SANSKRITI IAS EDITORIALS HIGHLIGHTS

07-08-2026

1. Donald Trump in the Persian labyrinth(THE HINDU PAGE NO 8)

1. GS II (International Relations)
2. Topics: Effect of policies and politics of developed and developing countries on India's interests.
3. Concepts: US-Iran conflict, Middle East geopolitics, Strait of Hormuz trade routes, asymmetric warfare, regime change vs. diplomatic negotiations.

Donald Trump in the Persian labyrinth

"When we are finished, take over your government. It will be yours to take. This will be probably your only chance for generations," United States President Donald Trump told Iranians on February 28, 2026, after the U.S. and Israel assassinated Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, and launched a war against the country. More than five months later, the war that Mr. Trump believed would be over in weeks, if not days, is far from over. The Islamic Republic has not only survived but has also consolidated its position, at home and in the region. Mr. Trump has alternated between strikes, ceasefires, talks, threats, ultimatums, renewed strikes, and U-turns in an attempt to shape the course and outcome of the conflict and the behaviour of the Iranian state, while seeking a face-saving exit. But with the war unresolved and his objectives unmet, Mr. Trump, confronting a resolute yet risk-tolerant Tehran, has found himself in a strategic cul-de-sac.

The U.S. and Israel launched the war with four principal objectives: destroy Iran's nuclear programme; dismantle its missile capabilities and military industrial base; end Tehran's support for its non-state quartet (Hamas, Houthis, Hezbollah and Hashad) and bring about a regime change. The first three objectives, however, were inseparable from the fourth. Without toppling the Islamic Republic, achieving any of the other goals appeared impossible even before the war began. This makes regime change or regime collapse the central strategic aim of the war on which all the others depended.

Stanly Johny

America's Iran war stalls as Tehran turns pressure into strategic advantage

The President's grave miscalculation

The challenge before Mr. Trump was to engineer regime change through an aerial campaign alone. He was unwilling to commit ground troops, and the U.S. lacked a credible local ally capable of leading an armed insurgency against Tehran. Mr. Trump initially seemed aware of the risks of attacking Iran. In June 2025, the U.S. joined Israel in striking Iran's nuclear facilities but quickly stepped back. He then declared that he had "obliterated" Iran's nuclear programme and compelled Israel to accept a ceasefire. Determined to avoid a wider regional conflict, he sought to prevent the war from spiralling out of control.

But by February 2026, two developments, along with sustained pressure from Israel, appeared to have convinced him that Iran could be defeated in a short war. The first was the U.S. invasion of Venezuela in early January, which in Mr. Trump's view was a resounding success. U.S. forces abducted President Nicolás Maduro, and withdrew without suffering casualties. Venezuelan Vice-President Delcy Rodríguez, who assumed the acting presidency, quickly offered full cooperation with Washington. The second was the wave of violent protests and riots across Iran in January, which reinforced the belief in Washington and Tel Aviv that the government in Tehran had been fatally weakened. They believed that by bombing Iran and decapitating its leadership, the regime would either collapse or result in a new leadership willing to cooperate with Washington, much as they believed had happened in Venezuela. This proved to be a grave miscalculation.

The three pillars of Iran's response

Iran's response rested on three pillars – preserving the state; regionalising the war; and enhancing its economic cost through horizontal escalation. Tehran understood that because Mr. Trump's other war aims were dependent on regime change, preserving the Islamic Republic would, by itself, deny Washington its broader objectives. Mr. Trump mistook Iran for a personality-driven authoritarian regime, which could crumble once the head was taken out. But the Iranian state is sustained by a deeply-entrenched institutional system and an ideology that fuses Shia notions of sacrifice with the ideals of political revolution. Under attack, the state – designed and built to withstand both internal and external shocks – consolidated, while millions rallied around the flag.

The second element was to turn the U.S. bases in the region, built to project American power and protect its allies, into vulnerable targets. Tehran shut down the Strait of Hormuz through which roughly 20% of the world's seaborne crude oil passed before the war. It turned the Persian Gulf into a battlefield and kept American warships out of it. The Iranian view was that if it was not allowed to export crude, nobody in the Gulf would be able to do so through the Strait. Surprisingly, the U.S. had no contingency plan for the closure of the Strait. Once the waterway was shut, the dynamics of the war began to shift. It was at that point that Mr. Trump began to lose the strategic initiative.

After 40 days of bombing, Mr. Trump announced a ceasefire on April 8. Since then, he has been searching for a dignified exit from the conflict. On June 17, he signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU) with Iran, under which Washington made significant concessions. Unable to present the MoU as a victory at home, however, Mr. Trump soon resumed military strikes, only to be met each time with Iranian retaliation. The ensuing cycle of escalation pushed Washington even farther from its original objectives, while Iran's willingness to take risks continued to grow.

The war has inflicted immense damage to Iran's military infrastructure and economy. Yet, Tehran, which has lived under U.S. sanctions for nearly five decades, seems willing to absorb the pain because it sees a strategic opportunity to reshape the regional balance of power at a time when the U.S. is confronting the limits of its own overreach.

As the war dragged on, Iran stepped out of the shadows of asymmetric warfare and increasingly shaped both the course and the pace of the conflict. When U.S. bombing resumed in July following the collapse of the MoU, Washington's primary objective shifted to reopening the Strait of Hormuz, which had remained open until February 27. Four months into the war, Iran had forced the U.S. to set aside its original objectives – from regime change to the destruction of Iran's nuclear programme – and instead contend with a new strategic problem created by Tehran itself. In July, while responding to U.S. strikes, Iran widened the conflict by intensifying attacks on Jordan and targeting Iraqi Kurdistan, Syria, and the Persian Gulf monarchies. Yemen's Ansar Allah (the Houthis) struck Saudi oil facilities and imposed a naval blockade on the kingdom's Red Sea ports. The conflict thus expanded horizontally in July, something which Mr. Trump was unprepared.

Trapped in escalation

Consider America's major military campaigns in the 21st century. In Afghanistan, U.S. forces achieved an initial swift victory by toppling the Taliban and establishing a new political order. They began losing the war only after the Taliban began regrouping and started a sustained insurgency. In Iraq and Libya, Washington succeeded in bringing down the regimes, even though the interventions destroyed those states and societies. In each of those theatres, the U.S. at least achieved its immediate military objectives, before failing to manage the post-war order.

But in Iran, the U.S. lost the war in the first phase itself. The U.S. now faces a diminished presence in West Asia, while Iran, with Hormuz under its control, is reasserting itself as a Persian Gulf regional power. Mr. Trump is no longer talking about Iran's missile programme, its foreign policy or the character of the Iranian state. Forget regime change; today, he is asking the Islamic Republic, the same regime he sought to topple, to make a deal with Washington.

Trapped in this Persian labyrinth, Mr. Trump has few good options. He can acknowledge defeat and exercise diplomatic patience to reach a deal with Tehran and extricate the U.S. from the conflict. For Washington, which has been the dominant power in the Persian Gulf at least since the 1956 Suez War, this would come at a significant strategic cost. Alternatively, Mr. Trump could turn his failed air campaign into a full-scale invasion, with more devastating strikes and the potential deployment of ground troops. But there is no guarantee that escalation would help him win the war. On the contrary, it could draw the U.S. deeper into the sands of Iran, where a military of roughly 6,00,000 soldiers would be waiting.

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2. Handloom — weaving India's heritage into global growth(THE HINDU PAGE NO 8)

1. GS III (Economy) & GS I (Art & Culture)
2. Topics: Indian Economy (mobilization of resources, growth, employment); Indian Culture (heritage).
3. Concepts: Handloom sector empowerment, Geographical Indication (GI) tags, rural entrepreneurship, technology in traditional industries (Handloom 4.0).

Handloom — weaving India's heritage into global growth

The making of a developed nation is not defined by technology alone. It is shaped by the ability to transform enduring strengths into engines of future growth. As India advances towards Viksit Bharat 2047, it is investing in frontier technologies, strengthening manufacturing and building globally competitive industries.

Yet, one of India's greatest strengths has been with India all along – its handloom tradition. On August 7, as India marks the 12th National Handloom Day, it is time to view handloom as a strategic sector for a world that values sustainability, authenticity and resilient supply chains.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's vision of Viksit Bharat 2047 is built on prosperity, self-reliance, inclusivity and cultural confidence. Handloom embodies this vision by bringing together heritage and innovation, while driving women-led development, rural entrepreneurship, livelihoods and global competitiveness.

Threads of India's legacy

Every handwoven fabric reflects the courage to preserve tradition, the patience to perfect every thread, the integrity of honest craftsmanship and the wisdom passed down through generations. That is why handloom is not merely a craft, but one of India's greatest civilisational strengths. From the Indus Valley Civilisation, where cotton was first cultivated and woven, to the 18th century when Indian textiles dominated global trade, India set global benchmarks in textile excellence. Bengal's legendary muslin – so fine that a 25-metre length could pass through a ring – along with Banarasi silk, Kanchipuram weaves, Pochampally Ikat and countless regional traditions, earned India worldwide admiration.

Today, as the world turns towards authentic, sustainable and handcrafted products, India has a historic opportunity to reclaim that leadership.

Giriraj Singh

Union Minister of Textiles, Government of India

India's ancient handloom traditions can transform heritage into a globally competitive creative economy

India's next handloom revolution must export not just textiles, but also craftsmanship, heritage, innovation and trust, making every handwoven product an ambassador of Brand India.

Transformation through policy

Handloom is India's largest cottage industry, supporting the livelihoods of more than 35 lakh weavers and allied workers, nearly 72% of whom are women. Over the past decade, the Government has strengthened the sector through the Raw Material Supply Scheme, 797 handloom clusters, over 1.24 lakh improved looms, skill upgradation for nearly 97,000 artisans, and initiatives such as Producer Companies, GI tagged products, the Handloom Mark, India Handmade certification, Urban Haats and Design Resource Centres.

Today, 29 Weavers' Service Centres provide end to end support through training, upskilling, design development, raw material assistance and market linkages, while the 11 Indian Institutes of Handloom Technology are being strengthened to expand advanced training and develop niche, high-value handloom products. The forthcoming National Handloom and Handicraft Programme will accelerate this transformation by strengthening 1,800 clusters across more than 500 districts, benefiting 65 lakh weavers and artisans and establishing Handmade in India as a globally recognised brand.

Innovation has always been part of India's handloom journey. Mahatma Gandhi's Ambar Charkha made spinning easier, faster and more efficient, advancing the vision of self-reliance.

More recently, Assam's Maina Loom and the Chitranjan Handloom developed in Sivasagar have shown how better loom design can make weaving easier and more productive. The Centre of Excellence for Handloom Technology, established with the Indian Institutes of Technology, is developing lighter, stronger and easier to use looms that reduce physical effort and improve productivity, including for persons with disabilities.

Under the Centre, the Handloom 4.0 initiative uses digital tools and Artificial Intelligence to monitor productivity, quality and maintenance, and is being piloted on 100 looms before expanding across the States.

Technology should empower the artisan, not replace the artisan. Platforms such as VisioNXT can help forecast demand, identify design trends, authenticate genuine handloom products and connect weavers directly with global markets. At the same time, product diversification into premium silk, natural fibres, sustainable fibres and innovative blends can create high-value products and unlock new markets.

Combined with better branding, value addition and direct market access, these innovations can significantly enhance weavers' incomes. The vision is to enable every weaver to earn a dignified and aspirational income, with the ambition of ₹50,000 per month in the years ahead.

India's identity

India's weavers are not merely a workforce. They are entrepreneurs, innovators and creators of value. By enabling them to build global brands, move up the value chain and reach global markets, handloom can be transformed into one of India's most dynamic creative industries. This is also a call to India's youth to bring together heritage and technology, creativity and enterprise, to shape the next chapter of handloom.

On this National Handloom Day, let us celebrate India's weavers not only as custodians of our heritage, but also as architects of India's progress. Every handloom product we buy and wear strengthens a weaver's livelihood, preserves a timeless tradition and carries India's story to the world.

The views expressed are personal

3. The Beijing model of innovation(THE HINDU PAGE NO 10)

1. GS III (Science & Tech / Economy) & GS II (International Relations)
2. Topics: Science and Technology- developments and their applications; Effect of policies of developed and developing countries.
3. Concepts: State-backed innovation ecosystems, AI and robotics commercialization, bridging the R&D "valley of death", private venture capital integration.

The Beijing model of innovation

Beijing's innovation model brings together universities, start-ups, industry and the state to turn research into commercially viable technologies by bridging the 'valley of death'; the ecosystem is driving China's push in AI and humanoid robotics through state-backed funding, talent and industrial clusters

WORLD INSIGHT

Ananth Krishnan

If the conventional wisdom about innovation is that it is best left to individuals and private enterprise – and the best thing a government can do is get out of the way – that is certainly not the thinking in Beijing.

How innovation happens in Beijing offers a snapshot into China's model in which research universities, start-ups, the market and the state all have a role to play.

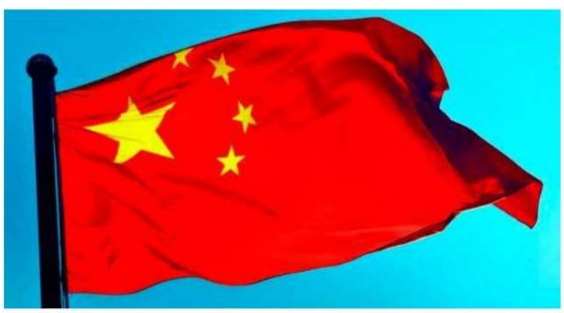
The Chinese capital has always had the country's most important cluster of research universities, with Peking University and Tsinghua leading the list. It is also home to several cutting-edge robotics and AI companies, including Moonshot, which was started by graduates of Tsinghua and made waves over its latest Kimi K3 open-source model.

"A closed loop from project discovery to incubation" is how Yang Xiuling, who as the Director General of the Beijing Municipal Commission of Development and Reform leads the city's top economic planning body, describes the ecosystem. "Our greatest strength," she says, "is talent and the concentration of top research universities."

The challenge that then follows is how to leverage that talent, or, as she puts it, "how to move results out of the lab". The gap between translating early research into commercially sustainable ventures is known as the "valley of death" for innovation. To cross that valley in Beijing, the state steps in.

Beijing's Zhongguancun research cluster is at the forefront of tech innovation in China, along with clusters in Shenzhen, Shanghai and Hangzhou. A strong undercurrent of competition underpins the national innovation ecosystem, especially when it comes to attracting and keeping talent.

To deal with the "valley of death", Beijing set up what it calls "an intelligent platform for results commercialisation" led by a group of tech managers, who, Ms. Yang says, "are a bridge because they understand both the tech and the market". In 2025, the city's platform executed 1.04 lakh tech contracts.



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"Markets and companies are still at the centre," Ms. Yang says. "But the way we look at it is that the companies pose questions, and the universities can provide answers. The companies still play a key role in R&D and in taking the lead in collaborative research with institutions".

The universities provide the foundation from which the rest follows, says Zhang Jihong, who is a Director at the state-run Zhongguancun Science Park. "It's the universities that have helped incubate a number of high-tech enterprises," he says. "We have formed a virtuous cycle where the universities produce talent, the talent provides intellectual support for innovation, and innovation again reinforces the growth of universities."

The state as investor

The state's role here is twofold. It provides the hard infrastructure, as seen in the science park and a number of incubators littered around Zhongguancun.

More importantly, it also provides capital, not only linking start-ups to private venture capital (VC) but also stepping in with state-backed capital to help bear some of the risk.

The state taking a direct stake in companies is a unique feature of this ecosystem. The upside is it helps bear losses and allows for the longer-term, patient kind of support that VC might not afford. This has played a key role in enabling the speed and scale of innovation in China.

The downside is wasteful spending, if state funds do not do their due diligence, which is often the case. So much so that this has emerged as a growing concern for Chinese regulators, who in June issued new rules to tighten how local governments spend these funds.

The intense competition among different clusters, coupled with the collapse in land sales as a source of revenue for local governments, has led to a splurge in spending at the local level, with each province putting in funds with the hope of finding its national champions, even if they lack the capacity to do the needed due diligence. The new rules have now called for stricter control over how these funds are spent and for more approvals from the Central government.

Humanoids on the factory floor

AI and robotics are the twin peaks of Beijing's current innovation drive. If Zhongguancun in the north is the home of tech talent, the Yizhuang industrial cluster in the city's southern suburbs offers a snapshot of how innovation is playing out on the factory floor. Here, a hub-and-spokes model has the state's Humanoid Robot Innovation Centre at its centre, which funnels talent to a number of robotics companies around its periphery. "The idea," explains Che Zhengping, who is Head of Embodied AI at the Beijing Humanoid Robot Innovation Centre, "is to build a full supply chain that is ready for mass production". The current focus in humanoids is to "shift from industrial use scenarios to daily use scenarios", including healthcare, which is expected to be a major source of demand in an ageing society.

Among the companies in Yizhuang is Lingyi iTech, which in April started production on humanoid robots and is already planning to scale up. "Advancements in technology are making it more affordable" to scale, says Vice President Philip Yang. "As we move from semi automation to full automation," he estimates, "costs in 2030 will be half of what they are today."

Lingyi already has production capacity "for the next 5 to 6 years". By the end of 2027, it will be making 20,000 robots annually. The plan is to scale up to 1 lakh units by 2028 and 5 lakh by 2030 from this Yizhuang facility (the company has four others), by when it hopes to be "one of the world's top three".

At the state-run innovation centre next door, researchers pore over unfinished humanoid robots, getting them to perfect a range of delicate movements before the latest model is given the green light.

State subsidies of land, policy and tax support are among the more well-known elements of China's industrial policy. The state's enabling of talent and intellectual support are perhaps less well-known, but arguably just as important when it comes to getting innovation right.

THE GIST

Beijing's Zhongguancun and other innovation clusters are using research universities, technology managers and incubators to help move scientific results from laboratories into the market.

The city's push for AI and humanoid robots is being supported by industrial hubs, state-backed capital and policies aimed at building a full supply chain for mass production.

4. Why are households pledging gold instead of selling it?(THE HINDU PAGE NO 10)

1. GS III (Indian Economy)
2. Topics: Indian Economy and issues relating to planning, mobilization of resources, growth, development.
3. Concepts: Gold monetization, household savings patterns, gold loan market expansion, RBI lending regulations, current account pressures.

Why are households pledging gold instead of selling it?

How are rising prices reshaping India's traditional appetite for gold jewellery?

Santosh V. Perumal

The story so far:

For centuries, gold has had a prime position in India's economic and social landscape. Gold has proved its timeless appeal, but global uncertainties and their disruptions have led to a structural change in its holding pattern in India, exhibiting a dual-track economy, one steeped in tradition (as wedding and festival buying to provide seasonal support) and another shaped by modern portfolio management.

How is the demand pattern for gold changing?

India's overall gold demand was up 2% year-on-year (YoY) to 282 tonnes in the first half (H1) of this year, driven by investment demand as ETFs hit a record high; while jewellery demand declined 17.1% to 141.2 tonnes (also the second-lowest first quarter or Q1 on record since 2000), according to the World Gold Council (WGC) data.

In the second quarter (Q2) alone, India's overall gold demand was down 6% YoY to 131.4 tonnes, with jewellery demand (30% of overall gold demand, the lowest since the WGC began tracking the data in 2000) falling faster at 15% to 75.1 tonnes, the second-lowest in Q2 since 2000. India was the world's largest gold jewellery market in the quarter, accounting for 27% of global demand, WGC data suggest.

Investment demand was seen softening in Q2 to 54 tonnes but was higher than the long-term quarterly average of 49 tonnes, hinting at above-average demand and pointing towards sustained investment interest.

Q1 was a record for Indian gold ETFs, with net demand of 20 tonnes, driven by strong investor participation amid elevated gold prices and subdued domestic financial markets. Similarly, bars and coins saw a 21.3% and 105.5% surge in volume and value, respectively, in H1FY27.

Is investment gold overtaking jewellery?

The shift in allegiance to investment instruments such as ETFs, gold bars, and coins is palpable as the price of the yellow metal increased more than fivefold in the last 10 years, against India's national average (economic growth), and is seen favourably from a current account perspective.

According to IIFL's Capital Outlook 2026, the Reserve Bank of India (RBI), in 2025, stepped up gold purchases just as global gold prices rallied sharply.

The combination (household gold and the RBI purchases) helped cushion the impact of rupee depreciation and strengthened India's external balance at a time when foreign portfolio flows were under pressure, it said.

Affordability pressures pushed jewellery demand down. Yet, consumers' gold purchases hit a record ₹1.98 lakh crore, reflecting the extraordinary jump in prices.

The domestic MCX spot gold price was broadly flat in Q2FY27, supported by the import duty hike and the rupee depreciation (down by 4% QoQ). Even with this quarterly moderation, the domestic prices remained substantially higher than a year earlier. To put it in perspective, 10 grams of gold jewellery bought in 2016 for about ₹28,000 and more than ₹89,000 in H1 last year would cost ₹1.5 lakh or more in 2026.

Given the scenario, jewellery's monopoly as the preferred form of ownership started slowly fading, while financial gold made inroads and gained legitimacy among urban and younger investors, who preferred gold bars, coins and ETFs, which are seen as better investment vehicles.

The rising popularity of investment gold comes amid a previous unsuccessful attempt by the government to encash it, although India has one of the world's largest private gold stocks.

The Gold Monetisation Scheme, introduced in 2015, was designed to mobilise idle household gold by allowing individuals and institutions to deposit gold with banks and earn interest. But was met with lacklustre performance due to taxation concerns and procedural complexities.

Why are households pledging gold instead of selling it?

The apparent contradiction in India's gold market – falling jewellery demand but rising investment appetite – is now accompanied by a third trend as households increasingly use the existing gold holdings as collateral.

According to the WGC, outstanding retail bank loans backed by pledged gold jewellery reached around ₹4.3 lakh crore by February 2026, rising 124% YoY.

The broader banking system has also seen an extraordinary acceleration in gold-backed lending, with gold loan portfolios reaching about ₹5.4 lakh crore by June 2026, registering close to 94% YoY growth. Despite domestic gold prices being around 60% higher YoY, holders showed limited appetite to sell, preferring to monetise their gold holdings rather than liquidate them, keeping recycled supply "muted", according to WGC.

The rapid expansion of gold loans needs careful monitoring in view of financial vulnerabilities it can create.

The RBI strengthened its regulation to promote responsible lending, as it mandated borrowers to make full repayment of the principal and interest before repledging the asset.

What is next?

India's huge household gold stock can evolve from a passive store of wealth into an active financial asset, which could ease some of the traditional pressure that gold imports place on the current account.

Time is not too far for India's financial markets to see a better combination of monetisation schemes, financial innovation, recycling, market reforms and digital transparency for unlocking the huge pile of privately held gold.

5. How will the Supreme Court order impact mining around Ramsar wetland sites?(THE HINDU PAGE NO 11)

1. GS III (Environment & Biodiversity) & GS II (Polity)
2. Topics: Conservation, environmental pollution and degradation, environmental impact assessment; Judiciary.
3. Concepts: Ramsar Convention, wetland conservation reserves, Eco-Sensitive Zones (ESZ), judicial interventions in environmental protection, mining regulations.

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6. Is AI taking jobs? Answer isn't that simple(INDIAN EXPRESS PAGE NO 15)

1. GS III (Economy / Science & Tech)
2. Topics: Indian Economy (employment); Awareness in the fields of IT, Computers, Robotics.
3. Concepts: AI-induced job displacement vs. creation, Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) limitations, workforce reskilling, gig economy and data annotation.

Is AI taking jobs? Answer isn't that simple

NIDHI SINGH

EARLIER THIS month, India's largest IT services firm, TCS, reported its strongest quarterly hiring in nearly four years, adding over 9,000 employees and onboarding 14,000 fresh graduates. Twelve months earlier, the same company had announced 12,000 job cuts. This reduction of head count was promptly taken as a verdict on artificial intelligence and jobs. The rebound shows the fears may have been overblown. This push-and-pull narrative is emblematic of the way we talk about AI's impact on the future of work.

The real problem here is that none of these claims can currently be verified.

Consider the layoffs that dominated last year's headlines. When India's largest IT firm let go of roughly 12,000 employees, its chief executive was emphatic that the decision was about skill mismatches and deployment feasibility, not AI-driven productivity gains. Executives across the sector have offered similar explanations, and they may well be right. The IT industry hired aggressively through the pandemic, and some of what looks like AI displacement is a delayed correction of that excess.

But here is the uncomfortable truth: It is impossible to tell. A company that adopts AI tools, restructures around them, and then removes roles it no longer needs will rarely describe this as AI displacement, and it has every incentive not to.

AI's real effect on Indian employment may arrive not through layoffs but through jobs that are simply never created. The industry's biggest recruiters have cut their fresher intake targets. The share of employees under 30 at Infosys has fallen to its lowest level in 15 years. Entry-level tech openings in mid-2026 were down more than 40 per cent from a year earlier, and the pattern is not confined to IT services: Fresher hiring has fallen across corporate India, with recruiters citing AI-driven redeployment as one of the main reasons. A hiring freeze produces no pink slips, no headlines, and no data point in any Indian labour survey. The graduate who never gets an offer is invisible.

The optimists have their own evidence, and some of it is encouraging. AI is generating streams of work that did not exist a decade ago. Bengaluru-based Karya pays rural workers, a majority of them women, well above prevailing wages to build voice and text datasets in Indian languages. India's data annotation industry employs tens of thousands. Global capability centres now employ over two million professionals.

But the arithmetic of "jobs lost versus jobs created" may not be the correct equation to be used here. The truth is that jobs come in different tiers; a mid-career software engineer in Pune earning Rs 20 lakh a year and a data annotation worker earning a few thousand rupees a month both count as one job in any tally. Economically, they are not the same thing, and a labour market that swaps the first for the second has not broken even.

The redesign of the Periodic Labour Force Survey in 2025, which now produces monthly indicators, is an opportunity. But the PLFS measures whether people are working, not what is happening inside their work. India needs occupation-level tracking of AI exposure built into its official statistics, supplemented by the data the private sector already generates: Job postings, hiring platforms, and industry payrolls.

India is preparing to spend heavily on reskilling its workforce for the AI economy. It should first invest a fraction of that in finding out what, precisely, it is reskilling them from, and what it is reskilling them for.

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7. The Hasina factor in India-Bangladesh ties(INDIAN EXPRESS PAGE NO 15)

1. GS II (International Relations)
2. Topics: India and its neighborhood-relations.
3. Concepts: India-Bangladesh bilateral ties, political asylum and diplomatic leverage, transboundary water sharing (Teesta/Ganga), border security implications.

• GEOPOLITICS

The Hasina factor in India-Bangladesh ties

Sheikh Hasina's press conference in New Delhi can be seen as India using the Bangladesh ex-PM's statements and silences as a diplomatic lever

SHUBHAJIT ROY

OUSTED BANGLADESH Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina had her first media interaction through virtual mode on Wednesday, where she said she plans to return to her country, stand with its people, and help improve their lives.

The statement, made while she is in India, its timing, and Hasina's willingness to answer or dodge questions have implications for herself, Bangladesh's politics, and New Delhi's ties with its neighbour.

Bangladesh, predictably, has reacted with outrage that "the absconding convicted genocider Sheikh Hasina was allowed this evening to engage in live interaction with the media in New Delhi..." according to a statement by its foreign ministry.

The timing

Hasina, who fled Bangladesh on August 5, 2024, amid raging protests, has been living in India in an undisclosed location for the last two years. She had addressed the media at the Foreign Correspondents' Club of South Asia in January through an audio-recorded message, but had not taken questions. That message was played out a month before the national elections in Bangladesh.

This time, Hasina took questions, and was also joined online by her son, Sajeeb Wazed Joy, who was an advisor in her government and lives in the US.

The tone and the statement

Hasina's statement was emotional and rhetorical, with her voice choking as she spoke from a prepared text. In the statement that lasted about 23 minutes, she highlighted the violent political unrest in Bangladesh, the destruction of public and private properties, the killing of police officers, and the targeting of media.

She emphasized the economic decline, with GDP growth falling to 2.2% from 6.8%, and called for international support to restore democracy and justice in Bangladesh.

She declared, "Whatever fate awaits me, I will return to my people. I cannot stay away while my beloved countrymen are suffering." The former prime minister has been sentenced to death over the killing of protesters in July-August 2024, and also faces a number of corruption cases.

Asked when she plans to return, Hasina referred to the 1971 Bangladesh liberation war and said, "December is our victory month, so I want to go back in the month of December." Her statement is aimed at shoring up support in favour of her party, the banned Awami League, against the incumbent Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) government.

The BNP government is facing economic challenges amid oil and gas price pressures due to the war in West Asia. Hasina hopes to make a political comeback before the next elections in Bangladesh.

However, her dodging the question of apologies and regret for the killings of protesters in July-August 2024 has been a sore point for many in Bangladesh.

Asked whether his mother had any regret for the killing of students and protesters, Joy said: "Look, this question of regret and apologies has been raised, but you see the Yunus regime and the BNP regime has continued... They have legalised the killings of police officers, the killings of civilians, the killings of Awami League members... And you have heard my mother express that this was a violent situation. So, if one set of killings is legal, then how does the question of apology arise? Why does it arise?"

Hasina's statements were barred from being broadcast in Bangladesh's mainstream media, using the same draconian laws that the Hasina government had used against current Prime Minister Tarique Rahman 17 years ago

Former Bangladesh PM Sheikh Hasina addresses a press conference in New Delhi via audio link. PRAVEEN KHANNA

Tricky ties

The Ganga Water Treaty of 1996 is due for renewal this year. The Teesta water treaty is still to be signed.

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While Bangladesh has removed visa curbs, some trade restrictions remain. Delhi also views illegal immigration from Bangladesh as a major irritant.

New Delhi and the BNP govt

Hasina in her statement directly targeted the BNP government, with which India has tried to cultivate ties.

Rahman had also signalled a positive relationship with India in his pronouncements. But there have since been challenges — Delhi views illegal immigration from Bangladesh as a major irritant, and the BJP-led West Bengal government has upped the ante on this. The fact that Rahman has visited China but not India yet also signals that there is some tension.

Amid the outstanding bilateral issues, the Ganga Water Treaty of 1996 is due for renewal this year. The Teesta water treaty is still to be signed. While Bangladesh has removed visa curbs on Indians, some trade restrictions remain.

In such a complicated bilateral situation, Hasina's statements targeting the BNP government are certain to create acrimony. "Dhaka deeply regrets that in spite of concerns conveyed apriori to the Government of India about the likely ramifications of this event on the reset of our bilateral relations, this public event was permitted to be held," its foreign ministry said on August 5.

Indeed, it is learnt that New Delhi allowing a platform for the former PM has had a negative impact in Dhaka.

BNP leaders feel that this only reinforces the belief that India is pro-Awami League, and is unable to reconcile to the new political realities. Many in Dhaka view this as a misstep at a time when the Rahman government was trying to repair ties. This also puts the possible visit by Rahman for the BRICS summit in September in jeopardy. And India will have to work hard to assuage the suspicion this episode might have instilled in the minds of Bangladesh's decision-makers.

For Delhi, a robust and healthy bilateral relationship with Dhaka is essential, especially since it needs Dhaka to access its north-eastern states easily. A peaceful and stable Bangladesh, where anti-India statements and activities are kept in-check is important for Delhi's internal security.

Bangladesh too needs India, since it is surrounded by the large neighbour from three sides. The Hasina episode highlights New Delhi's tough balancing act to deal with a tricky bilateral relationship.

India's tightrope

In 2024, India gave Hasina refuge instantly, even when other doors were closed to her. She has lived here since. On how the Indian government had been treating her, Joy said she is being treated like a Head of State, with full services and security.

While the Ministry of External Affairs has clarified, for the record, that it was not involved in Hasina's press interaction, the event can be seen as New Delhi creating leverage by using the former PM — her statements and her silences — to gain some diplomatic quid pro quo in negotiations on trade, water, economy, politics, security, and a range of tricky areas with Bangladesh.

The fact that India has kept her in safe custody with full security is similar to how New Delhi has treated the Dalai Lama — much to China's annoyance. He is allowed to conduct spiritual activities and not political activities, but the Tibetan leader has the ability to fuse the two with finesse.

8. The challenge for school consolidation: Balancing access and quality education(INDIAN EXPRESS PAGE NO 17)

1. GS II (Social Justice / Governance)
2. Topics: Issues relating to development and management of Social Sector/Services relating to Education.
3. Concepts: School consolidation strategies, demographic transition (declining fertility rates), UDISE+ metrics, educational access vs. learning quality.

• EDUCATION

The challenge for school consolidation: Balancing access and quality education

EXPERT EXPLAINS

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FORMER PROFESSOR AT IIT KHARAGPUR, IIT KANPUR, BITS PILANI AND JNU

THE CONGRESS recently posted on social media platform X that 94,000 government schools had been shut down over the past decade, a number first flagged in a NITI Aayog report from May.

For decades, India's school education policy focused on expanding neighborhood schools so that every child could access education closer to home. Today, however, the narrative is changing. Education being in the Concurrent List, several states have adopted policies to close, merge or consolidate schools, raising concerns about access to education. Government data, however, reveals a more nuanced story, which can be understood through three broad trends between 2014-15 and 2024-25:

ONE, the total number of schools saw a modest decline of around 45,000. This, however, was driven entirely by a fall in the number of government schools (94,000, as mentioned above) while the number of private unaided schools increased.

TWO, overall student enrolment declined in a manner similar to the trend seen in school numbers — government enrolment fell while private enrolment increased in recent years.

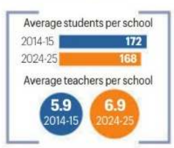
THREE, the number of teachers increased, pointing to improved teacher availability amid declining enrolment and fewer schools.

Is the closure and consolidation of government schools a crisis that is depriving children of neighbourhood educational access, or is it a consequence of demographic factors and changing preferences? More importantly, should the success of school education be measured by the number of schools, or by whether every child has access to a well-resourced school — even if it means traveling a little farther?

• HOW SCHOOL EDUCATION LANDSCAPE HAS SHIFTED

Indicator	2014-15	2024-25	Change
Schools	15.16 lakh	14.71 lakh	(-) 45,000
Govt schools	11.07 lakh	10.13 lakh	(-) 94,000
Teachers	89.84 lakh	1.01 crore	(+) 11.2 lakh
Student enrolment	26.95 crore	24.69 crore	(-) 2.26 crore

(SOURCE: UDISE/UDISE+ REPORTS)



What the data reveals

India is experiencing a demographic transition. The country's total fertility rate — the average number of children born to a woman — has plunged from more than 3 in the early 1990s to about 2.0 today, below the replacement level of 2.1.

The transition is reflected in data from the Centre's Unified District Information System for Education Plus (UDISE+), an education management information system.

ENROLMENT: With fewer children entering school each year, enrolment has steadily declined. Between 2014-15 and 2024-25, overall student enrolment fell by 2.26 crore to 24.69 crore. Enrolment in government schools declined from 13.62 crore to 12.16 crore between 2022-23 and 2024-25, while enrolment in private schools increased from 8.42 crore to 9.59 crore, according to a Rajya Sabha reply in March.

SCHOOLS: The total number of schools saw a decline from about 15.16 lakh in 2014-15 to 14.71 lakh in 2024-25. During this period, the number of government schools declined from about 11.07 lakh to 10.13 lakh even as private unaided schools expanded.

TEACHERS: The number of school teachers increased from about 90 lakh in 2014-15 to over one crore in 2024-25, improving teacher availability amid lower enrolment and fewer schools.

The national averages mask stark disparities: While many rural schools operate with very low enrolment or a single teacher, many urban schools are overcrowded.

Overall, the data points not merely to school closures, but to a transformation of the school education system. This is being driven by demographic change, shifting enrolment patterns, evolving parental preferences and efforts to provide students with better-resourced learning environments.

Why school size matters

Thousands of government schools operate with a single teacher or only a handful of students, making it difficult to provide grade-wise, subject-specific instruction, co-curricular activities, sports, laboratories and meaningful peer learning. Teachers often handle multiple classes alongside administrative tasks, limiting the holistic development that schools are expected to foster.

School consolidation seeks to address these limitations by merging under-enrolled schools into better-equipped composite schools with qualified teachers, improved infrastructure, and richer learning opportunities. The aim should be to improve educational quality rather than merely reducing costs. As seen earlier, the data also indicates improved teacher availability despite fewer schools.

Yet, consolidation is not an end in itself. Its success depends on balancing quality, efficiency, and equitable access. While larger schools may offer better learning opportunities, increased travel distances can disadvantage young children, girls and students in remote or tribal areas.

India's school education system must balance access, equity, quality and efficiency. Wherever schools are merged, governments must ensure safe transport and uninterrupted access. While demographic transition and declining enrolment make some degree of school consolidation inevitable, decisions should be data-driven — not merely administrative or financial considerations.

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