

# EDITORIAL HIGHLIGHTS

23-09-2026

## GS 2: INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS THE HINDU PAGE: 8

### *Haifa — a century-old battle, the politics of memory*

**T**he September 23, 1918 Battle of Haifa occupies a curious place in the intertwined histories of India, Israel, and Palestine. What was, in military terms, a small but tactically significant cavalry action in the final phase of the First World War has, over the past century, become a site of layered remembrance, celebrated, contested, reclaimed, and reinterpreted by different communities for different purposes. Remembering Haifa today requires navigating not only the battlefield itself but also the shifting terrain of postcolonial identity, diplomatic symbolism, and the moral ambiguities of imperial history.

For India, Haifa is often invoked as a symbol of the extraordinary global footprint of Indian soldiers during the First World War. More than a million Indians served overseas, from Flanders to Mesopotamia, and over 74,000 died in a war not of their own making. The cavalry charge at Haifa, executed by the Jodhpur, Mysore, and Hyderabad Lancers, stands out as one of the most dramatic episodes of Indian valour abroad. Contemporary British war diaries describe the action as decisive in securing the port city and enabling the Allied advance northwards to Damascus. It was also, for military buffs, one of the last great cavalry charges, and featured the 15th Imperial Service Cavalry Brigade which overcame principally Ottoman forces. The complication is that the Indian forces were under British command – and many Palestinian Arabs were on the side of the Ottomans.

#### Reclaiming military history

In the decades since Independence, Haifa has become part of a broader effort to reclaim India's military history from the shadow of the empire. The soldiers who fought there were colonial subjects, but their courage and sacrifice belong to India's national story. Commemorating Haifa thus becomes an act of historical recovery: an assertion that Indian agency existed even within the constraints of imperial command.

The Haifa narrative also illustrates how postcolonial nations reinterpret their pasts to assert dignity and continuity. For India, celebrating the battle (and renaming a First World War memorial as "Teen Murti Haifa Chowk") is a way of acknowledging that its soldiers shaped world events long before the country became a sovereign republic. For Israel, the memory of Indian cavalry "liberating" Haifa has been woven into a narrative of gratitude and friendship, symbolised by memorials and annual ceremonies. These commemorations serve diplomatic purposes, but they also reflect a genuine historical connection.

Yet, this reclamation of agency is complicated by the fact that the soldiers themselves had no say in the political consequences of their actions.



**Shashi Tharoor**

Fourth-term Member of Parliament (Lok Sabha) for Thiruvananthapuram (Congress party), the Chairman of the Parliamentary Standing Committee on External Affairs, and the Sahitya Akademi Award-winning author of 29 books, including 'An Era of Darkness: The British Empire in India'

They fought bravely, but they fought under a flag not their own, in a war whose outcomes would reshape West Asia in ways that continue to reverberate.

This is where the moral ambiguity of Haifa becomes unavoidable. The Indian cavalry's victory helped secure British control over Palestine, enabling the implementation of the Balfour Declaration and the subsequent political transformations that led to the creation of Israel. For many Palestinians, this is not a story of liberation but of dispossession. When Palestinian representatives say to Indians celebrating the Battle of Haifa, "We did not ask you to liberate us," they are not questioning the bravery of Indian soldiers but the imperial project in which that bravery was embedded.

This tension highlights a broader challenge in remembering colonial-era military history. Acts of courage can coexist with outcomes that later generations view with discomfort or regret. The soldiers who charged up the slopes of Mount Carmel did not choose the geopolitical consequences of their victory. Yet, those consequences shape how different communities remember the battle today.

#### As a diplomatic bridge

In recent decades, Haifa has acquired new significance as a symbol of India-Israel friendship. Indian leaders have visited the Haifa memorial; Israeli officials have spoken warmly of the Indian role in the city's history. These gestures reflect the deepening strategic partnership between the two countries, but they also demonstrate how historical memory can be mobilised to strengthen contemporary ties.

At the same time, this diplomatic embrace has sparked debate among historians. Some Israeli scholars argue that the Indian role has been overstated, and that the real credit should go to the British and Australian soldiers, a view that partially reflects their discomfort at "owing" much to colonised brown-skinned cavalrymen. Meanwhile, Indian military historians point to British war records that clearly credit the Indian cavalry with the decisive breakthrough. These disagreements are not merely academic; they reflect the politics of national pride and the desire to shape historical narratives in ways that reinforce present-day identities.

The Palestinian critique of the Haifa narrative adds another layer of complexity. For Palestinians, the 1918 campaign is part of a longer story of foreign domination and displacement. From their perspective, the Indian cavalry's victory facilitated British rule and the subsequent transformations that reshaped their homeland. This view does not diminish the bravery of Indian soldiers, but it challenges celebratory narratives that ignore the lived experience of those who were "liberated". To many Palestinians, Indians

should not be celebrating their role in a colonial project that eventually led to the "naqba" that displaced so many and uprooted them from their homeland.

"For Palestinians," says their Ambassador to India, Abdullah Mohammed Abu Shawesh, "history is ... a tool for affirming roots and shaping the future, particularly in the face of an ongoing campaign against the Palestinian narrative led by the Zionist movement. ... It is therefore natural that we, as Palestinians, are highly sensitive to any attempt to manipulate history, as such attempts directly affect our right to exist and to determine our future." In a letter to this writer, he sees "a clear Israeli effort to link contemporary India with the history of the establishment of Israel", and questions India's embrace of the "Israeli narrative", arguing that the Indian soldiers were not heroes or valorous "martyrs" but "victims" of British colonial exploitation.

Indians, too, have their own ambivalence. Many feel pride in the courage of the soldiers but discomfort at the idea that Indian blood was shed in service of an imperial project that contributed to the dispossession of another people. This tension reflects a broader challenge in postcolonial memory: how to honour the sacrifices of those who served without endorsing the political aims of the empire they served under.

#### A site of contested memory

The challenge is that remembering Haifa today requires holding multiple truths at once. There is no denying that Indian soldiers fought with extraordinary courage. But they fought under colonial command, without agency over the political consequences, and their bravery had nothing to do with any Indian national ambitions. Their victory is celebrated in Israel and resented in parts of Palestine.

The battle of Haifa is a symbol of India's global military legacy, but also a reminder of the moral ambiguities of the empire. It is a diplomatic bridge between India and Israel, but its role in India's relations with the Palestinian people is morally ambiguous. Haifa, in other words, is many things, but it is above all a site of contested memory.

A mature historical consciousness does not demand choosing one narrative over another. It requires acknowledging the full complexity of the past: the bravery and the burden, the pride and the pain, the honour of the soldiers and the ambivalence of the outcomes. Haifa endures not because it offers a transcendent story, but because it forces us to confront the layered realities of history: that courage can serve causes not chosen by those who display it, that memory can unite and divide, and that the past can illuminate the present only when we are willing to face it in all its complexity.

The Battle of Haifa represents India's global military legacy, even as it lays bare the moral complexities of the empire

## GS 3: ECONOMY THE HINDU PAGE: 8

### Using trade treaty policy to strengthen arbitration

India's long-standing negotiations to sign new bilateral investment treaties (BITs) and free trade agreements (FTAs) with its prominent economic partners are bearing fruit. It has signed BITs with the United Arab Emirates (2024), Israel (2025), and Uzbekistan (2024), and FTAs with New Zealand (April 2026), the United Kingdom (July 2025), European Free Trade Association (March 2024), and Oman (signed December 2025). While much of the conversation has understandably focused on the potential economic benefits of these agreements and the mechanism for resolving investor-state disputes under international law (or the omission thereof), an important facet is frequently missing: their impact on commercial arbitration within India.

**The opportunity beyond market access**  
India's expanding network of BITs and FTAs presents an opportunity that goes beyond attracting foreign capital and opening export markets. Properly designed, these agreements can help India strengthen something every international business needs: a dispute-resolution system that is predictable, enforceable and trusted.

India already has the basic statutory architecture. The Arbitration and Conciliation Act, 1996, covers domestic arbitration, international commercial arbitration and the enforcement of foreign arbitral awards. The question now is how India's treaty policy can reinforce that architecture. The answers vary.

In the first instance, India's recent FTAs have generally omitted an investor-state dispute settlement (ISDS). However, given that a sizeable share of investment in India is made through contracts between foreign investors and Indian state agencies, future FTAs could better explain the rationale for this policy. For example, when the European Union-Australia FTA was negotiated, the contracting parties clarified that "the agreement does not cover the protection of



**Arun Chawla**  
Director General of  
the Indian Council  
of Arbitration

investments, which is not necessary given the level of trust in the respective legal systems of both parties".

Taking a cue from this approach, India's future FTAs should include provisions or preambular text that similarly clarify that the absence of an ISDS is justified by the availability of commercial arbitration remedies in India. Such provisions, alongside recent legislative reforms to strengthen India's arbitration framework and the pro-arbitration approach of Indian courts, could help provide a middle ground between the state's reservations about an ISDS and the desire of foreign investors to avoid litigating in Indian courts.

The second instance is where India's BITs, which do provide for an ISDS, explicitly distinguish between the scope of treaty-based arbitration and commercial arbitration pursuant to a contract. For example, the India-Uzbekistan BIT excludes "disputes arising solely from an alleged breach of a contract" between the state and a foreign investor from the scope of an ISDS.

Such treaties also make access to ISDS conditional on foreign investors exhausting local remedies. They require foreign investors to submit their claims to the relevant domestic courts or administrative bodies of the host State for a specified period. The wording appears to exclude commercial arbitration tribunals seated in India. There does not appear to be a cogent policy reason for this exclusion. Accordingly, future BITs could clarify that foreign investors may also satisfy the exhaustion-of-local-remedies requirement by submitting the substance of their investment dispute to commercial arbitration in India.

Finally, India's recent BITs indicate that the Government of India does not favour third-party funding in an ISDS. Since ISDS claims implicate sovereign decisions and can have a chilling effect on States' regulatory policymaking, this approach is understandable. However, these considerations do not apply to commercial arbitration in India.

Given these distinctions, India's future BITs and FTAs should clarify that their prohibition of third-party funding in an ISDS does not, by itself, signal the impermissibility of such funding in commercial arbitration in India. This would, in turn, create room for Indian regulators to develop a coherent and comprehensive policy on third-party funding for the domestic commercial arbitration ecosystem, consistent with global best practices. Such a nuanced approach is also necessary for India to realise its ambition of becoming a global arbitration hub.

#### What investors look for

Ultimately, investors deciding where to invest their capital do not assess tax rates or market access alone. They also ask what happens when a relationship breaks down. A country that can answer this question convincingly has a significant economic advantage.

India's recent BITs and FTAs already demonstrate an evolution towards more sophisticated dispute-resolution mechanisms that balance investment protection with the country's needs. The opportunity now is to connect that treaty practice with the goal of bolstering commercial arbitration in India.

The goal should be straightforward: agreements that strive to prevent disputes, arbitration proceedings that resolve such disputes efficiently and responsibly, and courts that enforce arbitral awards predictably. From this perspective, India does not need to make every treaty an arbitration treaty. Yet, through subtle adjustments, it can make commercial arbitration an integral part of the infrastructure supporting the country's trade and investment relationships.

If India gets that balance right, its growing treaty network can do more than open markets. It can help establish India itself as a jurisdiction in which international businesses are willing to make commitments, with the confidence that, when those commitments falter, any resulting dispute will be resolved credibly and efficiently.

India's  
expanding  
treaty network  
can help build a  
stronger  
arbitration  
ecosystem

## GS 2: ECONOMY

### THE HINDU PAGE: 10

# Breakdown of civic infra in India

**T**he breakdown of civic infrastructure is killing ordinary and unassuming citizens every day. Lives are now lost in India due to abject governance failure rather than to natural or traditional causes. Further, citizens' growing apathy towards governance failure is also concerning.

The age-old practice of blaming the Central and State governments is getting tiresome as it is clear that these incidents are fundamentally caused due to systemic failure, bureaucratic greed, absence of strict enforcement, and brazen entitlement of the general public.

Be it an illegal billboard in Mumbai that killed ordinary bystanders, or illegally constructed buildings that are constantly collapsing in Delhi, the same storyline follows – the police arrest the accused, suspend a few officials, a compensation is awarded (read: blood money) to the next of kin, and a vague promise to carry out a strict investigation is given. A few days later, it fades from public memory until the next tragedy occurs and conversations around civic responsibility and governance failure are reignited. One thing that is absolutely clear from these series of events is that administrative officials are privy to illegal activities, and it is their connivance that fuels the public's brazenness to break regulations.

Another common feature is that the accused responsible for the mishap usually has prior criminal offences registered against them. Despite this, they continue engaging in illegal activities because the message from the system is



**Prachi Dutta**

Corporate lawyer licensed in New York and India, advises companies and funds, and serves as an Adjunct Professor at Shiv Nadar University

An official who clears or knowingly ignores an unauthorised structure should face the same consequences as the owners who built it

loud and clear – that there is no accountability for individual actions and as long as corruption is fuelling the system, officials will turn a blind eye. Officials who fail in their responsibility of upholding civic order should be held liable. An official who clears or knowingly ignores an unauthorised structure should face the same consequences as the owners who built it. It is only then that one can work towards trying to enforce regulations.

#### Poor urban planning

While India's population size is an administrative hurdle that is unique to India, poor urban planning has exacerbated the problems caused by population pressure. A case in point are unauthorised colonies in Delhi that mushroom rapidly. The fact that these colonies are exempt from urban planning regulations gives building owners a free pass to build structures without any approval; a form of sanctioned impunity.

The entitlement of building owners is also significant. Be it in an upscale residential area or in an unauthorised colony in Delhi, building owners encroaching upon public land for their private use is a common occurrence in India. The reason for the brazenness is simple – no collective municipal drive has thoroughly addressed and deterred private encroachment.

One routinely reads about symbolic anti-encroachment drives; but most such drives are targeted at the marginalised groups of society who cannot retaliate. Selective enforcement is not enforcement, and in fact condones certain classes of encroachment. Civic action must target all private

encroachment with equal scrutiny in order to ensure compliance with norms.

In 2025, a fire broke out in a bar in Goa when fireworks were used indoors during a performance. The limited escape routes and crowding led to several people dying in the fire. While this particular outlet is permanently closed and the owners were arrested, what is upsetting is that consumers continue to patronise other establishments owned by the same owners.

In the U.S., established food and coffee chains have reported a slowdown in sales because of consumer boycott movements due to the political stance of these chains. If consumer boycott movements can lead to a slowdown of global conglomerates, then Indian consumers should also boycott establishments that have brazenly violated rules that have led to loss of life.

However, for an ordinary citizen who may not remember the incident, lack of access to compliance information such as publicly displayed compliance certificates in establishments and a public registry of violation norms, makes it harder for them to make an informed choice. Lack of access to this information is a governance failure, and access to it may be a step towards strengthening compliance with regulatory norms.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, establishments across India were under strict operating guidelines. Any deviation resulted in their immediate closure. The same enforcement must continue to be applied, and all buildings must be monitored to ensure compliance with guidelines.

## GS 2: INTERNATIONAL REATIONS

### INDIAN EXPRESS PAGE: 12

# A world on the brink, diplomacy and politics as usual

**S**OON, Xi Jinping and Donald Trump will meet. World leaders will descend on the UN General Assembly. Yet another forum of leaders, P4M, with Canada, Europe, Brazil, and Kenya, was just announced. The SCO met at Bishkek. The BRICS summit has just concluded in Delhi. The liturgy of international politics continues. Talking is usually good. This has helped put a floor under the multiple crises. In some cases, like trade, these summits have opened up new options for the world and created new alliances. It has, to use the current buzzword, helped build resilience. Who knows what might have happened without all this activity? In all likelihood, we would be worse off.

At the same time, it is not difficult to shake off the deep vertigo this activity is inducing. One of the greatest novels of the 20th century, Robert Musil's *The Man Without Qualities*, had captured this well. It is, psychologically, a richly layered novel. I first read it right after the fall of the Berlin Wall, when its pessimism about modernity seemed out of place. But its disorienting force lingers in two respects. The first is the sense of a civilisation that is sophisticated, intelligent, inventive, smart, capable, refined, even if a little amoral and confused. Yet, it has no sense of how to mobilise judgement or political action to avoid impending catastrophe. But the second thing is the weird juxtaposition between a sense of impending danger, even catastrophe, and the normal routines of ordinary life and diplomacy. Leaders and people were not exactly ignorant of what was going on. They were not quite "sleepwalking". Everyone was

aware of the momentous changes in politics, in technology, in society. They were daily news. But in a way, that was part of the paradox. Catastrophe talk or talk of dangers was just another one of those things. It is as if, in our times, the catastrophic melting of the glaciers and not quite getting the proportion of ice right in a cold coffee were on the same level of attention.

There is, of course, a virtue in not catastrophising; frenzy can produce fatalism or bad decisions. But the yawning gap between the machinery and protocols of international politics and the underlying historical dangers is quite striking. One temptation is to put this down to the absence of global leadership. One of the disturbing features of our current condition is that the fate of the world seems increasingly concentrated in the hands of a few individuals: Trump, Xi, a bunch of technology executives, and maybe a bunch of energy barons. In such a world, the characteristics of the few individuals seem to matter disproportionately. And yet never was the world more bereft of global leadership, if by leadership we mean the ability



PRATAP BHANU MEHTA

You have to wonder: On a simple measure of significant risks to humanity — widespread war, climate change, pandemics, nuclear risks, and now possibly AI — is all this activity amounting to making us safer?

China nor the United States can unilaterally frame the global order according to their whims. That is a relief. There are no hegemonies. Countries can constrain each other. But they cannot produce collective action. Foreign policy is made under domestic constraints, and so it should often be. Governments are accountable to their citizens, who will care about the price of food, fuel, and employment. Domestic audiences in big powers also care about their national advantage: Leaders cannot surrender territory, accept defeat without facing domestic consequences, or be seen to concede technological advances to an adversary. The tension between national and global interests is baked into our sense of the normal. Not saving humanity might eventually be a disaster for any country, but trying to save it will often incur a high cost for the leader now. In normal times, these tensions are part of the fabric of international relations. We live with them, and they can be quite productive.

But when the magnitude of the risks has changed considerably, these tensions skirt at the edge of a breaking point, which is where we are now on every issue.

In none of the wars that have systemic consequences for the world — Russia-Ukraine, America-Iran, Iran-Saudi, Israel and its neighbours — is there a bargaining solution within the current frameworks of territory, power and prestige. In AI, the incentives to accelerate, when driven by the quest for technological advantage, come just at the moment when

the technology requires slowing down, regulation and deeper forms of information sharing. Climate negotiations have proved nearly impossible as each state protects its own energy security. Global debt seems an easy solution to economic woes. We want to continue to act normally when the stakes are no longer normal.

The summits will occur. The commitment to dialogue will be announced. The communiqué will be hailed as a triumph, as it was in the recent BRICS summit. The machinery working gives us a sense of normalcy. But you have to wonder: On a simple measure of significant risks to humanity — widespread war, climate change, pandemics, nuclear risks, and now possibly AI — is all this activity amounting to making us safer?

Musil's subtle point was not that we are foolish, ignorant or even depraved. It was rather that we might be rational, a bit too rational in taking our cues from normal times. Our leaders are doing what they are supposed to do: Preserve economic growth and energy security, compete for technological superiority, worry about the next election, and even stage the pageantry of summits. But conventional rationality and normalcy will not cut it. As in Musil's novel, a character says, "The function of diplomacy is to keep what we have." To this, the character Arnheim gives a dark reply, "Keeping what we have leads to war." The focus on Xi and Trump may make us forget just how stuck, and how much at risk, we are.

The writer is contributing editor, The Indian Express

## GS 3: ENVIRONMENT

### INDIAN EXPRESS PAGE: 12

# Saving the rhino, restoring grasslands



BHUPENDER  
YADAV

**F**OR INDIA, the greater one-horned rhinoceros is much more than an iconic species. It is an integral part of the ecological and cultural landscape of the Brahmaputra floodplains and the Terai grasslands. The animal's historical range extended across the northern Indian Subcontinent, along the Indus, Ganga and Brahmaputra river systems. Today, its wild population in the country is concentrated mainly in Assam, UP and West Bengal. Under Prime Minister Narendra Modi's leadership, India is now pushing for the expansion of the rhino range.

The rhino conservation strategy is guided by the understanding that conservation should not be limited to safeguarding existing rhino concentrations but should work toward establishing secure populations across suitable parts of their historical range. The National Conservation Strategy for the rhinoceros, launched in 2019, provides a framework for strengthening existing populations, restoring the species to suitable former habitats, maintaining genetic security and habitat connectivity, promoting scientifically planned translocations and building climate resilience into rhino conservation.

The rhino's story in India is a story of recovery. The animal's numbers have increased from around 1,500 in the 1980s to more than 4,000 as of September 2024.

The five-year Phase I (2026-2031), proposed for support through the National CAMPA Authority, brings together Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Bihar, Uttar Pradesh and West Bengal, with a focus on scientific monitoring, protection, habitat restoration and management, translocation planning, coexistence and capacity building. It seeks not only to consolidate the existing populations but also to support the species' expansion into suitable areas in Bihar and Arunachal Pradesh.

The rhino's habitats are also important for swamp deer, wild buffalo, elephants, tigers, grassland birds and several smaller species. Grasslands are dynamic ecosystems that require science-based management to prevent degradation, inappropriate succession and the spread of invasive species. The Rhino Conservation Action Plan provides for mapping grasslands and wetlands, identifying invasive species, prioritising habitats for intensive restoration and developing protected area-specific management protocols. This species-focused effort is comple-

mented by a national initiative. A five-year (2026-2031) project on the Comprehensive Assessment of Indian Grasslands, to be implemented by the Wildlife Institute of India, Indian Council of Forestry Research and Education and Forest Survey of India, will assess grassland extent, ecological condition, biodiversity, degradation, ecosystem services and carbon potential. It will support a National Grassland Atlas, restoration priorities and long-term management guidelines.

Flooding is intrinsic to landscapes such as Kaziranga. But the increasing frequency and intensity of extreme climatic events can create new conservation pressures. Maintaining access to higher ground, securing ecological connectivity, protecting dispersal routes and managing habitats will be important. The National Conservation Strategy recognises climate-resilient management as part of the protection framework for the species.

Technology, too, has an expanding role. Modern surveillance, spatial monitoring, veterinary diagnostics, genetic tools and decision-support systems can reinforce traditional fieldcraft. No technology, however, can substitute the forest guards, watchers, mahouts, veterinarians and field officers who patrol these landscapes. Equally important are the communities living around rhino habitats. The future of the species depends on conservation being seen not as an isolated governmental activity but as a shared enterprise.

India's experience has also shown the importance of cooperation beyond state and national boundaries. At the Second Asian Rhino Range States Conservation Meeting held in New Delhi in 2019, India joined Bhutan, Indonesia, Malaysia and Nepal in adopting the New Delhi Declaration to strengthen conservation cooperation for Asian rhinoceros species. The Centre and the rhino-bearing states have since continued to work within this broader framework.

On World Rhino Day, September 22, we take satisfaction in the distance travelled. In protecting rhinos, we are also protecting the rivers, grasslands, wetlands, forests and communities that together make these landscapes among India's richest treasures. The rhino's recovery is a national achievement. Its future is a national responsibility.

The writer is Union Cabinet Minister for Environment, Forest & Climate Change

Grasslands are dynamic ecosystems that require science-based management to prevent degradation, inappropriate succession and the spread of invasive species