

SANSKRITI IAS EDITORIALS HIGHLIGHTS

05 – 8 – 2026

1. SpaceX rocket stage hurtles toward moon (THE HINDU PAGE NO 7)

1. **GS III** (Science & Tech) & **GS II** (International Relations)
2. **Topics:** Space Technology; Space Debris/Pollution; International Treaties.
3. **Concepts:** Space debris management, lunar impact research, Outer Space Treaty.

SpaceX rocket stage hurtles toward moon, astronomers hot on its trail

This Falcon 9 rocket had launched two satellites towards the moon in January 2025, then SpaceX abandoned the rocket's spent upper stage in an unstable orbit as it lacked enough fuel to return to the earth or head into deep space; it is now expected to hit the moon at 12:05 p.m. IST on August 5

Shreejaya Karantha

Astronomers are closely monitoring a SpaceX rocket stage that is on the way to striking the moon. This Falcon 9 rocket had launched two satellites towards the moon in January 2025. Then SpaceX abandoned the rocket's spent upper stage in an unstable orbit as it lacked enough fuel to return to the earth or head into deep space. It is now expected to hit the moon at 12:05 p.m. IST on August 5.

The independent astronomer Bill Gray's calculations showed that the rocket stage is en route to the Einstein Crater on the moon. Mr. Gray said that over the course of a year, any small changes could add up and cause the object to fly close to the moon instead of impacting it. So he gathered more data, with which by January 2026 he was 100% sure that the stage was on a collision course.

"By April, I was confident enough to announce that it would hit near the Einstein crater," he said, giving scientists roughly 3.5 months to plan observations. All details regarding this event are posted on his website, 'Project Pluto'.

Since he had tracked the rocket within days of its launch, identifying the debris was easy: "We were somewhat fortunate in this case. If an object isn't spotted until months or years after launch, identifying it can be quite challenging," Mr. Gray said.

Accidental opportunity

Rather than threaten astronomy studies, experts said the collision will be an opportunity to study what happens in such events. Specifically, artificial impacts like this are rare. They are also valuable because scientists already know the impactor's mass, speed, and size in advance, unlike with natural meteoroid strikes, rendering the collision a so-called controlled source event.

The last time a similar event was observed was NASA's 2009 LCROSS mission, which deliberately crashed a rocket stage near the moon's south pole and confirmed water ice in the debris it kicked up.

What to expect

Mr. Gray has estimated the impact speed to be at 8,700 km/hr. During the time of the collision, astronomers are planning to investigate the behaviour of lunar dust, which can reveal more about the consequences of natural impacts and seismic activity. Since dust on the moon is not the same as dust anywhere on the earth, astronomers can also benefit from knowing how long dust will remain suspended or what kind of dust storms may be expected if humans want to start living on the moon.



The Falcon 9 rocket whose upper stage is going to crash on the moon (right) and the location of Einstein crater on the moon. NASA AND MAGRE HEIN (CC BY-SA)

According to a paper by U.S. Los Alamos National Laboratory planetary scientist Benjamin Fernando and colleagues (uploaded to the arXiv preprint server on July 16), three particular effects are expected from the impact.

First is a flash of light at the moment of impact, which may last less than a second. This is produced by material from the rocket stage vaporising on contact with the moon. Second, a cloud of debris or ejecta, possibly vapour, will be thrown up. Finally, a crater 20-30 m across, estimated based on past impacts and computer models.

The researchers wrote in their paper that "a double crater may be produced" if the object breaks apart, "which may occur depending on the stage's attitude at the time of impact".

However, catching the flash won't be easy because it will be on the moon's sunlit side, and any attempt will require a telescope.

Observers in India also won't get a chance to see it live as the impact will happen at noon, with the moon below the horizon then.

What if...?

According to Mr. Gray, current estimates of the impact time and location carry an uncertainty of about 5 seconds in impact time and roughly 20 km in location.

Einstein crater sits at 68° W, 15° N, close to the western edge of the near side. It is far from the equatorial and south-polar

With space agencies and private companies both targeting the moon for long-term lunar bases, mining, and satellites, accidental interference between missions may arise. Lunar scientific and cultural heritage are also at risk

regions, where most current and planned lunar landings are concentrated. So the chances of the rocket stage altering any sites that spacefaring nations consider significant are low.

Hypothetically, if this rocket stage or any other debris happened to strike any significant location on the moon – such as the Shiv Shakti point where Chandrayaan-3 landed – there currently is no legal instrument to protect them.

"There is no legal claim," Ranjana Kaul, partner at Dua Associates & Vice President, International Institute of Space Law, Paris, said. "Our outer space treaty does not recognise sovereignty in outer space." She added that just because a country happened to land at a site, it doesn't own that piece of the moon under current regulations.

Moon as a laboratory

Dr. Kaul also stressed the importance of studying artificial impacts like this one because of how quickly activity on the moon is expanding. With space agencies and private companies both targeting the

moon for long-term lunar bases, mining, and satellites, accidental interference between missions may arise. Lunar scientific and cultural heritage are also at risk. "Debris regulation is a serious problem," Dr. Kaul added.

At the United Nations, the Action Team on Lunar Activity Consultation (ATLAC) working group is trying to build consensus among spacefaring nations on issues from coordinating on landing sites to lunar dust mitigation and debris rules – which is a scenario the impending impact previews.

The UN discussions will nonetheless take time to come up with new rules.

"In the United Nations, decisions are by consensus," Dr. Kaul said. This means all participating countries must agree before a proposal becomes binding international regulation, a process that can take years.

Mr. Gray also said space agencies handle leftover rocket stages differently. NASA and the European Space Agency, he said, have been careful. The upper stage that launched the Webb telescope, for instance, was placed in an orbit that will keep it away from the earth-moon system for roughly a century. China's recent stages have similarly been directed toward the Pacific Ocean or orbits around the Sun.

SpaceX has made no public statement on its disposal policy, however.

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THE GIST

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2. Jammu and Kashmir — the elusive quest for Statehood (THE HINDU PAGE NO 8)

1. **GS II (Polity) & GS III (Internal Security)**
2. **Topics:** Federalism & Devolution of Powers; Security Challenges in Border Areas.
3. **Concepts:** Article 370 jurisprudence, UT vs. Statehood administration, preventive detention laws.

Jammu and Kashmir — the elusive quest for Statehood

August 5 marks seven years since Jammu and Kashmir (J&K)'s special status (Article 370) was revoked by the Narendra Modi administration; a few days hence, August 9 will mark seven years of J&K's loss of Statehood. Both actions were accompanied by the most dubious lockdown in India's history. Thousands of troops were flown in, over 5,000 political leaders and cadre were detained, and curfew was imposed together with a communications blockade.

These were emergency measures, yet no emergency was either visible or declared. The Modi administration argued that its measures were temporary and would lead to a violence-free region in which economic growth would be unleashed. Instead, and predictably, violence has continued, as last year's terrorist attacks in Kashmir's Pahalgam (April) and Delhi's Red Fort (November) attest; indeed, it has spread to areas that were relatively dormant, such as Poonch-Rajouri, and from there to adjoining districts of J&K.

Economically, the region continues to suffer. According to the J&K Economic Survey 2025-2026, the ratio of the region's per capita income to the national average is 76.6%, whereas it was 79.9% in 2013-14, a fall of 3.3 percentage points. Unemployment remains close to twice that of the national average; graduate unemployment is as high as 23.9%.

Lockdowns and summons

Kashmiri response to the Pahalgam attack was a wholehearted rejection of violence, expressed in peace marches and candlelit demonstrations. It offered the Modi administration an opportunity for peacebuilding on the ground, beginning with the restoration of Statehood. Instead, the Union Home Ministry chose an even more heavy-handed security response. This year's Amarnath yatra is the most militarised in the history of J&K. Citizens are routinely charged under the draconian Jammu and Kashmir Public Safety Act (PSA) and the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act on the flimsiest of grounds; mass summons are common — over 2,000 were called in for questioning after Constable Ashiq Hussain Qureshi was shot on July 22 this year — curfews are more often in place than not; and the Union Territory has had the highest number of Internet and communications shutdowns in the country since 2019.

At the time, few recognised how momentous



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Seven years on, J&K still awaits restored Statehood and accountable governance

the Modi administration's actions were, not only in what they did but also in how they did it. Article 370 was hollowed out by executive fiat — a Governor who later said he was 'ordered' to sign by the Union Home Minister. Statehood was removed by legislative fiat, via a Parliament which did not even consider consulting J&K's people or political leaders. No Indian State had been stripped of its Statehood since Delhi lost its Statehood in 1956.

Together, the two actions comprised a breathtaking violation of India's constitutional principles and the basic structure of the Union. They should have been seen as the second major salvo against India's democracy — the first being the re-communalisation of the Indian polity through state-sanctioned attacks on Muslims and Christians — but instead they were hived off as specific to conflict-ridden Jammu and Kashmir.

The belief that draconian measures are justified in a conflict-ridden region is fundamentally flawed both morally and pragmatically, as India knows from its own colonial past. Morally, the argument that subjugation is a means towards a desirable end masks the point that subjugation is a repugnant end *per se*, never a means. Pragmatically, as India knows from its more recent past, subjugation only breeds disaffection which will likely express itself in violence when peaceful means of expression are disallowed.

Yet, the deployment of the argument has allowed the Modi administration to get away with direct rule for seven years. The Supreme Court of India let Solicitor General of India Tushar Mehta parrot the argument for four years before weakly advising that Statehood be restored as soon as possible.

Three more years have passed since then, without the Court hearing petitions seeking a timeline for restoration. At no point did the Court question the Union on the utility of its measures on constitutionally moral, or even merely pragmatic, grounds.

Lieutenant-Governor holds power

The Constitution limited the imposition of emergency conditions to six months. Yet, in J&K, emergency conditions have not been lifted for seven years. Though the J&K High Court has repeatedly and increasingly lamented the misuse of draconian laws by the J&K police, its strictures do not appear to have led to reform. J&K held elections two years ago, but the elected

administration has few powers. It is the Lieutenant-Governor who controls the administration, the police and government prosecutors under the 2024 Transaction of Business Rules; he has now been granted emergency powers over telecommunications. As an appointee rather than an elected representative, the Lieutenant-Governor is not accountable to the people.

Accountability through democracy

Thanks to India's young, who so joyfully turned the derogatory 'cockroach' into an assertion of strength, accountability has acquired a salience that it had been stripped of over the past decade. Fortunately, J&K's ruling National Conference party had already decided to renew a campaign for the restoration of Statehood that the Congress party had launched two years ago but persisted with only fitfully. Now the campaign for Statehood must couch itself in the name of accountability.

As the Constitution clearly recognised, an elected administration is the only way to provide for accountability. Though accountability needs guarantees by an independent legislature, oversight and autonomous institutions and a free media, these too require an elected administration to develop. At base, civil society acquires some space to push for reform under an elected administration, which it lacks under an appointed administration.

Over the past decade, J&K has acquired a number of ugly firsts. It was the first State to undergo wide use of the semi-lethal pellet guns in 2016. (Ironically, pellet guns were developed partly as a less lethal response to the stone-pelting agitation in 2010. Our Interlocutors report had criticised their induction.) It was the first State to lose its special status and its Statehood in 2019. It was the first State to undergo a communal delimitation in which Jammu's demography was altered by the creation of additional Hindu-majority constituencies, some of them with populations below 50,000, in 2022.

Is it not time for J&K to experience some positive firsts instead of suffering only ugly ones? After all, it was the first State to overcome communal gerrymandering when the 2024 elections yielded a majority for the pluralist National Conference-Congress alliance. It is only fitting that it also be the first State to regain the Statehood that has been withheld for so long.

3. NATO enters a new strategic era of transformation (THE HINDU PAGE NO 8)

1. **GS II** (International Relations)
2. **Topics:** Global Groupings; Effect of Policies of Developed Countries.
3. **Concepts:** Transatlantic security, defense burden-sharing, US pivot to the Indo-Pacific.

NATO enters a new strategic era of transformation

For the first time since the creation of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in 1949, Washington is asking Europe not merely to spend more on defence but also to assume primary responsibility for its own security. This marks a fundamental shift in the transatlantic compact and signals the emergence of a new phase in the Alliance's evolution. The question is no longer whether NATO will endure, but how it is adapting to a changing strategic landscape.

America's shift

The National Security Strategy of the United States of America (November 2025) maintained NATO as America's principal transatlantic alliance while signalling a significant shift in Washington's expectations of European allies, particularly regarding burden-sharing and collective defence responsibilities. It argued that the era of the U.S. serving as Europe's primary security guarantor was drawing to a close and that prosperous European allies must shoulder greater responsibility for defending their own continent. While endorsing NATO's commitment to increase defence spending to 5% of GDP as the new benchmark for burden sharing, the strategy envisaged the U.S. remaining the Alliance's strategic enabler, nuclear guarantor and political convener rather than its sole military backbone. The objective is a stronger, more self-reliant Europe that allows Washington to devote greater strategic attention to the Indo-Pacific.

This rebalancing is already evident. Following Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, U.S. troop strength in Europe rose to around 1,00,000 personnel. Since then, Washington has gradually reversed that surge. During 2025-26, it withdrew around 5,000 troops from Germany, cancelled the planned deployment of 4,000 troops to Poland, and reduced Brigade Combat Teams in Europe from four to three, bringing the U.S. military presence in Europe down to approximately 75,000-80,000 troops – close to pre-Ukraine war levels. The 36th NATO Summit in Ankara in July 2026 reinforced this transition. While reaffirming the Alliance's commitment to Article 5, members pledged €70 billion in military assistance for Ukraine in 2026, committed to sustaining comparable support in 2027, endorsed European-led development of long-range



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NATO's European shift offers India new strategic and defence opportunities

precision strike capabilities and accelerated efforts to strengthen NATO's defence industrial base. The underlying message was unmistakable: Europe must assume greater responsibility for its conventional defence as the U.S. increasingly prioritises the Indo-Pacific.

Lord Ismay, NATO's first Secretary General, famously described the Alliance's original purpose as "to keep the Russians out, the Americans in, and the Germans down". While that dictum captured the strategic logic of the Cold War, NATO today has entered a distinctly different phase that may be summed up as keeping Russia deterred, America engaged and Europe prepared.

NATO's evolution over time

The Alliance's evolution can be viewed in three phases. NATO 1.0 (1949-1991) relied overwhelmingly on American military and nuclear power to deter Soviet aggression and preserve transatlantic unity. NATO 2.0 (1991-2022) followed the collapse of the Soviet Union, expanding eastwards, incorporating former Warsaw Pact members and undertaking operations in the Balkans and Afghanistan. Yet, this period also witnessed declining European defence expenditure and growing dependence on the U.S. for intelligence, logistics, strategic mobility and high-end military capabilities, making burden sharing an increasingly contentious issue.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine has ushered in NATO's third phase, a more balanced transatlantic partnership in which Europe assumes primary responsibility for conventional defence while the U.S. continues to provide strategic enablers such as nuclear deterrence, intelligence, long-range precision strike capabilities and global power projection. This is less a story of American disengagement than one of strategic redistribution.

The scale of Europe's response was evident at the 2025 Hague Summit, where NATO members committed to increasing core defence spending to at least 3.5 % of GDP by 2035, with progress to be reviewed in 2029. Germany has doubled defence expenditure since 2023 and aims to reach the same target by 2029 while rebuilding military capability to deter Russia. Moscow, meanwhile, has reorganised its western military

posture with new headquarters, formations and bases facing NATO.

The more difficult challenge, however, is not spending but replacing the American military ecosystem. Even as European armies become stronger, they continue to depend heavily on the U.S. for intelligence, surveillance, satellite support, command and control systems, strategic airlift, missile defence, long-range precision strike capabilities and, above all, the nuclear umbrella. Washington's reduction of rapid reaction assets, including bombers, fighter aircraft, air-refuelling tankers, warships, aircraft carriers and attack submarines, together with the deferred deployment of Tomahawk cruise missiles to Germany, illustrates the extent of that dependence. Europe's central dilemma is therefore not simply building larger armed forces but developing the integrated capabilities that have long underpinned NATO's effectiveness. As Poland's Foreign Minister recently observed, Europe does not need to match American military power; it simply needs to be stronger than Russia.

New Delhi and the rebalance

For India, NATO's transformation is less about Europe than about the redistribution of American strategic attention. A Europe capable of assuming greater responsibility for its own security would enable Washington to devote more diplomatic attention, military resources and strategic investments to the Indo-Pacific, reinforcing the regional balance amid China's growing assertiveness. At the same time, a more capable Europe could emerge as an important partner for India in defence manufacturing, advanced technologies, artificial intelligence, cybersecurity, semiconductors and space.

New Delhi should therefore view these changes through the prism of strategic opportunity rather than alliance politics. Closer cooperation with both the U.S. and Europe can complement, not compromise, India's long-standing commitment to strategic autonomy. If navigated prudently, NATO's new strategic model can expand India's defence industrial partnerships, accelerate technological modernisation and strengthen its position as a leading power in an increasingly multipolar world.

4. Delimitation may be less attractive for BJP now (THE HINDU PAGE NO 9)

1. **GS II (Polity) & GS I (Indian Society)**
2. **Topics:** Constitutional Provisions on Elections/Delimitation; Features of Indian Society.
3. **Concepts:** Gerrymandering vs. fair delimitation, voting demographics, caste and Gen Z voting dynamics.

Delimitation may be less attractive for BJP now

Jantar Mantar and Bankipur, taken together, may make the prospect of an early delimitation exercise far less attractive for the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) than it once appeared. For much of the last decade, the BJP had reasons to believe that it had assembled a durable social majority, with Hindus acting as a voting bloc across large parts of north and west India. If groups displayed stable voting preferences over long periods, then redrawing constituency boundaries could amplify existing advantages.

Engineering constituency boundaries to advance a particular political outcome, commonly called gerrymandering, rests precisely on this premise: that electoral loyalties of social groups are predictable. It is reasonable to assume, for instance, that Muslims are less likely to vote for the BJP, just as African Americans have historically been less likely to vote Republican than Democratic in the U.S. Gerrymandering works by stacking and cracking electorates according to such group identities and their assumed preferences.

The BJP has had reason to assume that it built a threshold Hindu voting bloc that could provide it with a permanent majority, albeit with regional variations. The party's continuing electoral triumphs in Gujarat is an example. One reason for its enthusiasm for an early delimitation exercise, which under the existing constitutional scheme can take place only after the data from the Census is published, has been to explore the possibility of redrawing Lok Sabha and Assembly constituencies to maximise its demographic advantage. This is not merely an assumption or an allegation. Assam Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma has publicly stated that the delimitation of Assembly constituencies in the State was intended to reduce the number of seats in which Muslims could influence the outcome. The subsequent electoral outcome



Varghese K. George

A young Brahmin, a young Dalit and a young OBC voter may occupy very different positions in the social hierarchy, yet they can share common anxieties about jobs, mobility, and examinations

suggests that the exercise worked in the party's favour. Yet politics has a habit of unsettling certainties.

An unforeseen twist
Bankipur's demographic composition is almost a dream scenario for the BJP. Out of roughly 3.8 lakh voters, around 1.6 lakh are upper-caste Hindus, the party's strongest social base. Muslims number about 40,000 and Yadavs roughly the same. In effect, the constituency has just enough communities considered adversarial to the BJP, namely the Muslims and Yadavs, to generate counter-polarisation on religious and caste lines, while still allowing the party to build a larger coalition of upper castes, Other Backward Classes (OBCs) and Dalits.

For years, Bankipur represented an ideal laboratory for the BJP's twin strategy of caste and religious consolidation. Yet the party's defeat at the hands of Jan Suraj founder Prashant Kishore suggests that these assumptions may no longer hold automatically. Mr. Kishore's victory appears to have rested on a social coalition that cut across caste and religious boundaries.

Something similar happened in Datia, though in a very different setting. Datia's electorate of about 2.2 lakh is overwhelmingly Hindu. It has around 35,000 Brahmins, more than 30,000 Scheduled Caste voters, over 80,000 OBC voters spread across several communities, and another 25,000 to 30,000 Thakur and Vaishya voters. Muslims account for only a small proportion of the electorate. While the relatively new Jan Suraj could sweep aside the BJP in Bankipur, the Congress could only secure a narrow victory in Datia. The dynamism within the Hindu electorate makes any permanent assumptions about its political preferences risky for the BJP.

Emergence of a new category
What links Jantar Mantar and Bankipur is the emergence of a political variable that neither the

BJP nor its opponents had adequately anticipated: Gen Z as a distinct political community. The protests and mobilisations around issues of recruitment, examinations, unemployment and representation have revealed a generation that does not fit neatly into traditional electoral boxes. It is not that Gen Z voters are caste-agnostic. In fact, they appear to be deeply caste-conscious, expressed in sharply different ways, ranging from anti-reservation arguments to assertive Ambedkarite politics. Yet these divergent strands often converge in their scepticism towards the BJP and, in many cases, towards established political parties in general.

This horizontal social category complicates the older vertical structures of caste and religious mobilisation. A young Brahmin, a young Dalit and a young OBC voter may occupy very different positions in the social hierarchy, yet they can share common anxieties about jobs, mobility, and examinations. Their political choices are therefore not always determined by inherited community loyalties.

The disintegration of the BJP's seemingly perfect constituency in Bankipur and the emergence of Gen Z politics suggest that politics in the Hindi heartland is not a prisoner of constituency boundaries. Electoral behaviour is increasingly shaped by cross-cutting identities that intersect with caste and religion but do not fully submit to them.

This challenges the logic of an early delimitation exercise for the BJP. Constituency engineering can magnify an advantage only when the social coalitions remain stable. If the party's traditional bloc is showing signs of strain, redrawing boundaries can only do so much. The more urgent task for the BJP may be to mend its own camp and restore its social base than redrawing the boundaries of constituencies.

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5. Out of work and outraged (THE HINDU PAGE NO 10)

1. **GS III (Economy) & GS II (Social Justice)**
2. **Topics:** Employment & Demographic Dividend; Social Sector (Education).
3. **Concepts:** Structural unemployment, education expenditure vs. GDP, regulatory issues (NTA/CUET).

Out of work and outraged

While the immediate trigger for the students' protest at Jantar Mantar was the repeated paper leaks, disillusionment among the youth runs much deeper. India has a significant youth population; however, unemployment remains high. Additionally, access to quality education has become limited due to a number of factors

ECONOMIC NOTES

Rohit Azad
Indranil Chowdhury

It won't be an exaggeration to say that the Jantar Mantar protest led by the Cockerroach Jani Party (CJP) is by far the most formidable challenge this government has faced in its 12 years of rule. While it was the issue of repeated paper leaks which pushed the people over the brink, the disillusionment runs far deeper among young Indians. And there is a material basis for this disillusionment. Unfortunately, neither the defiant resignation letter of the Minister nor the rousing welcome he got in the Parliament after the resignation gives the impression that the government has heard the voice of its own youth with any humility.

The question, then, is: why did the agitation catch the imagination of the youth?

A lost demographic advantage
Let us start with what is called a demographic dividend. India currently has the youngest population in the world. Chart 1 shows a rising share of people in the working age bracket (15-64 years) out of the total population – a potential demographic dividend. We are calling it potential because its mere existence does not guarantee its realisation. If the unemployment rates, especially among those entering the labour market, remain high, we are essentially frittering the youth dividend away.

Chart 2, which compares the unemployment rate among the youth (15-29 years) in contrast to the overall workers, shows that India is indeed turning its face away from its youth. Youth unemployment is three times higher than the overall rate. Among women, it is almost four times higher. Urban women are the worst affected. Nearly one in five women looking for work is unable to find a job. It is therefore no surprise that a significantly large section of those protesting were women students.

And the frustration runs deep because even education is not enough to find a job in the Indian markets. Chart 3 shows that unemployment rises with education. The more educated you are, the less likely you are to land yourself a job. So, lack of jobs for the youth is not a supply but a demand side problem. Youth in India are unemployed not because they are not educated but because the economy is not generating enough jobs for them.

The crisis in education
It is not just a lack of jobs; access to quality education is also becoming increasingly limited. This is due to both quantitative and qualitative reasons.

On the quantitative side, it is perhaps for the first time in India's history that spending on education as a percentage of GDP has declined consistently for over a decade. While the government's own National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 recommended a significant increase in spending on education, the reality is the opposite. Spending on education as a share of the total budget has been declining consistently under the current government (Chart 4). This is a significant point that cannot be stressed enough.

Strictly speaking, spending as a proportion of GDP could decline purely because other components (investments, exports, consumption) of GDP can potentially grow faster. In contrast, the share of its own budget that a government allocates to education is entirely at its discretion and reflects the importance it



Protesters demonstrate against the NTA and the alleged irregularities in the NEET-UG and NET exams in New Delhi, on July 4, 2026. SUSHIL KUMAR VERMA

National, centralised admission tests such as the CUET result in considerable shifting of admissions, not just across institutions but across the country

attaches to the sector. Chart 4 clearly shows that education has been slipping from the radar of this government over its tenure so far.

This was yet another case of a failed promise, to which the students responded with their feet on Jantar Mantar (and elsewhere in the country). The low priority accorded to education by this government becomes even clearer when one looks at what it did in the last Budget. They spent way below what they promised in their budget with a shortfall amounting to ₹6,701 crores (Chart 5).

Starving education of funds creates a serious supply bottleneck as far as access to education is concerned. While the number of applicants rises with the growing youth dividend, the number of seats does not. The odds of securing a seat even in an average institution, let alone a premier one, keeps declining every year. Added to this are the changing of goalposts by the government. One year, CBSE results are used for college admissions; the next, they are not. One year there is one entrance examination; the next, another.

Let us take the example of the Common University Entrance Test (CUET). If you want to join a college for an undergraduate (UG) degree, what you scored in your CBSE/ICSE/State board examinations no longer matters as much; what matters is how you perform in the Computer-Based

Test (CBT) with multiple-choice questions (MCQs) under CUET (UG). If you want to do post-graduate (PG), what you did in your UG college for three or four years comes to naught, instead what matters again is what you did in the MCQ of CBT under CUET (PG). As a result, teaching and learning in schools and colleges have been affected. Students are being forced to prepare only for their CUET exams instead of focussing on a holistic teaching and learning process. It is therefore no surprise that, instead of quality educational institutions, coaching centres that help students crack these MCQs are mushrooming across the country.

As if this were not enough, the logistical nightmare that CUET brings to the table at the time of admissions is mind boggling. The National Testing Agency (NTA) conducts the CUET, and there have been glitches since its inception. Academic sessions do not begin on time in many of the institutions that depend on these examinations. National, centralised admission tests also result in considerable shifting of admissions, not just across institutions but across the country. As a result, you have students joining the programme almost half way through the first semester. CUET has disrupted the admissions process in higher education. One could understand if these were teething troubles but this is the fifth year of CUET, and there is still no respite from this chaos.

Another bizarre example was introducing the scanning of CBSE answer scripts for evaluation in the name of objectivity. Given the massive scale of the CBSE examinations in the country, expecting such a policy to work smoothly was unrealistic from the outset.

Interestingly, there was nothing fundamentally wrong with the previous systems of either entrance examinations or CBSE evaluations. The government seems to have followed the maxim, "fix what isn't broken."

All this shows that not only is there an uncertainty of passing an exam, there is an uncertainty surrounding the exam itself. If the readers put themselves in the shoes of a student today, they would know what these students must be going through. One may argue that we are being a tad unfair to this government. After all, it has established new IITs and AIIMS. While this is true, merely increasing the number of institutions, with an overall fund squeeze, may not mean much. Buildings do not make institutions.

As for the quality of education, it is not infrastructure alone that matters, the quality of teaching does too. If the reports in the media were to be believed (and there is incontrovertible evidence to do so), there has been excessive political interference in the appointment of teachers at public universities. As a result, the quality of teaching has been sacrificed at the altar of politics under this regime. None of this is, or can be, hidden from students.

The Chief Justice of India gave an outlet to this simmering anger by calling those questioning the system 'cockroaches'. Much like the cockroaches that possess incredible biological resilience, allowing them to survive for weeks without a head, the youth of this country braved the batons, tear gas, pellet guns and whatever the government threw at them.

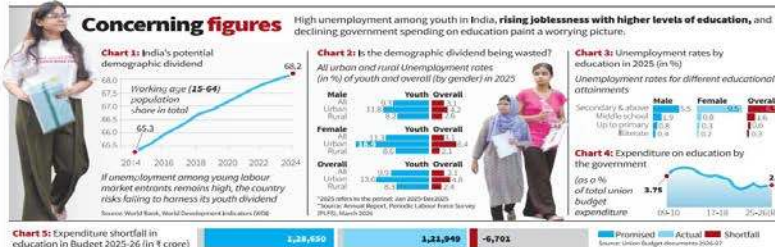
(The authors are a part of DevMac Development Macroeconomics network, which seeks pluralism in Economics.)

THE GIST

India currently has a large youth population. If unemployment rates, especially among those entering the labour market, remain high, the country risks frittering away its demographic dividend.

While the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 recommended a significant increase in spending on education, government expenditure on education as a share of the total budget has been declining consistently. The lack of funding creates a serious supply bottleneck for educational opportunities.

The logistical uncertainties associated with CUET in undergraduate admissions, along with reported excessive political interference in the appointment of teachers at public universities, have also adversely affected the education sector.



6. Israel's October election complicates Gaza roadmap(INDIAN EXPRESS PAGE NO 10)

1. **GS II** (International Relations)
2. **Topics:** Effect of Foreign Policies on India's Interests (West Asia).
3. **Concepts:** Ceasefire frameworks, post-conflict governance, regional instability in the Middle East.

Israel's October election complicates Gaza roadmap



R
SWAMINATHAN

While Netanyahu has avoided criticising Trump's roadmap, his far-right coalition partners have been quick to dismiss an IDF withdrawal, stating their avowed policy of Israeli settlements

SINCE THE war in Iran began in February this year, the world has largely lost its focus on the devastating situation in Gaza. Though a ceasefire has been in force since October 10 of last year following the 20-point Trump peace plan, a continuous, low-intensity conflict has persisted in Gaza. Additionally, while the supply of food and medical aid to Gaza has increased, no progress has been made on reconstruction. The movement of Gazans through the Rafah border crossing into Egypt, its only outlet to the outside world, remains restricted. Israel has expanded its physical occupation of Gaza's territory from the 53 per cent agreed upon under the ceasefire framework beyond the Yellow Line, to more than 60 per cent.

While Hamas has managed to retain control over the 40 per cent of Gaza's territory where more than two million residents are concentrated, the collapse of the local economy and the shut-down of smuggling through the Egyptian tunnel network have dried up its revenue generation. External funding has ground to a halt; its chief patron, Iran, is consumed by the war with the US, Hezbollah's operational capacity in Lebanon has collapsed, and traditional donors like Qatar have been applying diplomatic pressure. Left unable to pay the salaries of its cadre and with its weapons stockpiles depleted by sustained Israeli attacks, Hamas has handed over local governance to the National Committee for the Administration of Gaza and agreed to surrender its heavy weaponry under a 15-point roadmap of the Board of Peace.

Besides elaborating how Hamas's disarmament and the de-commissioning of its military infrastructure will be linked to a synchronised, phased withdrawal of IDF and clarifying that no Palestinian weapons would be transferred to Israel or to any non-Palestinian entity, the roadmap also contains some concessions to Hamas. Hamas will be able to retain privately owned firearms to be registered and licensed by NCAG, in addition to the retention of some of its police officers in the new setup, subject to vetting.

While Netanyahu has avoided criticising Trump's roadmap, his far-right coalition partners have been quick to dismiss an IDF withdrawal, stating their avowed policy of Israeli settlements in Gaza. The NCAG, waiting in Cairo for about six and a half months to enter Gaza and assume governance, has still not been given the necessary clearance by Israel. The requirement that member nations contribute \$1 billion to secure a seat on the Board of Peace appears to have made no meaningful progress either.

Any immediate progress seems unlikely as elections are scheduled for October 27 in Israel. Netanyahu is trailing in the opinion polls and is also facing intense internal threats from his far-right partners. Having failed to prevent a potential agreement between the US and Iran, it is almost impossible for him to agree to specific territorial withdrawals, as he will not like to project weakness to the electorate. Netanyahu was also hoping for Trump's endorsement during his recent trip to Washington, but did not succeed. He was content in emphasising that it marked his seventh meeting with the President in just a year and a half.

Thus, while Hamas's agreement to disarm and relinquish the administration of Gaza is a critical milestone that place pressure on Israel to reciprocate, subsequent progress is expected to be rather slow.

The writer is former ambassador of India to Egypt and former Permanent Representative of India to the Arab League

7. Gen Z leads change in Subcontinent, Pakistan the exception?(INDIAN EXPRESS PAGE NO 11)

1. **GS II** (International Relations)
2. **Topics:** India and its Neighborhood Relations.
3. **Concepts:** Civil-military balance, democratic protests in South Asia, institutional reform.

As Gen Z leads change in Subcontinent, is Pakistan doomed to be the exception?



C RAJA MOHAN

ACROSS SOUTH Asia, Generation Z has emerged as an unexpected force in politics. Over the last few years, students and youth in Bangladesh, Nepal and Sri Lanka have driven unprecedented political change. In India too, the political consequences of an increasingly assertive Gen Z could be profound over the longer term. What about Pakistan? Will it forever remain the Subcontinent's exception?

Pakistan has the same youthful demographics as the rest of the region, and even deeper economic anxieties. Yet its youth has struggled to shape the country's political trajectory. The army's pervasive dominance and extensive control have made popular mobilisation exceptionally difficult. Change still appears to come from the top; the army remains the principal source of political change. While the rest of South Asia debates how young citizens are reshaping politics, Pakistan is once again discussing Rawalpindi's power grab dressed up as reform.

The latest debate was triggered by Interior Minister Mohsin Naqvi's declaration that Pakistan's system of governance had effectively collapsed and required a sweeping overhaul. If he were an ordinary political figure, Naqvi's call for radical reform would have been dismissed as loose talk. Coming from Rawalpindi's current civilian subordinate, however, Naqvi's remarks deserve close attention.

It is evident that Pakistan's military establishment is contemplating not merely another intervention in politics but a redesign of the state. No authoritative draft of a revised political structure is in the public domain. Yet the direction is unmistakable. The discussion reportedly ranges from breaking up the existing provinces into smaller units and revising fiscal federalism in favour of the Centre to vesting greater

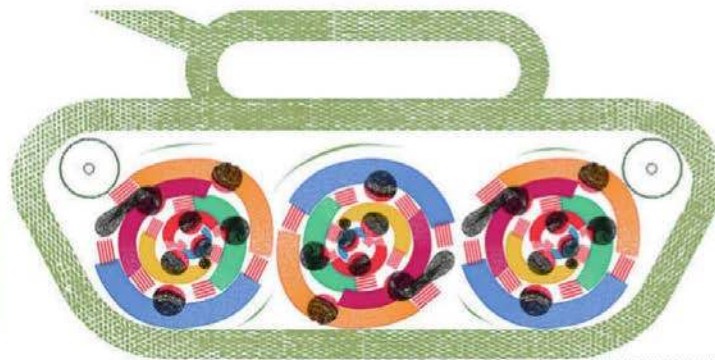


ILLUSTRATION: C R SASIKUMAR

authority in the army leadership and its preferred technocrats.

This represents an important evolution in Pakistan's political history. Ayub Khan, Yahya Khan, Ziaul Haq and Pervez Musharraf all interrupted constitutional politics through military coups. General Asim Munir is pursuing something more ambitious: Institutionalising military predominance within the constitutional framework itself.

The confidence behind this project has been reinforced by the new White House warmth towards Asim Munir. The Anglo-American media that only a short while ago was pleading the case for the release of Imran Khan, jailed by Munir, is now celebrating the self-promoted field marshal as a strategic genius. Anglo-American support has always emboldened Rawalpindi to tighten its grip over Pakistan's polity and society.

The more interesting question, however, is not what Munir wants or what the Anglo-Americans like. It is whether Pakistan's civilian politicians are once again preparing to help the generals consolidate power and write their own political death warrant. In their endless internecine struggles, Pakistan's civilian parties have repeatedly turned to the army to gain advantage over one another. That allowed Rawalpindi to install and uninstall civilian governments at will

In their endless internecine struggles, Pakistan's civilian parties have repeatedly turned to the army to gain advantage over one another. That allowed Rawalpindi to install and uninstall civilian governments at will

pindi to install and uninstall civilian governments at will. Had the civilian parties chosen collective action over short-term partisan gain, they could have pushed the army back into the barracks long ago.

There was one brief moment of hope. In 2006, Benazir Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif signed the Charter of Democracy. Having both experienced repeated military interventions, they recognised that democracy could survive only if civilian parties stopped inviting the army into their partisan battles.

The moment did not last. Both the Pakistan People's Party and the Pakistan Muslim League soon reverted to the familiar temptation of seeking tactical advantage over each other. Later, Imran Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf repeated the same mistake, initially benefiting from military patronage before becoming its victim.

That pattern is now set to repeat itself as the army shows the door to the current civilian government. The generals may design the blueprint, but they still need the civilian parliament to approve it. But the prospects of a united opposition to the Army's project appear bleak. Pakistan's missing Gen Z movement reinforces this imbalance. The country has no shortage of youthful anger. But the Army's instrumentalisation of religious nationalism and the ever-expanding state control over society have prevented that frustration from coalescing into a nationwide democratic movement comparable to those witnessed elsewhere in South Asia.

While the army's political power has steadily expanded, its capacity to generate broader social and economic gains has always fallen short. History offers many examples of authoritarian regimes that have delivered sustained economic growth. Pakistan is not one of them. Despite privileged ties with the world's leading economic powers, the US and now China, and close association with the oil-rich Gulf states, Pakistan has been on the path of economic decline over the last three decades.

There is little evidence to suggest that giving still greater authority to the field marshal will produce dramatically different outcomes. Pakistan's civilian leaders surely know this, but can they summon the will for collective action? While there is a murmur of dissent against Munir's plans, few would bet on Pakistan's political parties to prevail.

Pakistan's predicament offers a wider lesson. If there is no meaningful resistance to the dominant political force and its regressive ideology, societies have to endure prolonged stagnation and repeated humiliation. Resistance certainly imposes immediate costs. Yet it is also the mechanism through which institutions recover their balance and political systems renew themselves.

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8. Why must people be poor in a state rich with minerals?(INDIAN EXPRESS PAGE NO 11)

1. **GS III (Economy) & GS II (Governance)**
2. **Topics:** Inclusive Growth & Natural Resources; Welfare Schemes & Interventions.
3. **Concepts:** The "Resource Curse", District Mineral Foundation Trust (DMFT), sustainable mining.



BABULAL MARANDI

Why must people be poor in a state rich with minerals?

JHARKHAND POSSESSES nearly 40 per cent of India's mineral wealth, yet many of its mining districts remain among the country's least developed. For decades, coal, iron ore, bauxite and limestone have fuelled India's economic growth, while the communities living closest to these resources have continued to struggle with poor healthcare, inadequate schools, damaged roads, polluted environments and shrinking livelihood opportunities.

It was this contradiction that prompted the Centre to establish the District Mineral Foundation Trust (DMFT) in 2015. PM Narendra Modi had argued that mining-affected communities bear the greatest social and environmental costs of extraction but receive the least share of its benefits. DMFT sought to correct this imbalance by ensuring that a portion of mining revenues was reinvested in the welfare of those living in mining-affected areas. Unfortunately, that promise remains largely unfulfilled.

I recently travelled through West Singhbhum, including the Saranda mining belt, and witnessed first-hand the widening gap between the district's immense mineral wealth and the condition of its people. West Singhbhum, home to some of India's richest iron ore reserves, should have been a model of inclusive development. Between 2016 and 2026, nearly Rs 3,700 crore accumulated under its DMFT. Such resources could have transformed

Saranda and surrounding mining villages through better hospitals, schools, drinking water systems, roads and livelihood programmes. Instead, what I saw were struggling local markets, shrinking economic activity, unemployed youth and communities asking a simple question: Where has the money gone?

The DMFT Rules require every district to make annual reports, budgets, approved works, project progress, governing council decisions, and beneficiary details publicly available. Yet, across Jharkhand, these disclosures are either missing, outdated or inaccessible. Mining-affected communities, for whom the fund was created, have little means of knowing how thousands of crores collected in their name have actually been spent. In Jamda, once a bustling mining township, local traders spoke of declining incomes. Several mining leases expired years ago. As mines shut down, employment disappeared. The effects spread far beyond mine workers. Transport operators lost business, roadside eateries emptied, shops

struggled to survive, and young people increasingly migrated in search of work.

Cross the border into Barbil in neighbouring Odisha, barely 20 km away, and the contrast is striking. The geology is identical. The mineral deposits are the same. What differs is governance. Odisha ensured timely auctions after mining leases expired. Jharkhand hesi-

tated. The consequences are visible in the numbers. Since 2019-20, India has auctioned 434 mineral blocks. Odisha auctioned 45, Chhattisgarh 41, while Jharkhand auctioned only three, despite being the country's richest mineral-bearing state. The production gap is equally revealing. Between 2018-19 and 2024-25, Odisha's iron ore production increased from around 120 million tonnes to nearly 180 million tonnes. Jharkhand's production remained almost unchanged at approximately 23 million tonnes.

Revenue tells an even more compelling story. Odisha's mineral resources are less than half of Jharkhand's. Yet in 2025-26, Odisha generated nearly Rs 46,000 crore in mining revenue compared with Jharkhand's Rs 22,000 crore.

Delayed auctions reduce production. Lower production means lower royalty collections. Lower royalties translate into reduced contributions to DMFT. Mining-affected villages receive fewer resources precisely because the mining economy itself has been allowed to stagnate. The debate around DMFT, therefore, is not merely about financial accounting; it is about restoring trust. Before organising new investment summits or announcing ambitious industrial plans, the state must first demonstrate that it can effectively manage the resources it already possesses.

The writer is Jharkhand's first Chief Minister and currently the Leader of the Opposition in the Jharkhand Legislative Assembly

Odisha's mineral resources are less than half of Jharkhand's. Yet in 2025-26, Odisha generated nearly Rs 46,000 crore in mining revenue compared with Jharkhand's Rs 22,000 crore

9. Cut, hike, hold: How RBI decides monetary policy(INDIAN EXPRESS PAGE NO 16)

1. **GS III** (Indian Economy)
2. **Topics:** Mobilization of Resources, Inflation, and Monetary Policy.
3. **Concepts:** Monetary Policy Committee (MPC), Repo Rate, CPI inflation targeting.

• ECONOMY

Cut, hike, hold: How RBI decides monetary policy



UDIT MISRA

THE MONETARY policy committee (MPC) of the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) will unveil its next policy statement today.

Once every two months, the RBI's MPC sits down to take stock of India's economy and decide whether it wants to change the interest rates prevailing in the country.

Most economists and observers expect the RBI to "maintain a status quo" on interest rates. However, should not detract from the fact that economies around the world are facing a fairly unprecedented level of uncertainty. Even when a central bank decides to do nothing, as it were, it bases its decision after considering several factors.

What's the point of RBI monetary policy reviews?

Like all central banks, the RBI too is charged with the responsibility of maintaining stable prices in the economy. It does this by targeting the retail inflation rate at 4% (with a comfort band of two percentage points on either side).

The RBI's research has shown that this is the ideal rate of inflation that promotes sustained economic growth. If the inflation rate remains persistently higher than 4%, it erodes the purchasing power of consumers. If it stays persistently below 4%, it weakens the profit incentive of producers.

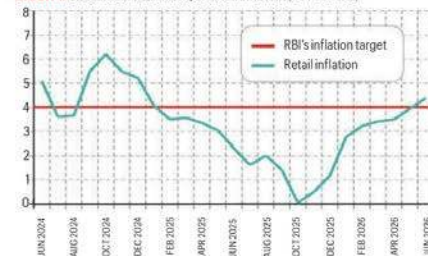
The main tool with which the RBI tries to achieve this 4% inflation target is by tweaking the interest rate it charges when it lends money to India's commercial banks to meet their short-term needs. This interest rate is called the "repo rate".

When the RBI evaluates that economic growth is weak and inflation rate is falling below its target, it reduces the repo rate — making it cheaper for commercial banks to borrow. When the cost of their own borrowing falls, commercial banks cut the rate at which they lend to the rest of the economy — be it a consumer seeking to buy a car or a businessman looking to start a firm. This is how the RBI incentivises economic growth while maintaining price stability.

When the RBI sees inflation rate going up too high — either because there is too much demand for goods and services or because there is too little supply — it raises the repo rate to dampen demand. A repo rate increase triggers banks to raise interest rates, thus forcing many to give up their demand for a new car or a new business.

• Retail inflation creeping up

CHART 1: Consumer Price Index, or retail inflation (Y-O-Y % CHANGE)



SOURCE: CENTRE FOR MONITORING INDIAN ECONOMY PVT LTD.

What are the factors it has to consider?

In any meeting, the RBI has three choices: hike interest rates, cut interest rates or maintain status quo.

On the face of it, the RBI targets the retail inflation rate. That, of course, is the main variable on which it bases its decision.

Chart 2 shows retail inflation has risen through 2026 and is now just above the 4% target, even though it is still within the RBI comfort zone of 2% to 6%. Chart 1 shows the movement of the repo rate over the same period. But looking at just headline inflation is not enough. As things stand, one can argue for a rate cut: after all, inflation is close to the target level and well within the comfort zone even as economic growth is expected to slow down. Or, for a rate hike, since inflation is steadily rising up over the past few months. But since the effect of a repo rate tweak takes time to percolate through the economy (often several months), a central bank has to consider many other factors.

In many ways, the RBI has to continuously assess not just where growth and inflation are at present but where they will be in a few months. Here is a list of some of the other key factors that RBI is likely to take into account in its deliberations.

1. CRUDE OIL PRICES: Higher crude prices don't just raise domestic inflation but also worsen India's trade deficit, hit exchange rate, increase government debt and bring down economic growth. Thanks to the shaky ceasefire between the US and Iran, crude oil prices continue to swing wildly from one week to another. But, crucially, since the middle of June when the peace deal was signed, crude oil prices have gone up by around 10%. If the RBI expects crude oil prices to remain high or possibly even go higher, it may consider raising rates or, at the

Rate actions by key central banks

As of July, US Fed, European Central Bank, Bank of Japan, and Bank of England all maintained status quo on the rates in their economies.

This brings down the pressure on the RBI to hike rates.

very least, keep rates higher for longer.

2. US-IRAN HOSTILITIES: The same argument applies here as well. If the war continues, supply of energy will remain constrained and prices will continue to remain elevated. This is more so because apart from the Strait of Hormuz, now even shipping through the Red Sea has come under threat. Such an assessment will likely single any plans within the RBI to cut interest rates.

3. MONSOON, EL NIÑO, INFLATION: Regardless of what happens to crude oil prices, there is another big threat to domestic inflation in the form of El Niño. El Niño conditions are likely to intensify in the coming months. As of end-July, rainfall is 13% below average and more than 40% of area in the country remains in the deficient category. Water reservoir levels are considerably lower than what they were at the same stage last year. These can affect rabi sowing.

Food inflation was already well above 5% in June and these developments may tilt the RBI towards either raising rates or keeping them at the same level.

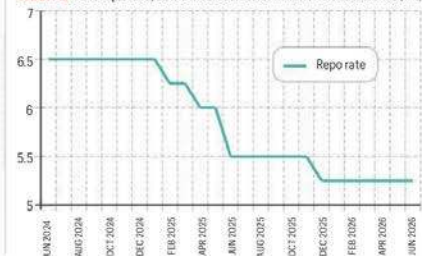
4. QUALITY OF GROWTH MOMENTUM: All central banks have to balance between controlling inflation and promoting economic growth. Further, while deciding on its rate policy, the RBI concerns itself not just with the level of growth but also assesses the quality of growth momentum. It is entirely possible that the growth rate in the past year or the last quarter was strong enough but there are emerging signs of weakness.

To assess this, the RBI looks at the picture painted by a whole host of high frequency indicators. For instance, as a recent report from Bank of Baroda notes, "high frequency data for quarter ending June 2026 indicates that airline passenger traffic (including domestic travel), rail freight traf-

Most economists expect a 'status quo' on interest rates this time. But even when RBI chooses to hold the course, it does so after weighing several factors

• Repo rate steadily coming down

CHART 2: RBI's repo rate, or the interest rate at which it lends to banks (IN %)



fic, diesel consumption, GST e-way bill generation growth, all slowed compared with June 2025". On the other hand, "port cargo traffic, telecom subscribers, vehicle registrations and GST collections have maintained upward momentum" in the same quarter (April, May and June).

Clearly, the high frequency indicators are painting a mixed picture of the economy.

A mixed picture suggests that the underlying growth momentum is uneven — that is, it is not the case that every sector is looking up. This, in turn, has a key policy implication: The RBI will have to be cautious about raising interest rates.

If all sectors were doing well, the RBI could be tempted to raise rates in the hope that the underlying growth momentum is robust enough to take an interest rate hike in its stride. But if growth is not broad-based, a rate hike can also hurt several sectors that were in any case not doing as well.

5. ACTION OF OTHER CENTRAL BANKS: Typically, interest rates in India are higher than the interest rates in the developed countries such as the US and euro area because the inflation rate is also higher. This gap between the two interest rates often plays a big role in attracting global investors to invest in India via the bond market (a market when money is lent and borrowed), thus providing money that is borrowed by Indian companies as well as the government.

As such, if other central banks raise interest rates, there is pressure on the RBI to follow suit and protect India's attractiveness as an investment destination for debt funds.

But there is a flipside too. Higher interest rates also raise the cost of borrowing for everyone in the economy, especially the government. An increase in interest rates can hurt the government's debt calculations.

10. SC expanded scope of domestic cruelty law to live-in relationships (INDIAN EXPRESS PAGE NO 11)

1. **GS II** (Polity/Social Justice) & **GS I** (Indian Society)
2. **Topics:** Judiciary & Vulnerable Sections; Evolving Family Structures.
3. **Concepts:** Section 498A IPC / Section 85 BNS, Domestic Violence Act (2005), purposive interpretation of law.

LEGAL

Why SC expanded scope of domestic cruelty law to women in live-in relationships

Vineet Bhalia
New Delhi, August 4

EXPANDING THE protection against domestic cruelty under criminal law, the Supreme Court has ruled that such protection, ordinarily given to married women under Section 498A of the erstwhile Indian Penal Code (IPC), extends to women in live-in relationships as well, provided the couple shares an "intent to marry".

Since the IPC has now been replaced by the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (BNS), the judgment will likely apply to the corresponding BNS provision: Section 85. The judgment, delivered on Monday by a bench of Justices Sanjay Karol and N Kottiswar Singh, recognises that women facing cruelty in domestic settings cannot be denied the protection of criminal law merely because they have not undergone a formal marriage.

The legal position until now

Section 498A of the IPC penalises a husband or his relatives for subjecting a woman to cruelty. Because the provision explicitly uses the word "husband", its application was traditionally restricted to legally valid marriages.

Over the years, the Supreme Court expanded this definition to cover such men who induced a woman into a marriage that is legally void or voidable — for instance, by hiding a previous subsisting marriage — holding that such men cannot claim that they were not a "husband" to escape prosecution for cruelty.

This was what had transpired in the present case as well. The accused man approached the courts to quash a Section 498A case filed by his partner, arguing that since he was already married to someone else, his relationship with the complainant was not a valid marriage. The Karnataka High Court rejected this argument, ruling that when "a man induces a woman to believe that she is lawfully married to him, and thereafter subjects her to cruelty, [he] cannot be permitted to evade criminal responsibility on the plea that no valid marriage existed in law." This led him to appeal to the Supreme Court.

Beyond void marriages

The Supreme Court could have dismissed the appeal by relying on the established precedent regarding void marriages, but the bench took up the broader question of whether a man in a live-in relationship can be prosecuted under Section 498A.

The judgment, written by Justice Karol, adopted a "purposive interpretation" of the law, noting that since the original objective of Section 498A was to deter domestic cruelty, the law must adapt to changing social realities, observing that "cruelty, any which way, does not check at the door, whether the house it enters is that of a married woman or not". The court reasoned that if a woman faces cruelty from her partner, it makes no logical sense to offer her the protection of criminal law if she is married, but deny it if she is cohabiting before marriage. This distinction, it said, "has no rational nexus with the object of preventing domestic violence and is as such offensive to Article 14 of the Constitution of India", which guarantees the fundamental right to equality.

Why the DV Act is not enough

During the hearings, both the petitioner and the Union government argued against expanding Section 498A, pointing out that unmarried women are already protected under the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence (DV) Act, 2005, since the Act expressly covers not just married persons but also those "related... through a relationship in the nature of marriage".

The Supreme Court rejected this argument on the basis of the fundamental difference between the two laws. The DV Act, it pointed out, is primarily a piece of civil legislation providing remedies like maintenance and protection orders. The court said that equating it with Section 498A would be a "misstatement of law" because "the import of civil and criminal law is different" since "police has almost singularly civil and monetary consequences, whereas the other is backed by the force of criminal deterrence".

'Intent to marry' is crucial

To determine which live-in couples get this protection of criminal law, the Supreme Court borrowed the concept of a "relationship in the nature of marriage" from the DV Act. The court clarified that a "relationship in the nature of marriage" is a narrower legal subset of a general "live-in relationship". Relying on a 2013 judgment by it, the court reiterated the features of such a relationship, which include pooling financial resources, sharing domestic arrangements, having a sexual relationship, and holding themselves out to society as being akin to spouses.

Monday's judgment, however, added a caveat for the application of Section 498A: The couple must, in addition to the above, also have the "intent to marry".

This is because, according to the court, while many relationships "may meet all the requirements to be a relationship in the nature of marriage", the partners might choose never to enter matrimony. When this intent is absent, the court held, the relationship should not be equated with marriage for the purpose of invoking a penal provision and its "long list of adverse consequences".

"Those relationships that are in the nature of marriage and also have the requisite intent to marry are the closest to marriage itself, and it is those relationships that shall be entitled to the protection of [Section 498A]," the court ruled.

The judgment noted that the initial burden of proof to establish this intent will lie on the female partner seeking the law's protection. But it did not lay down specific parameters for how this internal "intent" is to be legally recognised.