeavour, science was to be a partner.

When the Constitution, which was a product of reasoned debates and contestations, came into existence, it unleashed enormous democratising possibilities. Its incorporation of fundamental rights and freedoms was a paradigmatic shift in a society which had and still has some of the most oppressive structures in the world such as the caste system. A democratic Constitution could have emerged only in the context of democratic nationalism.

> One of the most distinctive features of the present day dominant ethnic nationalism is that it is based on exclusions – religious minorities, Dalits, tribals and women are systematically relegated to the background

Exclusionary nature of present nationalism

The nationalism that is being privileged now in India in the last decade or so is the antithesis of what nationalism stood for during the freedom struggle and in its aftermath. What one is witnessing today is the assertion of an exclusionary, masculine, undemocratic ethnic nationalism (*Hindurashtra*). Systematic and organised efforts are being made to convert civic nationalism into an ethnic and exclusionary nationalism. One of the most distinctive features of the present day dominant ethnic nationalism is that it is based on exclusions – religious minorities, Dalits, tribals and women are systematically relegated to the background. The fact that they can come under attack for storing beef or for skinning dead animals clearly shows that they have no space in the dominant imagination of the nation.

Women too are constantly lectured on what they should do and what to wear, with less say over bodily autonomy. If women are vocal in raising their voice against unjust and unfair happenings in the country (for example, the SIR protests over '*vote chori*'), it supposedly leads to "cultural shocks" among some wide-chested males. This shows the symbiosis between patriarchy and nationalism. What we are seeing today is an aggressive and masculinised version of nationalism.

As noted by political scientist Benedict Anderson, a nation is an "imagined political community". He, however, did not look at the possibility of multiple imaginations, and the possibility that at certain historical junctures certain imaginations (right-wing nationalism at present, for example) hold sway over others. In the current dominant imagination, there is clearly no space for marginalised and oppressed sections of society. They have only two options: either fall in line or be ready to be subjected to a 'cognitive blackout'. Therefore, the nationalism that is presently on the ascendant has lost its progressive and emancipatory potential. It is intolerant of any kind of questioning and deeply oppressive of dissent. It uses all possible state machinery to suppress oppositional voices. Anti-nationals, urban naxals, *dimagi naxals* etc. are some of the terms used to describe those who dare to imagine the nation in a creative, democratic and inclusive manner.

Further, one hears of 'peace bonds' these days when anybody tries to hold peaceful protests against what they perceive as anti-people and anti-democratic measures of the government. Weaponising 'peace bonds' has become a way of silencing dissent. It is in the very nature of ethnic nationalism that alternative imaginations and different ways of looking at what the nation should be are delegitimised. The right-wing nationalists of today are clearly inspired by the European (Germany, in particular) experience and are trying to follow its model of nationalism which is based on essentialising a single identity.

It needs to be recognised that ethnic nationalism when pushed to its extreme logic assumes the form of fascism as it happened in Europe. American philosopher Jason Stanley enumerates 10 important features of fascism (glorification of a mythical past, anti-intellectualism, victimhood, propaganda etc.), some of which are observed in India today. In this context, one also needs to remember, as economist Prabhat Patnaik argued, the deeply imperialist nature of European nationalism, bent upon capturing distant lands, and the history of Indian nationalism and its anti-imperialist thrust.

The role of corporate capitalism

The other important feature of present-day ethnic nationalism is the cosy relationship that it has developed with corporate capitalism. Whenever capitalism is in crisis, as it is now, with high levels of unemployment and a falling rate of profit, it looks for those phenomena which can distract the attention of people. It has found in Hindutva one such phenomenon. In such times, capital needs a reactionary ideology to de-radicalise class consciousness and prevent the possibility of marginalised sections of society coming together in the fight for justice and equality. The ideology of right-wing nationalism is precisely that. Further, equality is an idea with which both capitalism and right-wing nationalism share an uncomfortable relationship.

Clearly, there is a strong need to recover the inclusive, empowering and anti-imperialist nationalism of the freedom struggle that once united us on the basis of equality, justice, secularism and respect for differences.

GS 3: INDIAN ECONOMY & RESOURCES

THE HINDU PAGE: 08

India's minerals policy needs to move to material security

One can auction a lithium block in a day. Turning what lies beneath it into a resource that Indian battery manufacturers can use is an entirely different story. Bridging that gap between a resource and a usable supply will shape the next phase of India's critical minerals policy.

In the last two years, the government moved the sector up on their policy agenda. The National Critical Mineral Mission was allocated ₹34,300 crore for a seven-year program covering exploration, mining and processing of critical minerals and materials. The amended mining law enables the government to auction blocks of 24 critical minerals; more blocks are expected to be auctioned before 2031.

The government's intent is justified. There is a growing global reliance on minerals such as lithium, cobalt, nickel and rare earth elements for Electric Vehicles (EVs), batteries, electronic devices, renewable energy and strategic industries. Without the secure supply of these critical minerals, India cannot implement its ambitious manufacturing plans. However, the real question is, will having mines ensure the supply of materials?

Beyond the auctions

Mining a block is just the beginning. The minerals have to be extracted and processed for industry use. Often, that requires high end beneficiation (treatment of raw ore or material to remove impurities) and refining. Having mines does not mean having the materials. India is particularly vulnerable because it still imports most of its critical and processed materials.

China's case clarifies this point. It has gained control over critical mineral supply chains because of its ability to process and refine minerals at scale, not just because of its dominance in mining.



Rohan Gupta

Co-founder and COO, Attero

It is one thing to successfully auction mineral blocks and meet exploration targets; it is another to refine the materials and provide a steady supply of industrial material

India could have vast untapped mineral resources, and still be heavily reliant on imports for critical minerals. This happens when a country does not develop the required capacities for mineral processing in conjunction with mining. This is why some aspects of the National Critical Mineral Mission, that are relatively less known, may ultimately be more important than the schedule for mineral auctions.

It takes time to set up new mines. Several challenges such as environmental concerns, land acquisitions, and limited mining and processing infrastructure can delay the opening of new mines and processing facilities. One cannot choose between mining and processing. Both need to happen simultaneously.

Tapping the recycling industry

The same is true for recycling. One of the schemes under the Critical Minerals Mission has a target of recycling 400 kilotonnes of critical minerals from tailings, fly ash and red mud, as well as from end-of-life products by 2031 with a monetary allocation of ₹1,500 crore. This is only a small fraction of India's requirement of critical minerals but that is not the point. Recycling critical minerals can be a quicker option than new mines.

There are several factors that have the potential to impact the nation's minerals security. For example, e-waste production in India is already large, and is only expected to increase. According to Redseer, India produced 3.8 million metric tonnes of e-waste in 2024, and the situation will only become more acute. The growth in the battery storage and EV sectors will also increase the supply of materials for recycling.

Collection and traceability will be the larger challenges. Currently, the scrap economy is largely fragmented. For recovered minerals to be reliable inputs to industry, recyclers must have predictable access to waste, and manufacturers must have confidence in the quality and consistency of the material they purchase.

Stockpiling not a long-term plan

The proposal for a national stockpile of selected critical minerals is another important part of the emerging strategy. Recent restrictions on the export of minerals have illustrated the rapid and unanticipated changes in supply. While a strategic reserve of minerals can lessen the impact of short-term disruptions, simply stockpiling minerals is not a strategy.

There will need to be decisions on what to stock, and what the target inventory levels will be. These challenges will become more pertinent as changes in technology impact the minerals that will be most strategically important.

There is little doubt India has made a considerable effort in a short amount of time. A few years ago, there was very little policy focus on critical minerals. Today, there is increased focus and support for policy and financial and institutional frameworks for critical minerals recycling, processing and imports.

The challenging part, now, will be implementing these policies.

It is one thing to successfully auction mineral blocks and meet exploration targets; it is another to refine the materials and provide a steady supply of industrial material through recycling. India's mineral strategy in the coming decade will likely revolve around the response to these challenges rather than the number of mineral blocks sold at auctions.

India has initiated steps to ensure access to a robust mineral resource base. Now, the next big step will be to transform those mineral resources into materials that the Indian industry needs. The big challenge that India is still facing is to evolve from mineral block auctions to material security.

GS 3: INDIAN ECONOMY & LABOUR
THE HINDU PAGE: 09

What protections do workers in India have in case of layoffs?



K. R. Shyam Sundar

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PARLEY

Layoffs have become an increasingly prominent feature of the employment landscape. The growing adoption of artificial intelligence and the significant investments companies are making in AI infrastructure have added to concerns about job security and the future of employment. Against this backdrop, as India marks the first anniversary of the implementation of its four Labour Codes on November 21, we examine the question of severance pay and the wider social security framework for workers who lose their jobs.

What protections do workers in India have in case of layoffs? K.R. Shyam Sundar and Rahul Charkha discuss the question in a conversation moderated by **Nivedita Varadarajan**. Edited excerpts:

What happens when somebody gets laid off? Does it change across sectors?

Shyam Sundar: Layoff is a term that is Americanised; in India, we use the term retrenchment. Layoffs impact workers or employees across the board, irrespective of the economic activity that the worker is performing, be it in coal mines or tech companies or even those retrenched in government services, and all carry the trauma.

In the West, an individual layoff is simple: you get the pink slip, settle your dues, and leave. In India, when a worker is retrenched, the worker undergoes a tremendously different experience. He wonders whether to tell his family, looks for jobs secretly, and is barred from the premises where he served for several years.

Getting retrenched or laid off is a huge question mark on the existential aspects of workers.

How is retrenchment different between blue- and white-collar workers?

SS: White-collar workers are generally believed to fend for themselves with their human capital. A white-collar worker's skills could be specific to his role at one company. Those with low-skilled or semi-skilled jobs can migrate to different companies till they are able to achieve the reservation wage [the wage below which no worker would be willing to sell his or her labour power].

In a "hire and fire" system, security is not guaranteed. This is prevalent in North American countries such as the U.S. and Canada. In India, the type of contract under which the worker is employed by a firm, be it a trainee, contract worker, or tenured, is important.



GETTY IMAGES

What has changed in the new Labour Codes?

SS: Much of what has been done in the name of labour law reforms is hogwash. It had three aims: ease of doing business, attracting foreign capital and technology into the country, and dealing with workers' questions.

There used to be a multiplicity of adjudicating authorities. The new Labour Codes bundle them. In the name of rationalising the judicial infrastructure, the Industrial Relations Code simply makes a mess of it. The Code removed labour courts and replaced them with Industrial Tribunals. The government argues that this will increase efficiency. But are vacancies filled on time? Do we have efficient presiding officers? These need to be assessed. But still, unlike in Europe, even if a single worker is laid off, the entire machinery can come into work.

Why is severance pay taxed?

Rahul Charkha: Legally in India, severance pay is mandated for certain sectors, but it is a customary practice for the employer. For workers, being laid off is a rude shock, not only because they are losing their regular income, but also employee benefits like health insurance for their families. The real fundamental question is whether the government should really be taking away one-third of the severance pay that the employer pays workers to compensate for all these livelihood issues. The government can tax what it believes is taxable. To the government, this is really nothing but a salary that you receive in advance. So, it can be taxed.

The government treats severance pay as "profit in lieu of salary", which is nothing but salary. Both are taxed similarly.

There are several components in an employment termination letter.

For a long time, taxes were paid on what was the salary component, which is a smaller part of the whole package.

> Why India does not have an unemployment relief system in place is itself a question that needs deliberation
>
> SHYAM SUNDAR

The government brought in a specific provision to say that even this non-taxable part of the severance agreement would also be liable to tax under a separate head, which is income from other sources. Legally, the government can tax what it believes is taxable. Is it fair for the government to tax it?

Is a one-time severance pay enough?

SS: Critics argue that severance pay is very high in India. I disagree. Several countries, including Sri Lanka and many in Europe, have stricter rules. A progressive employer will provide counselling before the layoff, legal counsel, retraining, testimonials, and help registering with employment exchanges. These might look like small costs, but it is very important for the employer to bear them. Most employers prefer the Indian model: pay the compensation in one stroke, and the file is closed.

But these rules are applicable only to three industries – coal mining, plantations and the manufacturing sector. This leaves out service workers and IT workers. In the last five years, the sector has witnessed some of the worst layoffs, and the proper legal procedure was not followed. It also leaves out informal workers.

Several countries have several ways of providing security for their workers. Which are the ones that India should look at? Which is most feasible for India?

RC: Different countries have had different philosophies, and they have tailored their social security to suit their culture. For instance, Germany has an earnings-linked unemployment insurance, where unemployment payouts are calculated as a percentage of the worker's prior earnings rather than a flat rate.

The U.S. funds its unemployment insurance payout through a payroll tax. This is determined through an experience rating, which is based on the history of unemployment claims and the payroll changes of an employer as such. It is funded by a federal-state combination and that has its own administrative challenges.

The U.K. and Singapore also have different schemes. I think we can certainly look at these schemes and tailor a scheme to suit Indian customs. Maybe we should also look at insurance to tackle this. We have a set of solutions to tackle rural unemployment, but we need to keep in mind that the parameters for urban employment schemes would be different.

SS: Why India does not have an unemployment relief system in place is itself a question that needs deliberation.

Traditionally, the joint family system was a cushion. One can always fall back on it. The government can give unemployment benefits using tax money to provide unemployment assistance to vulnerable workers.

The government's Employees' State Insurance (ESI) scheme offers insurance for workers and their families, but the spread of ESI hospitals is disproportionately less compared to the number of beneficiaries. This is a serious loss of bureaucracy, governance and lack of vision.

How do we get social security for gig workers, platform workers and informal workers?

RC: We are moving away from a very formal employer-employee relationship, and the government has recognised this. Gig/platform and informal workers are mentioned in the new labour codes. State governments are also forming laws to protect them.

It is very important to have a database and e-Shram is collecting that data.

How do you compensate gig workers for a loss of earning potential or a consistent earning potential? There is no easy answer for this. I think the simplest way would be to extend existing insurance to them. But we need some out-of-the-box kind of solution. Maybe gig workers can opt in to pay a small premium against any potential loss of revenue. Maybe the fund for the premium could be matched by the aggregator and the customer.

SS: There needs to be a two-pronged attack strategy: the government should bring workers inside the traditional social security net and there must be synergy between citizens and government agencies.

The future of labour market governance will be primarily in the Skills Ministry rather than the Labour Ministry or the Commerce Ministry. We have a very admirable infrastructure, but we are a huge failure when it comes to implementing it.

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Scan the code or go to the link
www.thehindu.com

GS 2: INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS
THE HINDU PAGE: 10

Xi's new rulebook for local leaders

The Communist Party has published rules that centralise control over every provincial, city and county committee with four shifts from the 2015 version: a sharper focus on Xi Jinping Thought, a wider remit for local committees, tighter control over personnel and a new emphasis on discipline

WORLD INSIGHT

Manoj Kewalramani

All eyes this week are on Shenzhen, where leaders of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) grouping are meeting for their annual summit. The summit, however, is being overshadowed by the first-ever sit-down between U.S. President Donald Trump, Chinese President Xi Jinping and Russian President Vladimir Putin. As significant as that is, it is arguably not the most important political development in China this week. On Monday, the Communist Party published a revised set of regulations detailing how the country will be governed in the years ahead.

The Regulations on the Work of Local Committees of the Communist Party of China govern every local Party committee and its standing committee at the provincial, city and county levels. These committees, rather than the governments they oversee, are the real seat of power in China. They set the direction, decide major issues, manage cadres and supervise the legislatures, governments, courts and procuratorates in their jurisdictions. The rules that bind them are, in effect, the operating manual for governing China below Beijing.

The previous version of this regulations was issued in 2015, three years into Mr. Xi's tenure. Read side by side, the two texts reveal four significant shifts.

The first change is ideological. The 2015 regulations asked local committees to arm themselves with Marxism-Leninism, Mao Zedong Thought and the theoretical system of socialism with Chinese characteristics. Mr. Xi featured only as the author of a "series of important speeches" whose spirit cadres were asked to implement. In the 2026 text, the references to Marxism-Leninism and Mao Zedong Thought have been removed. Article 3 instead reads like a summary of Xi's political programme. It calls on everyone to use Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era as the guide, emphasises the centrality of his leadership and position, and stresses his vision of China's modernisation. Article 4 makes upholding the authority of "the Party Central Committee with Comrade Xi Jinping at its core" the precondition for all else. Article 9 translates this into routine practice through the "first item on the agenda" system, under which committee meetings must open by studying Mr. Xi's relevant instructions, and demands that committees "resolutely follow the command of the Party Central Committee."



In 2015 regulations, Xi Jinping was merely the author of a 'series of important speeches' whose spirit cadres were to implement, ranked behind Marxism-Leninism and Mao Zedong Thought. REUTERS

Blurred lines

The second shift concerns the remit of local Party committees. The 2015 text empowered them to exercise "overall leadership", but their remit was limited to "political, ideological and organisational" domains. That qualifier has now been deleted. The revised Article 5 directs committees to strengthen overall leadership over economic, political, cultural, social and ecological work, and to make decisions on major issues in their regions. In essence, the fine line between the local Party committee and local government has been further eroded.

Third, on the issue of personnel and the qualities required of them, Article 7 now opens by requiring that political standards come first in staffing local committees, with political integrity as a qualification placed ahead of capability and competence. Political integrity, in this context, implies alignment with the central agenda. In addition, each committee's membership must be filled with the committee one level up, the grounds for automatically ending a member's tenure have been widened, and the higher committee's power to appoint and remove members of lower committees is spelled out more clearly. In short, higher-level committees now enjoy far greater powers of oversight and control over individuals at lower levels.

Fourth, the 2015 regulations were largely about streamlining procedures and, to an extent, empowering local committees to lead. The 2026 document, on the other hand, is focused on building guardrails around what committees and individuals in leadership positions can and cannot do. The emphasis is on discipline and intensifying control by higher-level committees. For example, an entirely new Article 27 lists 10 kinds of prohibited conduct. These range from ensuring that officials implement central decisions to the letter to barring vanity projects, new local government debt and local-level protectionism that hinders the goal of building a unified national market.

Article 18 further reins in the local "top leaders", essentially preventing them from cultivating their own fiefdoms. New procedures also require recusal, oblige the secretary to speak last in meetings and postpone votes when there is serious disagreement. Article 30 introduces lifelong accountability for secretaries and standing committee members for major decision-making errors.

What does all this add up to? Beijing has long wrestled with a dilemma. Local officials control the engines of growth and policy experimentation, but they are also behind debt binges, statistical fudging, protectionism and corruption.

The 2026 regulations resolve this tension decisively in favour of central control. Local committees gain broader authority over everything in their jurisdictions, but they must exercise it within tighter ideological bounds, under closer supervision from above, and with personal liability that never goes away. This structurally tightens Mr. Xi's control over the Party. It is, however, unlikely to produce greater initiative and policy innovation.

(Manoj Kewalramani is the Chairperson of the Geostrategy Programme at the Takshashila Institution)

THE GIST

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

What does the WHO report say about India's TB target?

What was India's target for eliminating TB by 2025 and why has the country missed its target?

Athira Elsa Johnson

The story so far:

India continues to account for nearly a quarter of the world's tuberculosis (TB) burden despite expanded diagnosis and treatment services, falling short of the national target of eliminating TB by 2025. According to the World Health Organization's (WHO) Global Tuberculosis Report, released on November 12, 2026, an estimated 10.6 million people developed TB worldwide in 2025.

While India's estimated TB mortality rate fell by 38%, from 28 deaths per lakh population in 2015 to 18 per lakh in 2025, the country diagnosed and notified 25.3 lakh cases during the year. However, the WHO has not published India's estimated incidence for that year, as the figures are under review.

India set a national target of eliminating TB by 2025, five years ahead of the global Sustainable Development Goal deadline of 2030, incorporated into the National Strategic Plan for TB Elimination 2017-2025.

The plan aimed to reduce estimated incidence from 217 cases per lakh population in 2015 to 43 per lakh by 2025, an 80% reduction. It also sought to reduce TB mortality by 90%, from 32 deaths per lakh to three, and ensure that no family affected by TB faced catastrophic costs due to the disease. The WHO's End TB Strategy had set global targets of reducing incidence by 50% and mortality by 75% by 2025, compared with 2015 levels.

How far has India progressed?

India's TB mortality rate fell by 38% between 2015 and 2025, reaching 18 deaths per lakh population. This exceeded the WHO's 2020 milestone of a 35% reduction, but five years late. The 2025 target was a 75% reduction in mortality. The rate of 18 deaths per lakh remains well above India's national target of three.

The WHO's 2025 report estimated that India's TB incidence had declined from 237 cases per lakh population in 2015 to 187 per lakh in 2024, a reduction of about 21%. This was well short of the reduction envisaged under the national plan.

The National Strategic Plan used an original 2015 incidence baseline of 217 per lakh, while the WHO's revised estimate was 237 per lakh. These figures belong to different estimation contexts and should not be treated as one continuous series. The absence of a 2025 incidence estimate means the latest change in India's disease burden cannot be assessed yet.

Why has India missed its target?

TB elimination requires more than diagnosing and treating people who reach health facilities. Transmission continues when people remain undiagnosed, receive a delayed diagnosis or are not linked to appropriate treatment. Access to testing and follow-up remains uneven, particularly for people in remote areas and vulnerable communities. A substantial number of patients also seek care in the private sector, making complete notification and continuity of treatment important challenges.

India has expanded active case-finding and the use of rapid molecular tests, including through the TB Mukt Bharat Abhiyaan. The WHO report records that 46 % of India's diagnosed cases in 2025 were initially tested using rapid diagnostic tests, up from 38 % in 2024. However, screening must lead to confirmatory diagnosis and appropriate treatment.

The disease is also closely linked to social and economic conditions. Undernutrition increases the risk of developing active TB, while crowded housing and poor ventilation can contribute to transmission. Patients may face costs related to travel, investigations, nutrition and lost wages, even when medicines are provided free through the public health system. These expenses can affect households and make it harder for patients to continue treatment.

Drug-resistant TB adds to the challenge. Resistance to one or more TB medicines makes treatment more complex. Shorter all-oral regimens, including the six-month BPaLM combination for eligible patients with multidrug- or rifampicin-resistant TB, have reduced the treatment burden for some. However, identifying people with resistant disease and linking them to appropriate care remain important.

Why are the incidence figures missing from the WHO report?

Incidence refers to the number of new cases occurring in a population over a specified period. Prevalence measures the number of people who have the disease at a particular point or during a defined period. Notifications refer to cases diagnosed and reported to the health system. Notifications do not represent everyone who developed TB during the year, since some people may not have been diagnosed or reported. The difference between estimated incidence and notifications helps assess gaps in diagnosis and reporting, but is not an exact count of undiagnosed people.

The WHO has withheld India's 2025 incidence estimate while it assesses data from a new district-level sentinel surveillance exercise. The updated estimate is expected in early 2027. The exercise involves population-level surveillance in 50 representative districts. The first round of data collection was completed in 2025. The findings are being examined alongside the results of the 2020-21 national TB prevalence survey. The data need to be assessed for comparability before they can be used to revise national estimates. The absence of an incidence estimate does not mean India had no TB data for 2025.

When will the updated figures be available?

The WHO expects to update India's incidence estimates in early 2027, after the district-level surveillance data have been assessed. The revised figures should provide a clearer picture of the country's TB burden and trends. The latest report records progress in reducing mortality and expanding diagnosis, but India has not met the targets it set for 2025. The updated incidence estimate will help assess the scale of the shortfall. Addressing delays in diagnosis, unequal access to care and the social and economic conditions that sustain transmission will remain central to India's TB response.

GS 2: POLITY & GOVERNANCE
INDIAN EXPRESS PAGE: 10

Missing in reform charters: India's Great Stagnation in state capacity



PRATAP BHANU MEHTA

WHEN WE write the story of India's development, the last couple of decades may well come to be described as India's Great Stagnation. But India's Great Stagnation is not economic. The economy has grown. The Great Stagnation is in the capacity of the Indian state. So much excellent contemporary work has documented this fact in staggering detail, from Devesh Kapur's pioneering work on state capacity to the work of the two most storied bureaucrats currently in government, TV Somanathan and Gulzar Natarajan.

The broad facts are clear. The Indian state, in headcounts, is extremely small, especially if you remove the railways. As Arvind Subramanian and Kapur noted in *A Sixth of Humanity*, total public employment peaked at 3.84 per cent in 1981 and is currently just above 2 per cent, the lowest in Asia. All of this while the size of the economy and the mandate of the state grew. In terms of judges, famously, we have only 1.1 per hundred thousand of the population. Second, the Indian state is hugely malapportioned. In most successful countries like China and the US, two-thirds of government employees work for local government, five times more than in India. Local government, where most of development is delivered, is very weak.

Just to pick a random state, the total number of municipal employees paid by the state in Andhra Pradesh is just 26,000; the total in all Gram Sachivalayas is only 82,000. The Sachiv *ji* of the series *Panchayat* is truly a lonely and forlorn figure. The addition of contractual labour does not compensate for small numbers. Third, there is a chronic shortage of recruitment even against vacant posts; the shortage gets worse the lower the tier of government. According to a recent survey, Gurugram, from where I am writing this, has a 27 per cent shortfall in the district commissioner's office; in many states, this routinely rises to 40 per cent. And fourth, other than the contractualisation of some services, there has been no radical rethinking of the kind of personnel or recruitment strategies we want in the state. Simply put, the Indian state does not have a serious HR policy.

These facts are well known. Their consequences are also well known. First, scarcity of personnel itself creates forms of discretionary power and rents. Even when there are no rents, selective enforcement creates appearances of injustice. Tukaram Mundhe is being accused of selective enforcement, when the brute fact is that the number of food safety officers needed for consistent enforcement across all eateries in Maharashtra would require at least triple the strength of the current staff. Third, as Aditya Dasgupta and Devesh Kapur's paper, "The Political Economy of Bureaucratic Overload", demonstrated, officials with fewer resources are worse at implementing programmes. One bureaucrat once joked that all state governments in India have the capacity to do about two and a half schemes well; the only question is which are the schemes to which they allocate scarce personnel and governance resources. The new PRS State of State Finances report chronicles how much states are still underspending: We do not even have capacity to spend. For every success in a state government, you will pay a hidden cost for something important that remains undone. Fourth, this scarcity of personnel skews the architectural choice of development. I suspect the mania for cash transfers is as much a reflection of the incapacity of the state to do things as it is driven by electoral largesse. The lack of state capacity reflects on national credibility and potentially legitimacy.

> Scarcity of personnel itself creates forms of discretionary power and rents. Even when there are no rents, selective enforcement creates appearances of injustice

Indian stagnation seems to be overdetermined: Certainly, there is an ideological element. After liberalisation, we thought there were gains to reducing government functions and increasing its efficiency. But the move to markets does not necessarily reduce the demands on the state; it changes the character of the risks and externalities we need to manage. In any case, so many core functions of the state cannot be wished away. Even efficiency and technology, and doing away with frivolous functions, presuppose a critical minimum mass to work with. But that naïve ideological picture of liberalisation came in the way of thinking about the state. Because so much state power is discretionary, we fear more state personnel. Another ideological element is centralisation; there is still an unconscionable neglect of local government where most development happens.

Somanathan, Natarajan and Karthik Muralidharan had another explanation: State wages are considerably higher than those in the private sector by orders of magnitude. So, the government accepts low staffing and higher wages. The public would also accept the opportunity to compete to enter a relatively small aristocracy rather than increasing the number of government jobs.

Indian politicians are, by instinct, fiscally conservative. They achieve their goals by keeping the state small, so they can spend on schemes. We also often run fiscal policy through vacancies in recruitment. Part of the explanation for chronic vacancies is that this is a covert way to rein in expenditure. But this produces the worst of all worlds, since it makes serious HR planning impossible. Most people in government also find the prospect of dealing with a larger number of organised government employees politically fraught. To keep the organised power of government employees limited, we are willing to keep the state less capable. But there is a final irony in all this. There have been abortive attempts to do two things. The first is that every scheme, regulation, and function of the state must have some administrative assessment attached to it. The second is a serious HR strategy for the state, including the design of exams and recruitment processes. The irony is that the Indian state does not have the personnel and capacity to do this.

The fact that we have come to see proper expenditure on the state as an expenditure and not an investment is a manifestation of the crisis of the state. In all the talk of reforms, no political formation has thought of how we can escape the Great Stagnation that is the Indian state.

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In renewable energy, bigger isn't always better



ROHIT CHANDRA

GOVERNMENTS LOVE big projects. They bring many things — jobs, contracts, domestic procurement, political visibility, perceptions of modernity, profit opportunities. The last few decades have seen an explosion of infra projects in India. Yet, serious questions are emerging about whether the majority of the benefits are trickling down to citizens. Infra projects do not create long-term economic growth automatically — only the well-planned ones, which control costs, plan the surrounding environment and respond to social needs do.

Bent Flyvbjerg, arguably the foremost scholar on megaprojects and risk, has framed an Iron Law of Megaprojects, which states that large-scale projects are consistently "over budget, over time, under benefits, over and over again". This occurs globally with a range of project types: Metros, high-speed rail, underground tunnels, and even the Olympic Games. Frequently, public money is wasted on underperforming megaprojects. Among his many suggestions are to make more modular, smaller, replicable projects with tightly calibrated cost estimates.

Flyvbjerg's ideas deserve to be kept in mind when thinking about India's energy transition. Much of it in the last decade-and-a-half has been driven by targets and top-down management. More panels, more inter-state transmission, more hydrogen, and more batteries are not necessarily bad. But policy has often ignored the small and local in favour of the large and national.

Renewable energy's emancipatory potential is in its ability to unmoor decentralised populations from the inertia of a centralised grid. Most countries were locked into such grids in the half-century of power sector growth after World War II. In a relatively high-insolation country like India, generating power locally for households, small businesses, and farmers could have undone decades of poor rural energy provision. Instead, India's solar push in the last decade has focused on centralised megaparks. These are not unimportant, but the fiscal, policy and commercial interest in them is almost an order of magnitude larger than in decentralised projects. Only recently has policy begun to refocus on projects at the local feeder level with priorities around rooftop solar, solar irrigation, and household electrification.

Organisations like the SELCO Foundation have been working for decades to create RE-linked business models for farmers and agrarian entrepreneurs. Such efforts need to be taken more seriously. Instead of large banks lending to large power companies, who prefer to sell large amounts of power to large consumers (frequently industrial consumers, or worse, data centres), there needs to be a change in mindset if India's energy transition is going to be truly inclusive.

One obstacle in this is the fact that our banks have forgotten how to lend to small businesses. NBFCs and other institutions have had to fill the gaps. Intermediation gets costed into loans through higher interest, and ultimately our small businesses face much higher costs for solar power systems. Frequently, the economics do not make sense without large state subsidies.

The distribution of solar panel quality is also not uniform for all buyers. Smaller customers in rural areas often get stuck with the worst-quality panels. With little recourse available and low supplier accountability, many MSMEs have burned their hands buying solar power systems and given up on building such systems for themselves.

In theory, many national and state policies are supposed to be able to target MSMEs better — the Udyam portal, for instance. Urban discoms have got considerable investments, are frequently private and on average better managed. But most rural discoms are still state-owned, underinvested, and often more concerned with procurement, tendering, and load balancing than with small consumers. An MSME sector that could employ as many as 200 million people has struggled to participate in the energy transition.

As our national discourse starts putting increasing emphasis on job creation, economist E F Schumacher's ideas around appropriate technologies become more relevant. Schumacher defined appropriate technologies as those which were people-centred, decentralised, resource-efficient, labour (not capital) intensive, and at intermediate costs. However, most of the headlines we seem to be getting these days are on record-breaking investment numbers, revolutionary tender designs, progress towards national targets, and ground-breaking pilot plants.

At COP31, India will inevitably ask for more international climate finance. Who knows when that will materialise. Perhaps it needs to convince its own financial institutions that the everyday energy transition with smaller consumers is just as important as national targets.

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The majority of rural discoms are still state-owned, underinvested, and are often more concerned with procurement, tendering, and load balancing than with small consumers

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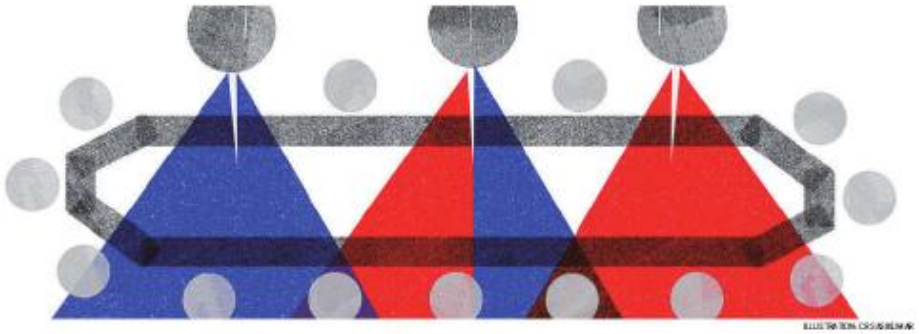
DIS/AGREE

THE BEST OF BOTH SIDES

A weekly column, which offers not this-versus-that, but the best of both sides, to inform the debate



The US, China and Russia have met in Shenzhen. Is it the end of the road for multilateralism?

G3 can't write rules, even if it wants to



SUJAN CHINOY

MANILA AND Shenzhen were at the crosswinds of geopolitics this week. If Manila represented multipolarity, Shenzhen suggests a triadic geopolitical endeavour.

Over 20 heads of state and government congregated in the Philippines for the 49th ASEAN Summit and related meetings. The kaleidoscopic sequence featured the Quad Summit alongside the 21st East Asia Summit and ASEAN meetings with its dialogue partners. ASEAN nations have taken strategic autonomy to the next level, capitalising on the group's centrality in the Indo-Pacific. ASEAN leaders trailpsed from a meeting with Premier Li Qiang — focused on China's role as the primary economic partner — into a meeting with President Donald Trump to discuss reciprocal trade, maritime security in the South China Sea, and supply-chain resilience, all shaped by China's shadow.

A defining paradox of statecraft today is strategic autonomy. Every leader in Manila was pursuing multi-alignment. Competing powers — China and the US — wooed the same constituency. Estranged allies — the US and Canada — roamed the same corridors, all availing themselves of ASEAN's neutral convening power, to advance their own strategic agendas.

The discourse across forums in Manila points to a central truth: The fulcrum of global security, critical supply chains and maritime stability is the Indo-Pacific. Recognising realities, Trump returned to the Quad table in pursuance of leverage ahead of his meeting with presidents Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin in Shenzhen on the sidelines of the 33rd Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Economic Leaders' Meeting.

Xi and Putin skipped Manila, preferring to prioritise their trilateral with Trump. Seven of the 11 ASEAN members are full APEC economies and are participating in the Shenzhen meetings, which, though focused on economic issues, bring together much the same cast, including the leaders of Japan, South Korea, Australia, and Canada, besides a few from Latin America. The motley membership of APEC is a limitation — ensuring that its "consensus" is markedly different from that of the East Asia Summit, the Quad and ASEAN.

The Manila conclaves demonstrate both the level of hedging in international statecraft and the ability of competing nations to engage on certain issues despite big differences, even if outcomes reflect anodyne common denominators.

After the Philippines, the geopolitical spotlight shifted to the trilateral in China. However, Shenzhen is no Yalta. There is little chance of the meeting achieving a substantive reset in global geopolitics. Unlike 1945, when three powers could carve up spheres of influence, this is more about optics than substance — not least because none of the three is in a position to achieve its core objectives in the dialogue.

Both Manila and Shenzhen offered Trump an opportunity to burnish his credentials in Asia after the setback in the mid-terms. The truth is that the US cannot end the war in Ukraine without the latter and the EU at the table. With Europe hunkered down and the emergence of a hostile Congress by January 2027, this seems more unlikely than ever. Moreover, Iran's rejection of dialogue has dented Washington's standing, with Tehran's confidence at an all-time high. Ironically, Trump's idea of a fourth meeting with North Korean leader Kim Jong Un with China's help suggested that he was on the back foot.

China, despite its chokeholds on supply chains, cannot reverse the US's protectionist tide due to structural antagonism in ties. On the other hand, China is loath to subject its growing nuclear arsenal to any arms treaty. The tech war has heated up following the Nvidia scandal. From Beijing's point of view, the longer the US drains its resources in the Strait of Hormuz and Ukraine, the greater its leverage on bilateral issues.

No doubt, Putin is looking to extract a good deal on Ukraine, with Xi on his side. But Russia cannot force Ukraine to submit, nor is it willing to yield. The Shenzhen photo-op is little more than an assertion of its global stature vis-à-vis the two big powers.

Taken together, the week's diplomatic engagements in Manila showed that Indo-Pacific nations are increasingly writing their own rules. Besides, ASEAN's refusal to choose sides has shades of India's multi-alignment. This allowed Prime Minister Narendra Modi — fresh from proposing a long-term Maritime Cooperation Plan and critical minerals tie-up at the 23rd ASEAN-India Summit, and described by Trump variously as a "very tough" and "great leader" — to simultaneously champion ASEAN centrality, push for equitable trade rules and reinforce Quad deterrence against unilateralism and disruptive maritime assertiveness. Overall, India's engagements across all three Manila forums — ASEAN, the East Asia Summit and the Quad — reinforced both its strategic autonomy and its reputation as a credible partner.

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Trilateral undermines global institutions



SURUPA GUPTA

GIVEN THEIR shared scepticism of rules-based cooperation and preference for transactional bargaining and power politics, it is impossible not to question whether the meeting between Donald Trump, Xi Jinping, and Vladimir Putin in Shenzhen foreshadows the further decline of multilateralism. All three epitomise a brand of personalised leadership and diplomacy. And all of them have sought to make a significant break with the past foreign policy of their countries.

Since coming to office in 2012, President Xi's actions have signalled the emergence of a China that pursues a more expansionist foreign policy and seeks to play a larger role in global governance. This has led China to set up institutions of its own rather than participate exclusively in multilateral institutions set up by the US in the aftermath of World War II. It has come to dominate BRICS, set up the AIIB, and supported the formation of the RCEP. Further, it has used its economic resources to develop the Belt and Road Initiative. At the same time, China has been a major beneficiary of Western-led trade liberalisation, so much so that its success likely played a central role in changing the consensus on trade openness in the US.

President Putin has always opposed a US-led international system and has been a major proponent of a multipolar world order. Under his leadership, Russia has used military and diplomatic force to challenge existing norms, beginning with its 2014 annexation of Crimea, the most egregious and recent evidence of Russia's repudiation of the US-led order is its 2022 invasion of Ukraine. Russia has argued for negotiated spheres of influence for major powers. To strengthen its position, it has deepened strategic, economic, and security ties with China and Iran.

Finally, President Trump, responsible for defending the US-led post-war order, has been one of its major critics. He has been particularly critical of institutions of global economic governance such as the World Trade Organisation and even of the US's mainalliance, NATO. He has demonstrated deep scepticism towards multilateralism, preferring instead to make bilateral deals. He has advocated for an "America First" strategy in both security and economic issues. His tariff wars have upended the global norm on international trade, shifting away from multilateral rule-based institutions towards unilateral action and use of bilateral leverage. He has conducted foreign policy through direct engagement with other national leaders, bypassing established diplomatic processes and institutional mechanisms.

What does this mean for multilateralism? Appearances may not reflect reality. It is very likely that we might be reading too much into this meeting. However, it is worth analysing the potential lessons for multilateralism that the trilateral provides.

First, we may be seeing a move away from institutionalised cooperation, common norms, collective deliberation and an effort at inclusiveness and towards direct negotiations among powerful leaders. This is not entirely new; even at the height of multilateralism, it was common practice for a small group of states to establish norms, expecting others to follow these. However, with the rise of multiple emerging powers, established powers sought to appear more inclusive and invite multiple players to the high table. Ending the Ukraine war, for example, is a consequential issue; discussing it without the presence of other European powers and Ukraine itself risks normalising the idea that international problems can be addressed through negotiations among a handful of major powers.

Second, while these leaders represent very different ideas about a future world order, the optics of the three negotiating critical issues strengthen the perception of multipolarity; at the same time, the exclusive presence of three leaders leads us to question the possibility of multilateral cooperation. It suggests the creation of a new hierarchy to replace an older one.

Finally, not only does such a trilateral suggest the marginalisation of others who should have been at the table, but it also invalidates the role of international institutions in solving international problems and setting global norms. It may not signal the end of these institutions; only that they might now become a space for rubber-stamping decisions made elsewhere.

The meeting may be emblematic of a broader shift in international politics. This shift has been happening for at least a decade. While these leaders may represent a similar brand of politics, they have a different understanding of how power is exercised and constrained. It is possible that we may see several competing versions of multilateralism and the growing importance of great-power diplomacy. What remains to be seen is the space that emerging powers and the Global South might occupy in any one of those alternative orders.

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• CLIMATE

Why fixing India's air pollution crisis requires more than technical solutions



EXPERT EXPLAINS

SHAHZAD GANI

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AIR POLLUTION is often discussed as if it were primarily a problem of Delhi-NCR and winters, but much of India experiences unhealthy air year-round.

North India faces severe outdoor pollution episodes because of numerous emission sources and unfavourable winter meteorology. Every winter, experts are called upon to decode these phenomena — atmospheric scientists explain the meteorology, engineers discuss pollution control, and doctors warn about health impacts.

After over a decade of the problem visibly worsening, it is worth examining how this knowledge has helped the situation, the limitations of the current approach, and the scientific research still required.

Known problems and solutions

The sources of air pollution are known by now — fireworks and agricultural residue burning contribute during specific periods, while solid fuels such as firewood and dung cakes are burnt for heating in colder months. Transport, polluting household fuels, waste burning, industry, and construction contribute year-round. Weather affects how emissions disperse and accumulate; it does not create them.

With major sources of pollution well established, we do not need to quantify every source precisely before acting.

Fundamentally, reducing air pollution requires two clear actions: reducing emission sources and lowering emissions from the remaining ones. This means reliable public transport and less dependence on private vehicles, access to clean cooking and heating, alternatives to crop residue burning, functioning municipal waste management, and effective industrial regulation. Stubble burning and firecrackers receive considerable attention, but even addressing these requires looking beyond the immediate and avoiding purely technological fixes.



Anti-smog gun at Rajpath in New Delhi in November. ABHINAV SAHA

Agricultural residue burning cannot be addressed without understanding farming practices and farmers' economic constraints. And, reducing pollution from firecrackers requires not only restrictions and enforcement, but also changing social attitudes, with communities playing a role.

Neither problem can be solved by scientists or enforcement agencies alone.

Relevance of research

Uncertainties about source contributions and atmospheric chemistry will remain, and sustained investment in science and monitoring is essential. Our understanding of air pollution is indeed shaped by measurements, which can aid effective targeting.

Notably, what we measure in the ambient atmosphere is not necessarily what people breathe. For instance, a rooftop monitor does not tell us the particulate matter levels inside a home while someone cooks with solid fuels. For such households, it remains a major part of daily exposure.

We need greater attention to studying personal exposure, particularly among the most vulnerable. But research should help refine interventions, not become a prerequisite for action. The solutions we need are often not those for which we lack expertise, but ones lacking institutional attention, political commitment, and investment.

The question of expertise

This brings us to a more fundamental question: who exactly is an air pollution expert? The obvious answers are atmospheric scientists, engineers developing pollution controls, and medical professionals.

Recognition of expertise is also shaped by institutional affiliation. Scholars from IITs and AIIMS may command immediate recognition, while equally valuable knowledge from less prominent institutions and on-ground practitioners often receives less attention. What about the agricultural economists studying farmers' incentives, or social scientists examining household energy choices?

Expertise is often recognised most readily when it comes with a technological solution, billed as a silver bullet for a complex problem. Institutional changes, such as improving public transport, managing waste, or ensuring access to clean household energy, are less spectacular. They require sustained funding, institutional capacity, coordination, and confronting vested interests.

Technological spectacle should also mean scrutinising claims of solutions. Proposals for smog towers, artificial rain, and other interventions are presented with fanfare, despite questions about their effectiveness. Such projects can consume substantial public resources, create lucrative opportunities for entrepreneurs, and offer governments the optics of action without meaningfully reducing emissions. We need independent scientific scrutiny, as well as civil society willing to question how public money is spent.

Those living and working with the highest pollution exposure must also be accounted for, including street vendors, construction workers, sanitation workers, farmers, and communities alongside industrial facilities. Work and the choices available to people shape their exposure. For a large section, earning a livelihood may take precedence over pollution. Similarly, the task of household cooking is borne disproportionately by women, whose exposure is rarely reflected in some measurements.

Effective interventions must therefore consider safer working conditions, livelihood alternatives, and better economic opportunities. Knowledge gaps must be filled without delaying action on what is known. The priority must be to translate that knowledge into cleaner transport, better waste management, and effective regulation.