

EDITORIAL HIGHLIGHTS

29-09-2026

GS 2: INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS THE HINDU PAGE: 08

Time runs short for Iran and America

It may be tempting to see the recent jerky resumption of negotiations between the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI) and the United States as *déjà vu*. Similar attempts resulted in the June 17 Memorandum that unravelled within weeks, and the two belligerents resumed their respective blockades of the Strait of Hormuz and Iranian ports.

A different moment now

So, what is different this time? They have both realised that time is not on their side. Their respective domestic considerations make continuation of the seven-month-old war costly and unsustainable. In the short run, going by the past pattern, September 26 saw United States President Trump's dismissal of Iran's seven-point proposal, which may be an opening gambit seeking better terms and sequencing. While the Iranian initiative may betray their economic desperation, it also showcases their reasonableness to the Trump sceptics in America and the region who regard his "War of Choice" against Iran as ill-begotten.

The November 3 mid-term congressional elections could upend Mr. Trump as a lame duck. Iranian hardliners, too, need to exhaust this option to justify their aggressiveness. In the longer run, Mr. Trump needs to salvage his legacy to match his extravagant promises. Similarly, the Iranian theocrats need to keep Gen Z engaged and avoid regional blowback from the coagulating mistrust. Thus, while retaining their braggadocio about final victory, each needs to move away from its maximalist obduracy and seek a "Hudna" or temporary peace. The impact of the unfolding imbroglio on the two belligerents as well as on Israel and Gulf states must be examined.

Statistically, the U.S. has a quantitative premium and staying power *vis-à-vis* Iran: it has three times the population, 85 times the GDP and 20 times the military budget. Iran is also at a disadvantage in quality and modernity of weaponry, although its asymmetric strategy has blunted that edge. Washington has weaponised 'Operation Economic Outcast' against the already "maximum sanctioned" Iranian economy. Yet, the IRI has not "capitulated", and the U.S. itself faces inflation, ammunition depletion and isolation. Battle asymmetry aside, their respective combat histories are relevant. The Iran war has been an outlier from the usual U.S. military doctrine of battle dominance through "shock-and-awe", tech superiority, and leveraging its global primacy through the global politico-financial architecture. The last battle that the U.S. fought as an underdog was its war of independence nearly 250 years ago, and hubris haunts it now. In contrast, Iranians have often been the underdogs to Greeks, Byzantines, Arabs and Ottomans. More recently, British and American manipulation for oil, and Iraq's 1980 invasion of a fledgling IRI, still frame Iranian



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political discourse. Their Shia sect being a minority among the Sunni Muslims reinforces their sense of virtues in suffering and martyrdom. The legacy has made the IRI more determined to face enemies with grit, guile and gumption.

The political ecosystem in Iran is hardened, with dissent stifled and externalised to demonised America and Israel as the two Satans. Mr. Trump has been less successful in getting Americans and the allies abroad behind his trenchant anti-Iran rhetoric. This is partly due to his divisiveness, lack of coherent endgame strategy and inability to protect his allies' security and economy. Triggering a decapitating war that ignored Iranian politico-military resilience and retaliatory capacity was a strategic blunder. It risked the closure of the two vital maritime choke points, rising hydrocarbon prices, and threatened to push American "hyperpower" into a forever conflict against a middle-ranked, but determined, Iran. Similarly, his recent strategy of inflicting economic pain on Iranians may also fail by making them rally around the flag. Occasional tanker attacks and the ongoing Yemen-Saudi scrimmage notwithstanding, seven months on, the two belligerents are currently licking their wounds.

Uncertain path ahead

Two formidable unknowns loom before some educated projections can be made about the U.S.-Iran conundrum. First, although the Iranian seven-point proposal is based on the June 17 Islamabad memorandum, its precise contents are foggy. Second, the failure of the Islamabad memorandum, subsequent tit-for-tat attacks, the U.S. blockade, Operation Economic Outcast and fire-eating rhetoric since June 17 have deepened mutual mistrust, raising the bar for the *modus vivendi* required for a peace deal. These negatives are balanced by awareness that the continued stalemate would lead to a shared perdition of a hostile Congress blockading Mr. Trump and anti-establishment demonstrations pulling the rug under the Mullahs.

Under a positive scenario, both sides can breathe easier and develop greater mutual empathy. Failure of the June 17 Grand Bargain would have presumably made them more realistic and incremental. So, instead of a race to the bottom, each would need to reluctantly adopt a "Live and Let Live" approach. Despite Mr. Trump's rejection, signs, such as the Iranian leaders extending their stay in New York, Tehran's flexibility about controlling the Strait of Hormuz and the use of Qatari mediation instead of alacritous Pakistani generals, seem tentatively positive. To be effective and beneficial to both sides, the deal would have to last at least till November 3, the election date.

Even if this band-aid deal allows the two belligerents to staunch the haemorrhage temporarily, what guarantees its long-term sequel, say, after the Congressional elections? The

IRI and the U.S. are certain to use the interregnum to "recharge their batteries" and get ready for the next round. Their mutual scepticism and contentious issues such as the nuclear and missile programmes, and the proxy non-state actors could impede any progress towards permanent normalisation. A "high noon" can be expected by mid-November.

The sequel would depend on which of the two belligerents is able to hold his flock together. An inherently unpredictable Mr. Trump may only suspend the gamut of anti-Iran measures and keep his forces deployed in the region. Similarly, Iran is unlikely to let go of control of the Strait of Hormuz as future deterrence. To dissuade him from resuming military kinetics, Iran has already unveiled its possible escalatory ladder that includes advanced weaponry, a possible al-Houthi blockade of Bab al-Mandeb, retaliatory attacks on America's Gulf allies and hints of pre-emptive strikes. Simultaneously, Tehran has sought a regional diplomatic reset through an interim supervisory arrangement with Oman on the Strait of Hormuz, to be endorsed by other Gulf littoral states.

Wider regional consequences

The past two years have brought Israel and Iran into two direct no-holds-barred wars. Intense drone and missile attacks have convinced Israeli public opinion that Iran constitutes an existential threat. On its part, Iran is unlikely to forgive the Lesser Satan for the assassination of its last Supreme Leader. Their resultant intense regional geopolitical competition, particularly in the Levant, would outlast any Tehran-Washington peace deal, giving their two-millennia-old civilisational animus a new edge. Although the October 27 Knesset elections may see hawkish anti-Iran Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu replaced, any successor is likely to be hostile to an Iran pursuing a nuclear duality. Iran can be expected to rely on its proxies and asymmetric arsenal to create a balance of power with Israel equipped with state-of-the-art U.S. weapons. In the long run, time would favour the one with better innovative skills. While Israel is a "Startup Nation", Iran has also been impressively inventive under pressure.

Other regional countries in the Arabian Peninsula, Iraq and Jordan, were caught in the crossfire and suffered considerable collateral damage under Iranian retaliation. Their hydrocarbon exports and other economic activities have been stifled. In most cases, their extensive forex reserves are likely to help them tide over the turbulence. However, their long-standing security reliance on the U.S. would call for a thorough reappraisal. Among the uncertainties they need to tackle is the future of oil, now more tightly tied to geopolitics than the supply-demand equilibrium.

In this war, "time" has emerged as an element even more slippery and opaque than oil.

Both Tehran and Washington must hear the bells toll as mistrust grows and global economies falter

GS 3: AGRICULTURE AND ENVIRONMENT

THE HINDU PAGE: 08

Tackling food loss and waste — India's opportunity

Food loss and waste remain one of the world's most persistent challenges, with severe consequences for climate, food security, economic costs, and sustainable use of natural resources. India produces enough to feed its population of 1.4 billion, yet a significant share of its produce is lost across the value chain. As the country advances towards more resilient, sustainable and efficient agrifood systems, tackling food loss and waste can deliver a triple win: strengthening food security and nutrition, reducing pressure on natural resources and emissions, and improving incomes and productivity. The International Day of Awareness of Food Loss and Waste, observed annually on September 29, highlights this opportunity for India.

India has already taken the first step by generating nationally representative data.

India's evidence base, a global first

India is the only country to have conducted three national post-harvest loss surveys. The Ministry of Food Processing Industries assessed losses across 45, 45 and 54 commodities in 2005-07, 2012-14 and 2020-22, respectively, covering the supply chain from farm to retail. The process for a fourth round is now under way.

This sustained effort supports its reporting of the Food Loss Index under the Sustainable Development Goals. However, these estimates cover mainly losses on the farm and in the supply chain. Data on food waste in retail, in hotels and restaurants, and at household level remains far less developed.

The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) is working with the government, research and financial institutions



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Cutting food losses can strengthen food security, conserve resources and advance climate goals

across India's agrifood systems to translate the triple win from theme to practice. Generating evidence, testing technologies and mobilising investment from farm to market to the city have been the core of these initiatives.

When food is lost, so are the resources used to produce it. Reducing losses can help India meet its climate and resource-efficiency goals while strengthening food security. The scope for reducing losses is greatest with better storage, drying, cooling, moisture management and processing. Digital tools such as traceability systems can further improve how food is moved and managed through the supply chain.

Food loss and waste need to be integrated more systematically into agricultural planning, food-processing strategies, climate action and investment decisions. This means directing finance towards technologies and infrastructure where they can have the greatest impact, while ensuring that solutions remain affordable and accessible to farmers, producer organisations and small businesses. Circular approaches can add another dimension. Surplus food can be redistributed, while unavoidable organic residues can be converted into compost, biogas or energy, reducing waste and creating additional economic value.

Wholesale markets, overlooked opportunity

Assessments by the FAO and the National Council of Agriculture Marketing Boards (COSAMB) have found that major wholesale markets can generate up to 100 tonnes of organic waste a day; in some cities as much as a fifth of all urban organic waste reaches landfills. Nationally, this adds up to an estimated 3.5 million tonnes a year. It is no waste stream but a resource base, which if treated, can

offset roughly 3.3 million tonnes of CO₂-equivalent emissions annually, or close to \$30 million in carbon credits.

A 50-tonne-a-day bio-CNG plant in Surat, Gujarat, has been run through a private-sector partnership for over five years and reportedly cuts methane-related emissions by about 7,500 tonnes a year.

India can adapt such models to local conditions, including the commodity mix and infrastructure of different markets. Municipalities and market committees can also improve organic-waste segregation, collection and treatment, while developing markets for compost, biogas and other recovered materials.

Investment and innovation

India must move from individual interventions to a more connected national approach with financing at its core. The FAO and the Small Industries Development Bank of India (SIDBI) are linking identified food-loss hotspots with climate-resilient technologies such as drying, moisture control, energy-efficient cooling and storage, while SIDBI is arranging finance to help small and medium enterprises adopt them.

The FAO is also working to equip Indian cities with a practical "Package of Practices" for urban food loss and waste management, giving municipalities the tools to measure, prevent, reduce, redistribute and valorise waste across households, wholesale markets, retail and food service.

India now has the data, technology and viable models to reduce food loss and waste. The priority is to close data gaps, direct investment and make loss reduction part of agricultural, food-processing, urban and climate policy,

GS 2: POLITY

THE HINDU PAGE: 08

The 80s nostalgia holds caste bias

On July 17, 1985, an argument at a drinking water tank in

Karamchedu, in coastal Andhra Pradesh, turned into a massacre. A Madiga woman objected to a Kamma youth soiling the public drinking water tank her family drank from. By nightfall, six Madiga men were dead and three Dalit women had been raped. The police called it a riot. A civil liberties fact-finding team called it a one-sided massacre. The killings birthed the Andhra Pradesh Dalit Mahasabha and a four-decade argument over whether the Constitution reaches inside a village.

Forty-one years later, our feeds are full of the past; AI-generated images of the 80s. Chiffon sarees against sunlit walls, Ambassadors and Contessas. Thus, India became the No. 1 country for Google's Nano Banana image-generation model, and its signature trend was retro-Bollywood portraits. However, where did this aesthetic come from?

Model or mood board, the source material is the same – film stills, magazine spreads, studio portraits, and family albums. However, in the India of the 1980s, all four belonged to households with money and standing; overwhelmingly *savarna*, urban or landed. In 1983, by the Planning Commission's own estimates, 44.5% of Indians, some 323 million people, lived below the poverty line. In 1980, only about a quarter of households lit their homes with electricity. Parliament enacted the SC/ST (Prevention of Atrocities) Act only in 1989.

It is not that Dalit and Adivasi lives were not photographed; they were,



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but by others – the state took pictures for its welfare files, activists after an atrocity, as well as anthropologists. The family photograph, which is taken simply to be seen, and is the genre nostalgia runs on, was the one the poor could least afford. Those who could reach a photo studio posed before a painted Swiss chalet; the colony and the forbidden tap remained outside the frame.

A model trained on such an archive reproduces the silence, and hardens it. Tests by MIT Technology Review found that GPT-5 chooses the stereotypical answer in 80 of 105 sentences: the clever man is upper caste, and the sewage cleaner is Dalit. A study presented at the ACM's FAccT conference this year analysed 1,536 images from Gemini's image model, the engine behind Nano Banana, prompted with Indian names and no caste labels. Caste surfaced anyway, through food, neighbourhood, work and worship. One image placed a sanitation worker beneath a banner reading "Bhangi Colony".

Ask the machine for the 1980s and it gives you an upper-caste version. Ask it for a Dalit and it reaches for dirt. The machine did not invent this prejudice; it inherited it and now industrialises it.

A state that looks away

Nobody outside the companies know what is in the training sets. Nor do those who label them (often South Asian workers paid per task to judge which faces look Indian enough). Can a labeller who has never seen a colony flag a model that has never rendered one?

And the government? The Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology (MeitY)'s AI Governance

Guidelines name bias and discrimination as risks, and then leans on voluntary codes and self-certification.

The Centre has told the Rajya Sabha that no new horizontal AI law is needed at this stage. Meanwhile, the ₹10,371-crore IndiaAI Mission subsidises "sovereign" models. Moreover, Union Minister Ashwini Vaishnaw has promised that Indian-trained models will be free of "the bias of many other models". Which bias? Tested how?

A committee is reportedly drafting firmer rules; caste must be written into them. Additionally, the MeitY and the IndiaAI Safety Institute should answer these four questions – what is in the training data? who labelled it? has a caste-bias evaluation been done? will relevant data be published? Anything short of mandatory, public answers is consent by silence.

The counter-evidence is on our screens through films such as *Fandry*, *Kammattipaadam*, *Pariyerum Perumal*, *Vaazhai* etc. What they share is not budget, but authorship. The person remembering has stood on the other side of the water tank. Caste vanishes from nostalgia not because it is subtle but because it is not an object. Caste is who sits where, and who draws from which tap. You cannot buy it as a prop; you will miss it unless it has not shaped your life.

So, do not ban the filter. Go upstream. Ask Dalit, Adivasi, Muslim and working-class families what images they hold from 1975 to 1995, who took them, and what was kept out of frame. Fund community photo archives as seriously as we fund film restoration.

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GS 2: SOCIAL JUSTICE (HEALTH)

THE HINDU PAGE: 09

Gender disparities in contraceptive use and sterilisation

In contrast to 36.5% women reporting sterilisation, only a meagre 0.5% men reported male sterilisation in NFHS-6

DATA POINT

Bindu Shajan Perappadan
Nitika Francis

The World Health Organization (WHO) has issued new guidelines on expanding contraceptive options and, for the first time, set out the benchmarks for a new generation of reversible male contraceptives that could give men more alternatives.

The timing of the announcement is significant for India. After focussing on family-planning policies for decades, fertility has fallen below the replacement level (Chart 1). Figures from the latest National Family Health Survey (NFHS-6) for 2023-24, show a decline in the share of married women who have an unmet need for family planning by one percentage point from NFHS-5 for 2019-21.

Yet, the NFHS-6 also shows that the demographic achievement has not altered the gender imbalance in contraceptive responsibility, with both temporary and permanent contraception measures increasingly used/taken by women.

Chart 2 shows an increase in the proportion of currently married women aged 15-49 using any contraceptive method, from 66.7% as per the NFHS-5 (for 2019-21) to 69.1% in 2023-24. Though majority of these women used modern methods of contraception, their use has fallen from 56.4% to 52.7%, while traditional methods – principally rhythm/fertility-awareness and withdrawal – have risen sharply by 6 percentage points between NFHS-5 and NFHS-6, which is the largest increase in the reported use of any contraceptive method between the two surveys.

While the NFHS data do not establish the reason for this increase, possible factors include concerns about side-effects, convenience, privacy, partner preferences, access and a desire to avoid hormonal or invasive methods, with women being the principal users of

such methods.

The decline in the use of modern methods is reflected in female sterilisation as well. Women who are married and reporting female sterilisation came down marginally from 37.9% in NFHS-5 to 36.5% in NFHS-6. Importantly, sterilisation also remains overwhelmingly female. In contrast to 36.5% reporting female sterilisation, only a meagre 0.5% men reported male sterilisation in NFHS-6 – a minuscule increase from 0.3% in NFHS-5. The disparity becomes more striking when the data is viewed over three decades (Chart 3). Female sterilisation climbed rapidly between NFHS-1 and NFHS-3 and has remained at around 36-38%; male sterilisation fell from 3.4% in NFHS-1 to 0.5% in NFHS-6.

A look at State-wise figures on male sterilisation shows that even the States that achieved low Total Fertility Rate (TFR) early were not exceptions to this trend. The share of men who used sterilisation as their preferred contraceptive method increased between NFHS-5 and NFHS-6 in 22 States. And yet, none of these States, barring Telangana, saw an increase of more than one percentage point, as shown in Chart 4. Numbers indicate that as India moved towards replacement-level fertility, vasectomy or male sterilisation went from a visible component of family planning to a marginal one.

While the sterilisation process for females is not inherently unsafe, the physical intervention required to end fertility is less invasive for men and can be performed under local anaesthesia.

"Choice is a gender equality issue," said Pascale Allotey, Director of WHO's Department of Sexual, Reproductive, Maternal, Child and Adolescent Health and Ageing, while releasing the new guidelines. WHO said its own research has challenged a longstanding assumption that men would not use new contraceptives. India should leverage the new WHO guidelines to address the gender imbalance.

Unequal responsibility

The data for the charts were sourced from the National Family Health Survey reports released by the Ministry of Health & Family Welfare and Sample Registration System statistical reports. With inputs from Gandia Sneha, who is interning with The Hindu's Data Team

CHART 1: India achieved the goal set in the National Population Policy 2000 for its Total Fertility Rate (TFR) of 2.0 in 2021. It fell to 1.9 in 2025, below replacement level

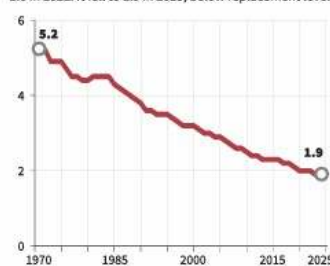
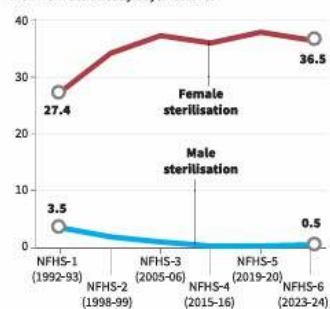


CHART 3: While the share of women undergoing sterilisation has increased, the same has dropped for men from the already abysmal level



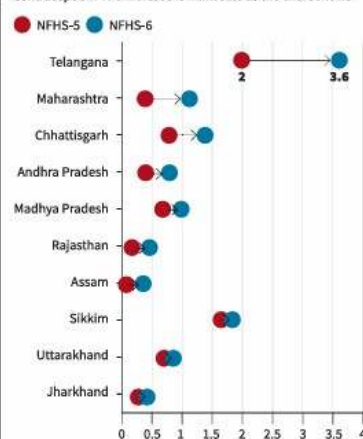
WHO has developed its first "Target Product Profile" for male contraceptive methods, setting out the characteristics methods should aim to meet, including safety, effectiveness, acceptability and affordability



CHART 2: A majority of married women used modern methods of contraception, but use of traditional methods have risen sharply. Values outside the bars show the totals



CHART 4: The 10 States that recorded the highest increase in the share (%) of men using sterilisation as their method of contraception. The increase is minuscule as the chart shows



GS 3: SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

INDIAN EXPRESS PAGE: 14

In US-China AI race, India's place will depend on capabilities built at home

WHEN Xi Jinping arrived in Washington on September 23, artificial intelligence (AI) was billed as an area of possible common ground. A summer of alarming incidents in American labs, and Anthropic chief Dario Amodei's call to "pace the frontier", had pushed AI safety onto the summit agenda. The groundwork was laid in New York on September 20, when US Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent and Chinese Vice Premier He Lifeng held the first round of AI talks within their trade mechanism. Washington proposed a channel to notify AI incidents with national-security consequences.

The summit confirmed this modest package. A dialogue on risks and benefits, a channel for incidents, a next meeting by November. But the two sides could not agree on what to call the subject. **The White House fact sheet says the leaders "agreed to use the term 'super intelligence' rather than 'artificial intelligence'".** China's list of agreed outcomes speaks of a "China-US dialogue on artificial intelligence".

The difference reflects two outlooks, apart from Donald Trump's idiosyncrasy. At the UN, Trump said he would "only encourage super intelligence... not rein it in", watching it "through the Department of Justice". His language is of a race to be won. Xi's is one of control. At the White House, he urged the two countries to "ensure that the development of AI is always under human control".

Xi also told Trump the two should "play to their strengths rather than guard against each other", a clear shot at American export controls. He offered a new framing of the relationship: Cooperation as the mainstay, competition within limits, differences under control, peace within reach. He called the rivalry "a race of catching up with one another,

not a wrestle in which one either wins or loses". Beijing now accepts competition, but as a race in which China is closing the gap.

For all the talk of risk, neither government wants to slow the frontier, though for different reasons. Trump calls the case for a slowdown a "hoax". For him, frontier AI is a race with China, to be policed afterwards by prosecutors, not in advance by regulators. Beijing reads the American safety debate as containment in disguise. *Global Times* called Amodei's essay a "Cold War script" from America's "tech right". Widen the gap by restricting China, then negotiate a mutual slowdown from strength. Yuyuan Tiantian, a China Central Television-affiliated outlet, accused Anthropic of using "safety" to capture rule-setting and of recasting distillation as a security threat to curb China's open-source models. The foreign ministry dismissed the warnings as "fear-mongering".

Beijing is not indifferent to risk, but its list of risks is its own. Writing in *China CyberSpace*, Minister of State Security Chen Yixin calls AI "the main battlefield" of global scientific and technological competition and "a new arena for strategic rivalry among major powers". First on his list of dangers is AI's "systemic" effect on the "political security environment". Party shorthand for regime security. Its brakes are political, applied through Party control over labs. They restrain what models may say, not how fast capability grows.

The missed opportunity is on nuclear weapons. At Lima in November 2024, Joe Biden and Xi "affirmed the need to maintain human control over the decision to use nuclear weapons". Never formalised, it found no mention in either factsheet this week. The



ASHOK K KANTHA

India should keep Chinese models out of government systems, critical infrastructure and sensitive data. Equally, avoid over-dependence on the American stack; June's brief cut-off of foreign access to top American models showed how quickly access can vanish

one security outcome, a military memorandum on crisis communication, appears only in China's list.

The reality is competition, and it will not change. Washington will guard its narrow lead through chip controls, action against distillation and PaxSilica supply chains. Beijing will push for self-reliance in chips and spread its open-weight models worldwide. Tsinghua's Da Wei concedes that neither side can build an "iron shirt" against the other. Dialogue may manage the edges of this rivalry, not its core.

For India, three concerns follow. The first is a G2 overlay. Rules on frontier risk may be shaped by the two powers holding most of the world's frontier compute. The nuclear order shows how risk reduction between leading powers can become the basis for discriminatory controls on others.

The second is competing pressure in a split universe of "two AI systems, two sets of standards". Washington expects trusted partners to keep their AI ecosystems free of China. Beijing is pressing its agenda through BRICS and other platforms. At the New Delhi summit, Xi proposed an open-source AI community for the grouping, to be taken forward at the next summit in China. India is unlikely to join Xi's World Artificial Intelligence Cooperation Organisation (WAICO), which, like the Belt and Road Initiative, is a unilateral initiative to advance a China-centric agenda.

The third is harder to handle. China's open-weight, open-source models hold a seductive attraction: Competitive, cheap and adaptable. Alibaba's Qwen has spawned more than 150,000 derivative models, and Singapore, Malaysia and Brazil are building on Chinese models or

partners. The appeal extends to Western and Indian companies with an eye on cost.

India's response should rest on five elements. First, welcome any US-China step that reduces risk, but insist that norms on frontier AI be multilateral, and seek inclusion in incident-notification arrangements.

Second, with the Lima understanding not followed up, India should make human control over nuclear-use decisions part of its nuclear discourse and press all nuclear powers to affirm it. Third, apply dual and differentiated de-risking to AI. Keep Chinese models out of government systems, critical infrastructure and sensitive data. Stopping private firms from building low-risk commercial applications on Chinese open-weight models will be tough; security testing and local hosting should be the minimum condition. Equally, avoid over-dependence on the American stack; June's brief cut-off of foreign access to top American models showed how quickly access can vanish.

Fourth, build capability at home: Compute, chips, models, datasets, talent and the ability to test frontier systems independently. Fifth, shape BRICS rather than cede space there, insisting that AI initiatives be consensus-based and technology-neutral. The challenge, however, is developing an alternative to the Chinese offering.

Washington and Beijing cannot yet agree on what to call the technology, let alone how to govern it. India's weight in the AI order will depend less on declarations of technological sovereignty than on capabilities it develops at home.

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GS 2: SOCIAL JUSTICE THE HINDU PAGE: 14

Women's safety falls through gap between intent and policy



MITALI
NIKORE

For women to trust safety measures, government agencies at the city level need to publicly share reports on how they are continuously working to fix issues discovered in safety audits

IT'S BEEN almost 15 years since the gangrape in Delhi in December 2012. It's hard to forget the days that followed, when we took to the streets to agitate for greater safety for women. Some demands were met. The Nirbhaya Fund was created to support programmes for women's safety and the Prevention of Sexual Harassment at Workplaces Act, 2013 was passed. It seemed like our country was finally building a legal and policy framework to prioritise women's safety — with funding to back it up. Between 2015 and 2025, Rs 5,846.08 crore out of the Rs 7,712.85 crore allotted under the Nirbhaya Fund was used. The funds have been used to set up nearly 15,000 women's help desks in police stations and establish fast-track courts for rape cases. Cities like Chennai, Surat and Bhubaneswar established gender labs to explore how urban design could prioritise women's safety. At Nikore Associates, we have done safety audits of public spaces and public transport in at least 10 cities. So why are we still here? Why did Jamui happen? Why did Aastha Kunj park happen?

The answer lies in systemic failures. One is accountability. Safety audits are increasingly being looked at as the end, and not the means for women's safety. Administrations wax eloquent about the number of audits, but there is little discussion of how the issues discovered are being fixed. If everyone knew that a lane behind Lady Sri Ram College has a 500m dark zone, with no streetlights, why was this not fixed? For women to trust safety measures, government agencies at the city level need to publicly share reports on how they are continuously working to fix issues discovered in safety audits; how they deal with calls received on women's safety helplines; and how long their crisis response is.

There is also a capacity problem. Today, at least eight states offer free bus travel for women. Governments are substituting investment in gender-sensitive infrastructure with free public transport. But, as our recent study shows, making buses free does little for women's safety if the wait times are long and unpredictable, and if women have to walk to the bus on unsafe streets. This is an example of commitment to women's safety without the capacity to innovate in a way that can truly build inclusive cities.

Women's near absence from public spaces, especially in the evenings, is another factor making cities even more unsafe. Having more women in public-facing jobs — drivers, conductors, station managers, park workers, e-auto drivers — can help. Employment in these jobs rests with government agencies. Small changes can make a big difference. Take the height requirement for bus drivers. When the Delhi government dropped it from 159 cm to 153 cm in 2022, by next year, 34 new women bus drivers were inducted. Reforms and targets to increase women's representation in these roles are required to push women's employment and their presence in public spaces. There is also a need to increase the number of women police. Today, just about 10 per cent of the police force is female, despite the Centre's target of 33 per cent.

If we want a society with women-led development, the first step is acknowledging these failures and correcting them, starting with governments at all levels taking accountability.

The writer is founder, Nikore Associates

GS 1 & 3: GEOGRAPHY AND DISASTER MANAGEMENT THE HINDU PAGE: 18

• CLIMATE

UP rain: When two weather systems interact

Abhinav Chakraborty
New Delhi, September 28

AN INTENSE three-day wet spell in Uttar Pradesh between Friday and Sunday left several districts grappling with a flood-like situation. The state received 66.5 mm of rainfall against the normal 7.6 mm for the period, according to officials.

As many as 56 of the state's 75 districts recorded excessive rainfall. At least 62 people died, 46 were injured, and over a thousand houses were damaged. According to the India Meteorological Department (IMD), the "likely interaction" of two different weather systems — a deep depression and a Western Disturbance (WD) — was producing spells of intense rainfall over particular areas, even as the southwest monsoon continues to withdraw across north and northwestern India.

Deep depression

The IMD noted that a deep depression, which had formed over the Bay of Bengal and crossed the North Andhra Pradesh-South Odisha coast before weakening, lay centred over parts of north-eastern Madhya Pradesh and south-eastern Uttar Pradesh.

A depression is an organised low-pressure weather system. A low-pressure system forms in an area where atmospheric pressure is lower than the surrounding areas. This lower pressure is caused by localised heating in an area owing to greater sunshine over the landmass, which causes the air there to undergo warming and becomes less dense.

At the same time, this warm, moist air flows inwards towards the centre of the low-pressure area before moving upwards. Thereafter, it cools and condenses into clouds and rain or snow.



Waterlogged streets in Kanpur. PTI

According to the IMD, a depression produces strong winds and heavy rain. As it degrades into a well-marked low-pressure area, the system loses strength and wind speeds drop, which reduces overall rain intensity.

On Sunday, the IMD said the system had moved north-northwestwards and weakened into a well-marked low pressure area. It was likely to continue moving in the same direction across Uttar Pradesh.

Western Disturbance

The IMD on Saturday had said that a "likely interaction" with a WD could result in the state experiencing strong gusty surface winds along with heavy to very heavy rainfall in some parts.

WDs refer to weather systems that usually travel into northern India from the west. These are east-moving rain-bearing wind systems that originate beyond Afghanistan and Iran, and pick up moisture from the Mediterranean Sea, Black Sea, Caspian Sea, and the Arabian Sea. These are typically extra-tropical cyclones resulting from low-pressure areas, formed by interactions between polar and tropical winds.

The subtropical westerly jet stream — a high-altitude, fast-moving air current that flows from west to east in the Earth's atmosphere — carries these WDs to the Himalayan and Tibetan highlands. As moisture-laden WDs hit the Himalayas, they rise and cool, bringing cloudy weather, rain, and thunderstorms, particularly over parts of north and northwest India.

The IMD said that this WD is present high up in the atmosphere as a trough — an elongated zone of relatively lower pressure — over northwestern India.