

EDITORIAL HIGHLIGHTS

26-10-2026

GS 2: INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS THE HINDU PAGE: 08

U.S. immigration restrictions may outlast Trump

In its second term, the Donald Trump administration has been active in restricting legal immigration to the United States. The administration's attempt to impose a \$100,000 payment requirement on certain new H-1B petitions, changes to visa renewal procedures, the introduction of a wage-weighted selection system, and the latest suspensions of the Program Electronic Review Management (PERM) process are cases in point, disproportionately impacting Indian immigrants and firms.

It is tempting to read these developments as a product of the Trump administration alone, but they reflect deeper political interests that are likely to survive post-Trump. Indian nationals account for 70% of H-1B visa approvals, with one-fifth of the visas going to employees of Indian-origin companies. This means that, as the bipartisan focus on immigration reform continues, the issue is likely to sustain as a friction point in India-U.S. relations.

The views of the Democrats and Republicans
Democrats are expected to dominate the upcoming midterm elections in November. They view immigration through a rights-based lens, and their voters remain supportive of both legal immigration and increased legalisation of undocumented immigrants. Some 75% of Democrats see skilled immigration as good for the U.S., compared with 54% of Republicans. Even under the current administration, Democrats have pushed for easing F-1 student visa requirements and have traditionally enjoyed the support of diaspora communities in the U.S., including the Indian diaspora.

However, prominent Democratic Senators such as Dick Durbin and Richard Blumenthal, as well as progressive Independents such as Bernie Sanders, have also pushed for bills seeking H-1B reforms. Democrats view alleged fraud in the H-1B visa system as a serious challenge that needs to be addressed. Similarly, the labour wing of the Democratic Party views the H-1B visa programme as a potential threat to domestic labour



Abhishek Kadiyala

Research Analyst,
Geostrategy
Programme,
Takshashila
Institution

With both the Republicans and Democrats committed to immigration reform, India faces continued uncertainty

protections and workers' rights. The Democrats' immigrant voter base, their open opposition to the H-1B visa fee hikes, and resistance to these restrictions from businesses and unions suggest that a Democratic-controlled Congress may soften the harshest executive measures and tone down the rhetoric. However, concerns about visa fraud and worker protections mean that Democrats are likely to keep up the pressure on the outsourcing model and continue pushing for H-1B reforms.

While a plurality of Republicans support restrictions on legal immigration, this number has declined considerably since 2025. Among the Republican leadership, there is a visible split between anti-immigration nationalists and pro-immigration business interests. The Trump administration's hikes in the H-1B visa fee is an example of this conflict. While the administration was openly critical of the programme and aggressively pushed for the fee increase, it subsequently diluted the measure by including exemptions for graduates of U.S. universities and existing visa holders, following pressure from businesses and universities.

The business divide

The debate over wage-weighted entries versus the lottery system for H-1B visas has dominated discussions on immigration within the U.S. business community. There are three broad categories in this debate. The first is the random lottery system that was in place until 2026, which benefited outsourcing firms and start-ups. The second is the wage-weighted lottery system (February 2026), which infers wage levels based on experience, job role and location, dividing visa quotas into four categories. On the surface, this system might benefit big-tech firms, but it could also benefit outsourcing firms that hire highly experienced workers for lower wages. The third is the actual wage weighted lottery model, which is supported by U.S.-based industries. This approach could dilute the advantages enjoyed by outsourcing firms while benefiting American hires and also F1 student hires.

For the artificial intelligence (AI) and big-tech business community, this reform could be beneficial in two ways. First, AI graduate programmes and advanced research roles in the U.S. rely heavily on international talent, with demand for AI skills growing faster than the supply of domestic graduates. The reform could therefore help AI firms secure top international talent for higher wages.

Second, the AI sector is expanding into market segments traditionally occupied by start-ups and outsourcing companies, which often perform low technology maintenance and communication roles. The AI sector could therefore benefit if these start-ups and outsourcing firms were compelled to hire fewer workers. With the AI sector playing a prominent role in campaign contributions for the 2026 midterm elections, these policies to counter outsourcing firms are likely to continue. With over 54% of India's software services exports going to the U.S., which remains the top market for Indian information technology (IT) outsourcing, this represents a major challenge for India. However, these developments could also be viewed as positive news for Indian students at U.S. universities.

Looking ahead

The U.S. Department of Labor's suspension of eight firms, including not only Indian outsourcing companies such as Infosys, Tata Consultancy Services and Wipro but also major technology firms such as Microsoft and Adobe, from green card sponsorship reinforces this trend. It raises the cost of hiring foreign workers for businesses as a whole, creating pressure that remains largely beyond partisan control.

With Mr. Trump's political power potentially diminished after November, anti-immigration rhetoric could decline. However, with both parties committed to immigration reform, India should continue to expect an unfavourable and unpredictable immigration landscape.

The views expressed are personal

GS 2: INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

THE HINDU PAGE: 08

New avenues

India and Poland have no conflict, but are pulled apart by other nations

Sixteen years after his visit as Poland's Prime Minister, Donald Tusk's travel to Delhi and Bengaluru last week was to signal a renewed desire to work closely with India. Mr. Tusk's visit, two months ahead of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's trip to Brussels to sign the India-European Union (EU) Free Trade Agreement, indicated one part of his agenda. Both sides agreed that it was time to develop trade, currently worth just \$6 billion, to double its size by 2030. Mr. Tusk's last visit to India was in 2017, as President of the European Council for the EU-India summit, and it is fitting that his trip was just as the FTA is finalised and ratified after years of delays. Another area of increased India-Poland collaboration is in technology, AI and defence hardware, critical minerals, renewable and nuclear energy given Poland's expertise in the last few decades and India's capacity for scale. As the EU's sixth largest economy, Poland has officially crossed the \$1 trillion GDP (nominal terms) milestone. Its \$120-billion-dollar tech economy is also gaining global interest. A large part of Polish machinery and parts is exported to Germany, which in turn has a growing share of Indian imports, and India could consider more trilateral collaborations for manufacturing and mining technology. The two sides agreed to establish a "Defence Industry Dialogue" and explore a dialogue on counter-terrorism cooperation. Finally, the Modi-Tusk talks focused on geopolitics, particularly the ongoing war in Ukraine. The war's impact, especially on the Global South, has been a concern for India, and the Modi government's initiative to work on an agreement acceptable to Kyiv and Moscow on grain exports and seafarers' safety was discussed. The four-pronged plan, announced by External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar during his September visit to Warsaw, won Mr. Tusk's support.

At the India-Poland Business Forum in Bengaluru, Mr. Tusk, who was accompanied by a Polish business delegation, said the challenge now was in "translating" the talks and MoUs signed into actual joint ventures between businesses. Apart from the distance and geographies, there is the matter of trust, given India's defence engagement with Russia and Poland's defence ties with Pakistan. Poland is credited with training Pakistan's Air Force in its early years; a mutual defence cooperation agreement was signed in 2018. India has a unique and enduring partnership with Russia, and New Delhi is unlikely to accept Warsaw's strictures over its military engagement and exercises with Russia that caused a controversy earlier this year during the Polish Foreign Minister's visit. It is essential for Delhi and Warsaw to complete the confidentiality of classified information that is still being negotiated and draw up the parameters of future cooperation based on realities. Mr. Tusk's statement that India and Poland today have no "conflicts of interest" is a significant aspiration, for two countries that share old values, and new avenues of partnership.

GS 1: GEOGRAPHY

THE HINDU PAGE: 08

Wicked surprise

Northeast monsoon is more unpredictable, and south must be wary

As India recovers from a monsoon-deficit year, there is both hope and trepidation regarding the prospects for that 'other monsoon', or the 'northeast monsoon'. While contributing only around a quarter of India's annual rainfall, it is largely focused on the south-east peninsula regions of Tamil Nadu, Puducherry, coastal Andhra Pradesh, Rayalaseema, south interior Karnataka and Kerala. The southwest monsoon, influenced by a strengthening El Niño, has already left its desiccating mark. Rainfall from June-September was 759.4 mm against 868.6 mm, a 12.6% deficit, the driest in 11 years. This has impacted *kharif* sowing and is reflected in food inflation.

The India Meteorological Department (IMD) has said that this year, the northeast monsoon rainfall, spanning October to December, would likely be 'normal,' meaning in line with a 50-year average and within a 12% error window. Most parts of the country, it said, are expected to receive below-normal rainfall, except some areas of northwest India and southern parts of peninsular India, where rainfall is likely to be normal to above-normal. The wide error window, however, is far less precise than its forecasts for the southwest monsoon with its margin of 5%, and can sometimes make the northeast monsoon the bearer of nasty surprises. For instance, December 1, 2015, saw the city of Chennai deluged by its heaviest rainfall in 24-hours in over a century; at least 500 lives were lost and 18 lakh people displaced in the State. That year and the present are linked by a common thread: a powerful El Niño. Associated with the heating up of the Central Pacific, the El Niño is linked to the drying up of the southwest monsoon rains but also yoked – not always – with a vigorous northeast monsoon. Other than in 2015, several El Niño years, such as 1997 and 2009, have been associated with above-normal rainfall between October and December in Tamil Nadu though El Niño years, such as 2002 and 1982, saw a poor northeast monsoon (and a predictably bad southwest monsoon). While the climate mechanisms linking a vigorous northeast monsoon and El Niño are still to be fully understood, it appears the warming patterns of the El Niño tend to deflect rain-bearing cyclonic circulations in unpredictable ways. Therefore, the Centre and the southern States ought to take enough precautions: from clearing up stormwater drains, fortifying shelters, making provisions for infrastructure damage and tightening weather warning forecasts to prepare for torrents.

GS 2: POILITY

THE HINDU PAGE: 09

The need for a national media council

The recent protests called by the Cockroach Janta Party (CJP), and helmed by Opposition parties, demanding the resignation of Chief Election Commissioner Gyanesh Kumar have exposed a chink in journalists' armour. The crackdown on journalists, especially freelancers and independent journalists, during the October 10 protests, has rekindled the debate on who has the right to be recognised as a journalist and about who decides who is a journalist.

One has seen how during the CJP protests, both in July over the NEET paper leak and in October over the demand for the CEC's removal, freelancers and independent journalists, and content creators descended in hordes at the protest venue already bulging at the seams with reporters from registered media houses. However, during the second round of protests on October 10, phalanxes of riot police removed them from the protest site and sent them to detention centres. Only journalists with the Press Information Bureau (PIB) or Directorate of Information and Publicity (DIP) accreditation were allowed to cover the protests.

A Bench comprising Chief Justice of India (CJI) Surya Kant and Justice Joydip Bagchi, while hearing a Public Interest Litigation (PIL) which seeks the protection of the right to freedom of expression by freelance journalists and content creators, wondered whether the right to freedom of expression empowered every citizen of this country to be a journalist. "If everyone starts becoming a journalist, it will create problems for every other



Rakesh Goswami

Professor of Journalism at Indian Institute of Mass Communication, New Delhi

Just like there is the Bar Council of India for lawyers and an Institute of Chartered Accountants of India for chartered accountants, the media council can recognise all working journalists, freelance journalists, camerapersons and technicians

person," the CJI said. During the hearing, senior advocate Indira Jaisingh said that there must be a national protocol for police not to obstruct the professional work of any journalist who has an identity card from the employer. Solicitor General Tushar Mehta said that in the present era, any person with a mobile phone could claim to be an independent or freelance journalist when he/she would, in fact, be making reels only to garner popularity on social media to earn money by either presenting one-sided stories or sensationalising events.

Recognising journalists

These developments have put the focus back on the question of who recognises journalists. As per the Occupational Safety, Health and Working Conditions Code, 2020, a working journalist is a person whose principal avocation is journalism and who is employed in a newspaper, electronic media or digital media. This definition excludes people employed in a managerial or administrative capacity. Further, Central and State governments provide accreditation to working journalists, freelance journalists, camerapersons and technicians. Accreditation recognises working journalists and others and gives them access to designated official sources of information. For journalists in Delhi-NCR, accreditation is provided by the PIB for covering the Central government while the DIP accreditation gives them the right to cover the Delhi State government. Media accreditation guidelines of the PIB and DIP define the eligibility

criteria for all those seeking accreditation. However, one of the major issues with government accreditation is that it has a quota depending upon circulation (for newspapers, periodicals and magazines), subscribers (for news agencies), licence under uplinking and downlinking guidelines (for private satellite TV channels), and unique visitors (for digital news publishers). Therefore, all journalists in recognised media organisations don't get accreditation. This leads us to the question on how all working journalists can be recognised.

One solution could be a national media council or commission. Just like there is the Bar Council of India for lawyers and an Institute of Chartered Accountants of India for chartered accountants, the media council can recognise all working journalists, freelance journalists, camerapersons and technicians. Just like you need a law degree to practise law, a medical degree to become a doctor, the media council may mandate a degree or diploma in journalism and mass communication while applying for a licence.

A few years ago, the Press Club of India drafted a Media Transparency (and Accountability) Bill, which mandated the formation of a national media council, among other things. Recently, some other journalists' bodies have also submitted a memorandum to the government with the same demand. As more and more people with a camera claim to be freelance journalists, it may be high time for the government to give some serious thought to the idea of such a council.

GS 2: POILITY

THE HINDU PAGE: 10

Where should judicial restraint begin?

Justice Ujjal Bhuyan's remarks on voter deletions have revived debate over judicial propriety and comments on pending cases; while his emphasis on voting rights and procedural safeguards aligns with existing rulings, his statement against mass disenfranchisement raises questions about limits of judicial speech

LETTER & SPIRIT

V. Venkatesan

In July 2018, Justice Ranjan Gogoi, months before becoming Chief Justice of India, said democracy sometimes needed "noisy judges", alongside independent journalists. Eight years later, that judicial voice has become contentious.

On October 4, Justice Ujjal Bhuyan, delivering the valedictory address at a moot court competition at NALSAR University of Law, said the right to vote was constitutional and integral to the basic structure. A process disenfranchising millions, he said, would be intrinsically arbitrary and violate Articles 14 and 326; Article 326 "cannot be tinkered with", and "no court can condone" mass disenfranchisement. Citing Section 22 of the Representation of the People Act, 1950, he stressed the need for notice and a hearing before deletion, except in the case of death.

Former Chief Justice of India B.R. Gavai objected that "judicial propriety" did not permit a sitting judge to comment on a sub-judice matter. Former Delhi High Court judges S.N. Dhinra and R.S. Sodhi expressed similar concerns, with Justice Sodhi stressing the statutory framework governing voting rights.

The day after Justice Bhuyan spoke, Justice Vikram Nath, the senior-most puisne judge in the Supreme Court, delivered a lecture in Delhi. "Impartiality and indifference are not the same thing," he said. A judge must be impartial, but need not be insensitive to the human consequences of law, he observed. Where is the line between an engaged judge and one who has said too much?

What does the Indian code require?

The starting point is the Restatement of Values of Judicial Life, adopted by the Full Court of the Supreme Court on May 7, 1997. Clause 8 says a judge shall neither enter public debate nor express views on political matters "or on matters that are pending or are likely to arise for judicial determination". Clause 1 requires conduct sustaining public faith in judicial impartiality. The Restatement carries no sanction of its own, but has been reproduced and relied upon in judicial decisions.

When Justice Bhuyan addressed NALSAR, litigation arising from the West Bengal SIR remained before the Supreme Court. More than 22 lakh deleted voters had appealed for restoration, the Election Commission of India told the court, and related matters were due on October 5. Justice Bhuyan neither named the SIR nor sat on those Benches.

But did Justice Bhuyan state something the court had not already held?

Here the criticism requires qualification. On May 27, 2026, a Bench headed by Chief Justice Surya Kant upheld the Bihar SIR in *Association for Democratic Reforms v Election Commission of India*. The court described the right to vote as constitutional, though neither absolute nor unregulated, and said Articles 325 and 326 require inclusion of eligible electors and exclusion of ineligible persons. Rule 21A of the Registration of Electors Rules, 1960, it added, requires notice, inquiry, hearing and a reasoned determination before deletion.

Justice Bhuyan was therefore on established ground in describing voting as constitutional and stressing a hearing



GETTY IMAGES

before deletion. The more debatable part was his proposition that a process disenfranchising millions would be intrinsically arbitrary and that no court could condone it. Yet the proposition was conditional and did not decide whether a particular SIR produces that result. The issue turns on how closely those words approached an answer to a live controversy.

Must judges remain silent on questions of public importance?

Comparative standards draw a more calibrated boundary. The commentary on the Bangalore Principles of Judicial Conduct recognises judicial freedom of expression on legal education, judicial independence and court administration. Principle 2.4 restrains comment that might reasonably affect a proceeding before, or capable of coming before, the judge, while Principle 4.11 allows judges to write, lecture and teach on law and the administration of justice.

The U.S. Supreme Court's 2023 Code of Conduct permits Justices to speak, write, lecture and teach, but asks them to refrain from commenting on the merits of a pending or impending matter. For scholarly or educational purposes, they may describe the issues involved. The distinction is between explaining an issue and appearing to answer it.

Justice Antonin Scalia demonstrated the risk in 2003 when he criticised a lower-court ruling on the Pledge of Allegiance. The litigant sought his recusal, and Scalia took no part when the case reached the U.S. Supreme Court, although the Court gave no reason. In Britain, Lady Hale outlined competing arguments in the pending Brexit litigation in 2016, then stopped: "the case is destined for our Court, so I must say no more". She later sat in *Miller*. Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg crossed a different boundary by criticising presidential candidate Donald Trump, then described her comments as "ill-advised".

Indian practice also counsels against treating every public intervention as improper. In NALSAR in March 2024, Justice B.V. Nagarathna criticised Governors who withheld assent to Bills while related disputes were before the

Court. Scholars Jasmin Moran and Christopher W. Schmidt recognise apparent-bias concerns without treating judicial silence as the answer.

Is Justice Bhuyan exceptionally outspoken?

Justice Bhuyan is an unusually visible judicial speaker. A conservative open-source audit found at least 25 public-facing engagements since he joined the Supreme Court on July 14, 2023. It covered institutional archives, Bar events and contemporaneous reports, excluding courtroom remarks, internal programmes and events where only scheduled participation could be established. At least nine addresses generated news reports, seven in 2026. The figure is a minimum.

In 2026, his speeches became more pointed. He questioned executive influence in judicial transfers, cited low conviction rates while discussing oversight of the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act, criticised restrictive bail conditions, sought greater transparency in collegium decisions and criticised frivolous prosecutions arising from food choices, poems, protests and slogans. Most generated headlines without a comparable propriety controversy.

Two episodes stand out. After Justice Bhuyan criticised the Supreme Court's 2024 Delhi Metro arbitration ruling, retired Justice Indu Malhotra called the remarks an "indiscretion". Former Justice Sudhanshu Dhulia, by contrast, defended another July speech on dissent and criminalisation, while cautioning that sitting judges must exercise restraint because similar issues may later come before them. Their disagreement shows why controversy alone is a poor test.

Does his High Court record bear on this?

Justice Bhuyan's Gauhati High Court record cautions against treating speeches as predictors of outcomes. In *Monowara Bevia v Union of India* (2017), his Bench upheld a Foreigners Tribunal finding and rejected a Gaoon Panchayat Secretary's certificate as an NRC linkage document. The Supreme Court later set aside that broader conclusion in *Rupojan Begum v*

Union of India. In *Sirajul Haque v State of Assam* (2019), it also reversed a 2017 decision of his Bench where variations in a family name had contributed to rejection of a citizenship claim. Yet in *Md Anwar Hussain v Union of India* (2014), Justice Bhuyan set aside a Foreigners Tribunal order for lack of sound logic and cogent reasons, remanded the case and ordered the petitioner's release from detention to argue it afresh. His record contains strict and claimant-protective strands. Extrajudicial language about citizenship, liberty or voting cannot safely predict how he would decide a properly argued case.

So, are Justice Bhuyan's critics correct?

India's Restatement uses broader language than the U.S. code. His propositions that voting is constitutional and deletion requires procedural safeguards largely track existing doctrine. The sentence that "no court can condone" mass disenfranchisement comes closer to stating a constitutional conclusion, although it was conditional and did not decide whether the SIR produces that result.

The criticism becomes weaker when enlarged to a claim that sitting judges should avoid public discussion of constitutional law, civil liberties, judicial appointments or court administration. Indian judges have long occupied that space, and international standards recognise its value. If a case presenting the precise issue on which Justice Bhuyan spoke were assigned to him, the Scalia episode shows why recusal could become a question.

Justice Gogoi's "noisy judge" and Justice Nath's formulation that impartiality need not mean indifference can coexist. The relevant measures are the subject of the speech, the specificity of the conclusion and its proximity to adjudication. Judicial speech can enrich constitutional conversation, but the lecture hall should not sound like a courtroom deciding a case before the parties are heard. (V. Venkatesan is Contributing Editor at *Supreme Court Observer*. Views expressed are personal.)

THE GIST

► The Restatement of Values of Judicial Life bars judges from commenting on pending or likely judicial matters

► Comparative standards allow judges to discuss legal issues but caution against remarks that could affect pending proceedings

► Justice Bhuyan's record includes both strict and claimant-protective rulings, showing why public speeches cannot predict judicial outcomes

GS 3: GEOGRAPHY

INDIAN EXPRESS PAGE: 11

We need to address the issue of soil health. Four steps can improve the situation



FROM PLATE TO PLOUGH
BY ASHOK GULATI
AND RITIKA JUNEJA

THE UNION Minister for Agriculture and Farmers' Welfare, Shri. Singh Chouhan, launched his rabi campaign, "Khet Bachao Abhiyan" (Save the Farm Campaign), on October 22 in Karnal, Haryana. His focus is to correct the imbalanced use of chemical fertilisers, which is harming soils and groundwater and polluting the air. He has appealed to farmers to use balanced doses of chemical fertilisers, in line with the doses recommended by state agriculture universities for major crops. He is well aware of the problem, but the issue is whether the farmers will heed his advice, especially when the pricing policy of urea, diammonium phosphate (DAP) and muriate of potash (MOP) gives them wrong signals. Sixteen years after the nutrient-based subsidy (NBS) was introduced, the imbalance in the use of nitrogen (N), Phosphate (P) and potash (K) has worsened.

Crops, like humans, need a balanced meal. ICRIER's recent policy brief, 'Repurposing India's Fertiliser Policy towards Nutrient Optimisation', compares actual nutrient use in 20 major states with crop- and irrigation-specific norms between 2009-10 and 2024-25, neatly bracketing the NBS reform of 2010.

The results are sobering. Nationally, nitrogen use has moved from 7 per cent below its recommended dose to 6 per cent above it. The phosphorus deficit has narrowed only from 29 to 22 per cent, while the potassium deficit has deepened from 48 to 72 per cent. Farmers apply just 9 kg of potash per hectare against a need of 32 kg. The N:P:K ratio stands at 10.5:4.1:1, against a de-

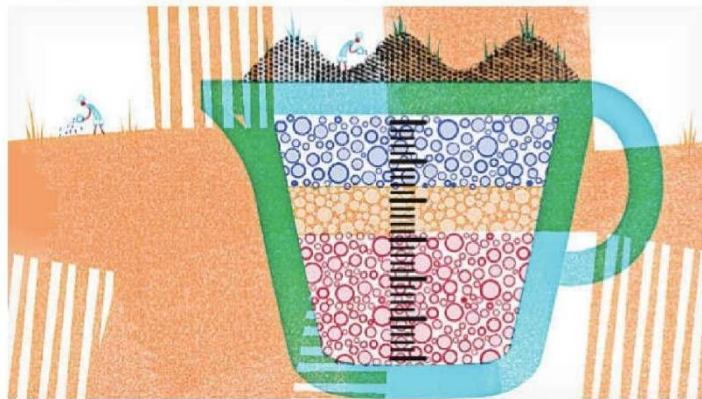


ILLUSTRATION: C R SAKSHI KUMAR

rived normative 2.8:1.5:1. Eleven of 20 major states, led by Jharkhand (72 per cent) and Punjab (65 per cent), overuse nitrogen. Every state under-applies potash; Haryana and Jharkhand apply barely a tenth of what their crops need.

Why has a reform meant to fix the imbalance made it worse? Simple economics. NBS let the prices of phosphatic and potassic fertilisers float with world markets, but kept urea out at a fixed price. Between 2010-11 and 2024-25, DAP prices nearly tripled to Rs 54/kg, and MOP rose six-fold to Rs 52/kg, while the price of nitrogen in urea rose by just 1 per cent. Farmers respond to relative prices. Nitrogen also makes the crop look green, while the damage from missing potash shows up later, and quietly. So, nitrogen's share in NPK use is back to about 67 per cent — the 1970-71 level.

The damage runs from the soil to the plate. Of the 96 lakh samples tested under the Soil Health Card scheme in 2025-26, 72 per cent were low in nitrogen, 52 per cent in organic carbon, 42 per cent in boron and 37 per cent in zinc. Low nitrogen despite its overuse is no

The subsidy budget for 2026-27 is Rs 1.71 lakh crore. The disruption in the Strait of Hormuz could push the subsidy bill to between Rs 2.5 lakh crore and Rs 3 lakh crore

paradox: Carbon-starved soils cannot hold what is poured on them, and crops take up only 30-40 per cent of the nitrogen applied. Part of the rest escapes into the air as nitrous oxide, a greenhouse gas 273 times as potent as carbon dioxide; Punjab's fertiliser-related emissions are nearly double the national average. Some of the chemical leaches into groundwater. Nitrate above safe limits has been found in parts of 502 districts and carries the risk of "blue baby syndrome" in infants and chronic illness in adults.

Potassium deficiency weakens resistance to drought and disease and lowers grain quality; phosphorus shortage delays flowering. When soils lack zinc and other micronutrients, the grains they yield do too, fuelling the hidden hunger that afflicts millions.

All this also comes at a steep fiscal price. The subsidy budget for 2026-27 is Rs 1.71 lakh crore. The disruption in the Strait of Hormuz could push the subsidy bill to anywhere between Rs 2.5 lakh crore and Rs 3 lakh crore, with the urea subsidy amounting to two-thirds of this. The benefits are skewed, too: Punjab gets about Rs 25,700 of ni-

trogen subsidy per hectare, 10 times what Kerala gets. Add MSP-based procurement and subsidised power, and the rice-wheat rotation gets locked in. All this hurts aquifers.

What, then, is the way out? Four steps can improve the situation.

One, move from input price subsidy to a direct benefit transfer on a per-hectare basis and neutral across nutrients and crops. This will ensure that farmers face the market price of each nutrient and urea loses its artificial edge. AgriStack is creating digital farmer IDs linked to land records and crops sown, and a framework for fertiliser sale (FFS) will tie each purchase at the point of sale to that identity. But identifying tenants remains a challenge. If this seems too abrupt, bring urea under NBS while lowering DAP and MOP prices in step, keeping the overall subsidy budget at around Rs 2 lakh crore.

Two, reward balance where decisions are made. PM-PRANAM was supposed to reward states that use fertilisers in a balanced way. But so far, nothing has been disbursed. The scheme needs fixing, and its implementation should be expedited.

Three, plough the savings in fertiliser subsidy into drip irrigation and fertigation, and backproduct innovation. These include customised and coated fertilisers, triple super phosphate (TSP) — in place of DAP — biofertilisers, nano fertilisers, and gene-edited seeds using nitrogen more efficiently.

Four, follow the 4Rs — right source, rate, time and place — with plot-level advice based on soil tests. Rotating cereals with pulses can cut the next crop's nitrogen need by 20-30 per cent. But none of this will stick in Punjab and Haryana unless power pricing and procurement are reformed.

The yardstick of success must change from total fertilisers applied to balanced supply of nutrients. India's soils have been quietly underwriting our food security for decades; that account is now overdrawn. The real question is whether the government will bite the bullet before the soils give way. The cost of waiting is rising with every season.

Gulati is distinguished professor and Juneja is senior fellow at ICRIER. Views are personal

GS 2: INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

INDIAN EXPRESS PAGE: 11

In Iran war, no clarity on what a win might look like



SYED ATA
HASNAIN

Does America seek to eliminate Iran's nuclear capability, dismantle its missiles, secure Hormuz, or change Tehran's behaviour? Each demands a different strategy

I **BEGAN** studying West Asia in 1967, while still at school. Almost six decades after my first encounter with the region, I find its strategic environment more complex than ever. The current US-Israel confrontation with Iran poses a deceptively simple military question: What would victory actually look like?

Nearly eight months into the war, US and Israeli strikes have damaged Iran's military infrastructure, yet Tehran retains the ability to threaten regional security and shipping. Overwhelming American superiority has not delivered a decisive political outcome.

The November 3 midterms may influence US President Donald Trump's choices, but cannot replenish munitions or resolve Washington's uncertain objectives. Does America seek to eliminate Iran's nuclear capability, dismantle its missiles, secure Hormuz, or change Tehran's behaviour? Each demands a different strategy. Regime change would require far more. Without clarity, further military escalation may merely prolong the conflict.

The apparent reluctance to employ America's full military might is not necessarily evidence of weakness. It may reflect recognition that escalation without a defined end state can create more problems than it solves. Iran, meanwhile, has organised much of its defence around the knowledge that it cannot win a conventional contest with the US. Missiles, drones, dispersed launchers, underground facilities and the capacity for intermittent attacks offer another method: Remaining dangerous enough to deny an adversary an easy conclusion.

My study of Iranian missile development taught me how little outsiders know about concealed inventories. Destroyed launchers and damaged factories reveal neither serviceable weapons remaining nor Iran's capacity to replace them. Historical links with North Korean missile technology and Chinese equipment, alongside relations with Russia, merit attention. Yet these do not establish that any country is currently replenishing Iran's arsenal.

Supply chains challenge assumptions

about isolation. Iran's northern land borders, Caspian access and overland commercial routes receive little attention compared with its vulnerable southern coastline. Across West Asia, ISIS and the Houthis have demonstrated how weapons move through indirect networks despite surveillance, hostile borders and maritime interdiction. Iran's requirements are far greater than those of insurgent organisations, making direct comparisons imperfect. The question is how quickly Iran can restore sufficient capability to remain dangerous.

The US faces its own industrial problem. Reports of exceptionally heavy expenditure of Patriot interceptors, alongside other precision munitions, underline the mismatch between the speed of consumption in combat and the years sometimes needed for replenishment. America must also maintain commitments to Ukraine and preserve readiness for contingencies in the Indo-Pacific.

Iran's endurance has limits, too. Inflation, disrupted trade, reduced revenues, and civilian hardship can gradually erode the state's freedom of action. But economic distress does not automatically produce political collapse. A country can remain militarily disruptive long after its society has suffered greatly.

Israel can impose further punishment, but it cannot by itself guarantee Iranian submission. The Gulf states have little appetite for an expanding war that threatens their infrastructure and economic ambitions. A wider confrontation involving Yemen or renewed attacks on shipping could enlarge the conflict without clarifying how it ends.

After November 3, Trump may enjoy greater political freedom or face sharper congressional scrutiny. Either result leaves the military dilemma intact. The challenge for Washington will be to determine how much more military force can realistically achieve, and when diplomacy must take over. Ultimately, the ability to end a war on acceptable terms is a greater measure of military success than the ability to prolong it.

The writer is Governor of Bihar and former commander of the Indian Army's Chinari Corps

GS 3: ENVIRONMENT

INDIAN EXPRESS PAGE: 15

• CLIMATE

Why Loss & Damage Fund for Nepal matters beyond it



AMITABH SINHA

A MONTH after it raised a request, Nepal has been promised a sum of \$20 million (around Rs 190 crore) to help it recover from the devastating flash floods in August this year. Though the amount is extremely small compared to an estimated need of about \$4.75 billion (around Rs 44,600 crore) in recovery and reconstruction costs, it marks the beginning of the implementation of a new international regime on loss and damage. This system seeks to provide financial assistance to developing countries affected by climate events.

The allocation is a first from the Fund for Responding to Loss and Damage (FRLD), a new international financing instrument created in 2022 to address a long-pending demand from developing nations, particularly those small and vulnerable countries that face the maximum risk from climate events. These countries have contributed negligibly to creating the problem of climate change because of their extremely low emissions footprint, and yet, they disproportionately suffer its consequences. For instance, Nepal's contribution to historical global emissions of greenhouse gases is a tiny 0.01%.

Developing countries also have fewer resources and happen to be among those least equipped to deal with major climate-related disasters.

The allocation for Nepal, which still has to undergo some procedural formalities before being released, is by no means commensurate with the extent of damage inflicted by an event assessed to be triggered by climate change. But its importance lies in acknowledging the need for quickly mobilising financial resources. The decision to earmark \$20 million for Nepal was taken at an emergency board meeting of the FRLD, following requests from Nepal and several other countries that supported it.

Emergency allocation

The money for Nepal is an out-of-turn allocation by the FRLD, and essentially its first decision on applications made by countries. Operationalised in 2023 after receiving the first round of contributions from



The devastated structure around Betrawati Rasuwa border in Nepal following the flash floods on August 31. FILE

• Top 5 donors to FRLD

COUNTRY	MONEY PLEDGED (IN MILLION \$)
Italy	110.31
France	108.23
UAE	100
Germany	98.24
UK	51.92

SOURCE: UNFCCC, BASED ON CURRENCY EXCHANGE RATES ON APRIL 7, 2025

donor countries, the FRLD made its first call for applications during the annual climate conference in Brazil last year (COP30). By the time the window for applications closed on June 15 this year, 119 countries had submitted 176 funding requests.

The total amount requested by countries added up to \$2.8 billion — over three times the fund's existing corpus. The fund has so far received only \$822 million from donors, and much of it is currently only at the commitment stage, with the actual amount yet to be delivered. Clearly, the fund has no capacity to accept every request even after capping each request at \$20 million.

As a result, the fund will have to prioritise these requests. A decision on these requests is scheduled for December, although Nepal's case is a separate one. The flooding incident, in which more than over 1,300 people were killed and over 5,000 continue to be missing, happened in August, and an extraordinary request was made in September. Its acceptance underlines the need to provide emergency financial assistance to countries following a large-scale climate disaster.

The success in disbursing funds to Nepal quickly, even though the amount is nominal, is likely to become a template for many such requests in future. Countries struck by a disaster would insist on immediate consideration of their request and quick access to money, which is how this mechanism was envisaged to work.

Developing nations have long pushed for payouts for events worsened by climate change. Nepal could become a template

Huge demand, limited supply

Most of the current requests made to the fund are of a slightly different nature when compared to Nepal's case. They pertain to both economic and non-economic loss and damage arising out of climate-induced extreme weather events or slow-onset events like glacial melt, sea-level rise, biodiversity loss and desertification.

Reconstruction of damaged infrastructure and restoration of essential services like health, transport, energy and education services are a small part of expenditures for which money is being sought.

The countries' demands are generally associated with building resilience, setting up early warning systems, institutional strengthening, including the capability to assess the contribution of climate change in causing an event, livelihood restoration, and providing psychosocial support to affected populations. India, too, has made three requests to FRLD, totalling over \$52 million.

The range of financial needs presented by the countries before the FRLD highlights the inadequacy of climate finance available to developing countries. Under the global climate change architecture governed by the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change and the 2015 Paris Agreement, developed countries are mandated to provide financial assistance to developing countries to help fight climate change. But just as they have been lacking in meeting their greenhouse gas emission reduction targets, developed countries have

not fulfilled their financial obligations either.

Between 2020 and 2025, they had offered to mobilise \$100 billion every year, but could never deliver on it. In 2024, the developing countries presented their requirements for climate finance, which added up to \$1.3 trillion every year. Still, developed nations agreed to increase their commitment to only \$300 billion a year, and that too from 2035 onwards.

Important beginning

This reluctance of developed nations to put money on the table has affected the loss and damage fund as well. These countries had stalled the creation of the fund for years, before giving in to sustained pressure.

But the actual contributions to the fund have been minuscule. Consider the fact that a total of 27 donor countries have together pledged \$822 million. Of them, only three countries — Italy, France and the United Arab Emirates — have made a commitment of over \$100 million each. The FRLD does not have any target — countries are encouraged to contribute voluntarily.

Nepal's case is a small but important beginning. It opens up the possibility that immediate financial assistance could be provided to resource-scarce countries to respond to a major climate disaster. But over the long term, the effectiveness of FRLD would remain severely constrained unless developed nations put more money into the fund.

One small, quick step

The allocation for Nepal is by no means commensurate with the extent of damage inflicted by the floods this August.

But its importance lies in acknowledging the need for quickly mobilising financial resources.

GS 2 & 3: HEALTH AND SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY



POLICY MATTERS
CK MISHRA
FORMER HEALTH SECRETARY,
GOVERNMENT OF INDIA

Cancer drug price cap: Why India needs a bigger plan

Lasting reform must balance affordable drugs with reliable supplies, quality care

THE DECISION to regulate trade margins on non-scheduled cancer medicines is a welcome step. It responds to a genuine concern. In a welfare state, the government has a responsibility to ensure that healthcare is both accessible and affordable, while creating an environment in which quality care can be delivered sustainably. When the difference between the price at which a product enters the supply chain and what a patient ultimately pays becomes difficult to justify, the government cannot remain a passive observer.

But a good first step should not be mistaken for a complete solution. The present debate raises three questions. Is the exercise comprehensive enough? Is it based on adequate evidence? And can it be implemented effectively across a healthcare market as large and varied as India's?

The Centre has informed the Supreme Court that trade margins on specified cancer drugs will be capped at 30 per cent. An expert committee will identify the medicines to be covered, after which the National Pharmaceutical Pricing Authority will examine its recommendations. The court has also asked why similar scrutiny should not extend to other medicines and medical products.

That is a legitimate question. If excessive trade margins are the problem, India should examine the issue comprehensively rather than regulate one category at a time. A fragmented approach can distort the market, create uncertainty and make enforcement needlessly difficult. But evidence must come before the prescription. The same medicine or medical product may cost different amounts to administer at two hospitals within the same city. This difference can arise from the patient's location, the complexity of the treatment, the expertise of the clinical team, the infrastructure available, the level of monitoring involved and the emergency support that must remain available. A routine medicine administered in a outpatient setting cannot be equated with a complex therapy delivered under specialist supervision.

The procurement price of a medicine or device, therefore, tells us only one part of the story. A fragmented framework must distinguish between the trade margin on a product and the legitimate cost of storage, handling and administration. It should also consider the infrastructure required to maintain quality and patient safety, and the possible effect of regulation on availability and access. Without this distinction, regulation intended to address excessive margins could inadvertently affect the delivery and quality of healthcare.

The government's own experience supports this approach. The generic medicine essential list, for instance, was not a comprehensive examination of trade margins across medicines, medical devices and consumables. It has not meant imposing the same formula on every product. It means using a common and scientifically credible method to identify where intervention is required so that that form should rule. Meaningful stakeholder consultation must form part of this exercise. Manufacturers, distributors, hospitals, clinicians, insurers, patient groups and state governments each hold important evidence on how healthcare products are manufactured, supplied, priced and used. Drawing on their experience will help the government design a framework that is both effective and workable. It can ensure that unjustified margins are addressed while recognising legitimate differences in clinical settings, infrastructure, safety requirements, geographical reach and the cost of delivering quality care.

Success cannot be measured merely by the number of products brought under control. The more meaningful test is whether patients pay lower prices without experiencing shortages, reduced access or any compromise in the quality and safety of care. India needs continued investment in healthcare, as its disease burden increases and demand for quality care grows. Hospitals must expand infrastructure, adopt new technologies, strengthen clinical capabilities and improve access across the country. blanket controls that do not recognise legitimate differences in cost and complexity could discourage precisely this investment. They could also make it harder for hospitals to maintain quality and safety standards in a market where margins are squeezed. This is not an argument against price regulation. It is an argument for getting it right.

When genes raise cholesterol, diet may make a difference



A Chennai study has found that people with a higher genetic risk had higher levels of bad cholesterol when they followed a poor-quality diet, highlighting the role of everyday food choices in metabolic health

Purnima Sah

WHETHER polished to a shine, a masala dosa drenched with oil, vegetables cooked in coconut oil and an extra spoonful of ghee, sumptuous staples on many Indian plates could add up to a diet that works against healthy cholesterol levels, particularly when fruits, vegetables and fibre take a back seat. Now, a study of LDL (bad) cholesterol in Chennai suggests that for Indians genetically predisposed to high levels of bad cholesterol, the quality of their everyday diet could make a significant difference in their blood markers. Those who ate a medium- or high-quality diet could completely offset the genetic risk of high LDL and total cholesterol. Those who ate poorly ended up being susceptible to higher levels of both.

The findings offer an important message for people who believe that high cholesterol is an inevitable consequence of their genes. Inherited susceptibility may not be the whole story. "While genes can influence a person's risk of metabolic disorders, dietary habits may modify how that risk manifests. Even if you are born with the tendency to high cholesterol and diabetes, you can still lower your cholesterol levels down by following a healthy diet," says Dr V Mohan, chairman of the Madras Diabetes Research Foundation (MDRF) and one of the authors of the paper. The study, titled "Low diet quality increases the genetic risk of high blood cholesterol levels in Asian Indian adults (LIFE-INDIA)", was published in *PLoS ONE*. It draws on data from the Chennai Urban Rural Epidemiology Study (CURES), a long-running research programme.

What did the study find?
The researchers studied 1,000 adults aged between 25 and 80, including 452 men and 548 women. They examined three genetic risk scores — TCF7L2 rs9939646, PP1B rs220236 and VSMR413 — and combined them into a genetic risk score. Diet quality was assessed using an Indian Diet Quality Score covering eight food groups: pulses and legumes, fruits and vegetables, milk products, white rice, edible fats and oils, added sugar, added salt, poultry and eggs. The researchers found that a higher genetic risk score was associated with a significantly higher total cholesterol and LDL cholesterol among participants in the low diet-quality group. The differences were not statistically significant among those in the medium- and high-quality diet groups. The interaction between genetic risk and diet quality was statistically significant for total cholesterol and LDL cholesterol.

The study also found associations between the genetic risk score and higher fasting blood glucose as well as glycated haemoglobin (HbA1c), a measure of average blood sugar over the preceding two to three months. "What we showed in this study is that those who have a certain genetic vari-

Food swaps for a healthier lipid profile

From the everyday dal chawal meal to evening chai and namkeen, small changes to familiar foods can help improve cholesterol and triglyceride levels without giving up traditional favourites

1. Look polished white rice for hand-pounded rice or a rice-dal combination

IF RICE is a staple at every meal, try hand-pounded or less-polished rice more often, or replace part of the rice serving with dal, ragi, chole or vegetables. Whole grains and pulses provide fibre, which can help improve cholesterol levels.

2. Substitute masala parathas, lenthils and bhature with whole-wheat rotis
REPLACE SOME refined-flour staples with whole-wheat chaplis, rotis or vegetable stuffed whole-wheat parathas prepared with limited oil. Oats, dal and millet-based bhatis are other options. Reducing refined carbohydrates, especially when consumed in excess, can help lower elevated triglycerides.

3. Replace ghee, butter and coconut oil with unsaturated oils

USE LESS ghee, butter, vanaspathi and coconut or palm oil, replacing some of these with moderate amounts of mustard, groundnut, sesame

or rice bran oil. These oils contain more unsaturated fats, and replacing saturated fats with unsaturated fats can help lower LDL ("bad") cholesterol. Avoid repeatedly reheating or reusing frying oil.

4. Samosas, pakoras and namkeen can be changed to roasted chana or nuts
Instead of making deep-fried snacks a daily habit, try roasted chana, unadorned peanuts, a small handful of nuts or roasted sun-dried raisins with chickpeas or other legumes. These provide protein and other nutrients while not supplying unneeded fats. Keep portions moderate, particularly for calorie-dense nuts and peanuts.

5. Give up sweetened chai, sherbet and packaged juice for whole fruit
GRADUALLY REDUCE the sugar added to chai and coffee, and replace regular soft drinks, sweetened sherbets and packaged fruit drinks with water or unsweetened beverages. Choose a whole guava, orange, apple or other seasonal fruit instead of juice. Cutting recent added sugar can help lower high triglyceride levels, while whole fruit provides fibre.

What should you watch out for?
Dr Mohan identifies refined carbohydrates as a key dietary concern. For example, he suggests unpolished brown rice as a healthier choice than polished white rice, while whole-grain wheat is preferable to refined wheat flour (such as maida). "Saturated fats, including those found in coconut oil, palm oil, ghee and butter, can increase cholesterol. Go for unsaturated ones. Ghee, butter, mustard and sesame (gingelly) oils are sources of mono-unsaturated fat while sunflower oil contains polyunsaturated fat," he says.

It is the overall diet, not one food
The researchers assessed overall diet quality and did not establish that any one oil, grain or individual food caused the

cholesterol differences. Dr R M Anjana, managing director of the Madras Diabetes Specialities Centre and a co-author of the paper, says, "People don't eat one specific food. Everything contributes to how your body behaves and reacts."

However, she singles out highly refined carbohydrates, sweets and sugary drinks as the fastest triggers of an unhealthy dietary pattern. "Excess refined carbohydrates can be metabolised into sugar, while excess energy intake can contribute to fat accumulation. Food high in saturated and trans fats can adversely affect lipid levels. But if you have a bit of carbohydrates and add protein, the risk comes down. If you have something that's a little high in fat, just increase the fibre content with it to negate the side effects. Your plate should be about balancing the equation, not eliminating food groups," she says.

What should a healthy Indian plate look like?
Dr Anjana recommends a simple plate-based approach: half the plate should comprise fruits and vegetables, including green leafy vegetables. The remaining half should be divided into two quarters: one for protein and the other for non-starchy carbohydrates. Water and dairy foods such as milk and curries can be included along side the meal. The proportions may need to be adapted to a person's body mass index (BMI), blood sugar status and other nutritional needs.

She also advises choosing less-processed foods whenever possible. Whole fruit is preferable to fruit juice or packaged fruit drinks. Vegetables that can be eaten raw, such as carrots, cucumbers and tomatoes, should be washed thoroughly; other vegetables can be cooked minimally. "Try to avoid anything that comes out of a packet," she says, adding that this can be difficult in busy modern lives.

How diet lowers LDL cholesterol
While dietary changes can improve cholesterol levels, the extent of improvement varies between individuals, says Dr Anjana. "Dietary changes may have a particularly significant effect on triglycerides, while LDL cholesterol can also have a favourable tendency. What we do know is that a healthy food choice will improve all the cholesterol parameters."

However, cholesterol-lowering medication may be necessary when lifestyle changes do not produce a significant improvement. "Someone with only mildly elevated LDL may see an improvement with diet and exercise but people with substantially elevated levels may need drugs. Don't delay treatment if cholesterol remains well above the required target," he advises.

Decoding a study