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EDITORIAL HIGHLIGHTS

08-09-2026

GS 2 : INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

THE HINDU PAGE: 08

India's opportunity to put BRICS back together

BRICS has strayed quite far from where it started. To be held this weekend (September 12-13, 2026) the 18th BRICS Summit, in New Delhi, gives India a huge opportunity to bring coherence back to the expanded group and give it direction if it is to be an effective body in shaping global events.

BRICS was formed to give a greater voice to Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa, the emerging economies, in global governance and institutions, particularly financial and economic institutions, and to aim for a more equitable multilateral order. India was initially an enthusiastic participant, seeing the group as a vehicle for genuine reform of multilateral institutions. The first summit hosted by India (the fourth BRICS summit), in 2012, focused on the theme "Global Stability, Security and Prosperity," tacitly reflecting a much broader geopolitical canvas. The Indian presidency helped lead to the establishment of the BRICS Bank, the New Development Bank. Other Indian initiatives followed, including the integration of a counter-terrorism architecture into BRICS' work.

T.S. Tirumurti

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The emergence of the China challenge

However, China had other plans. At the time, even if it was not anti-West, China saw BRICS as a counterpoise to western domination – a view that India also initially shared in the context of reform. More importantly, China needed a group such as BRICS, consisting of emerging economies, to amplify its global ambitions, given that BRICS countries accounted for nearly 20% of world GDP in 2010. Further, China wanted to use BRICS mechanisms such as BRICS-Plus and BRICS Outreach to reach out to the Global South and consolidate their profile as a second pole in a future bipolar world.

Suddenly, India not only had a reform agenda on its hands but also had to act as a counterweight to China's larger designs on BRICS. India, Brazil and South Africa soon realised that Chinese support for the reform of multilateral institutions was selective. For example, China resisted supporting the three countries' bid for permanent seats on the United Nations Security Council. Consequently, India started focusing more on BRICS consolidation and intra-BRICS matters to resist Chinese grandstanding. In fact, this year's theme for India's chairship has four pillars – Resilience, Innovation, Cooperation and Sustainability – and draws on Prime Minister Narendra Modi's vision of "Humanity First" and a "people-centric" approach to BRICS cooperation.

In addition, there was a real danger that the principle of consensus, which had kept BRICS a cohesive group, would be bypassed and that BRICS would go the way of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), where the majority can bulldoze their views through. India and Brazil resisted these efforts. The 2019 BRICS Summit in Brasilia was held without any other invited guest countries – just the five original members. But in 2020, under the Russian presidency, probably the first non-consensus chair's statement on COVID-19 was issued, bypassing the sacred principle of consensus. If non-consensus documents are increasingly resorted to, as we saw at the BRICS Foreign Ministers' meeting in May 2026 in New Delhi due to the inability of the new members to agree, then BRICS will cease to be effective.

> The Delhi summit offers India an opportunity to restore BRICS's original purpose

Membership expansion tests BRICS cohesion

But then, it was difficult to resist the Chinese juggernaut. China pushed for the expansion of the New Development Bank and then for the expansion of BRICS itself. India resisted, as did Brazil. But that was not to be, and BRICS now has 11 members, following the addition of Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Indonesia, as well as 10 partner countries.

India's sagacity has now been vindicated, as the new members of BRICS have started fighting among themselves. While the original five have their differences, some of them serious, they know how to address them with maturity for the greater good of the group. The new members do not have any such compunctions and are subverting BRICS through their bilateral conflicts. BRICS should not go the way of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), with bilateral disputes paralysing the group.

In addition, the tussle over the direction BRICS should take has begun. India has tried to keep BRICS as a "non-West" group, as opposed to the increasing pressure from some members to turn BRICS into an anti-West group. An anti-West slant is becoming increasingly difficult to avoid, with China competing with the United States for global leadership, Russia at war with Ukraine with the full backing of Europe, and Iran being bombarded by the U.S. and Israel. It becomes even harder to maintain the "non-West" line when Brazil and India have been subjected to punitive tariffs by U.S. President Donald Trump, and the U.S. Congress is considering legislation that would give the President the power to levy punitive tariffs on countries importing Russian oil. The question being asked is: how can India stop BRICS from becoming anti-West at a time when the Quad (Australia, India, Japan, the U.S.) is being emasculated by the U.S., India-U.S. relations are under great pressure, Pakistan is being courted by the U.S. at India's expense, and global institutions are being made dysfunctional by the West? The more erratic the U.S. is *vis-à-vis* BRICS, the greater the chances of BRICS going in the wrong direction. Fortunately, India's effort to prevent an anti-western drift is shared by many other BRICS members, since they too have much to gain by engaging with multiple actors from different camps in their national interest. They want change, but not geopolitical realignment with China and Russia. This is the direction of BRICS's future.

But there is a much larger question. Both the U.S. and China are enunciating parallel visions of the world and playing by their own rules, rather than internationally negotiated ones. Both are, in effect, challenging existing international norms and global institutions and setting up parallel structures and standards in emerging areas such as Artificial Intelligence, digital and Internet governance, data ownership, state control, 5G/6G and telecom, satellite navigation, and electric vehicles. Neither is looking for reform of existing institutions. China has just set up a new World AI Cooperation Organisation in Shanghai, in addition to other parallel initiatives such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, the Belt and Road Initiative and the Digital Silk Road, which challenge the Bretton Woods institutions and their governance and financing models. They see BRICS as one of the vehicles through which to pursue their broader goals. For example, the push for de-dollarisation through the establishment of a parallel BRICS currency is receiving a lukewarm response, since many members are uncomfortable with a renminbi-dominated currency and would prefer merely interlinking payment systems, central bank digital currencies and national-currency transactions. Nevertheless, after the success of its pilot project, China is formally launching its ambitious mBridge, an alternative financial payment system. The last thing India wants is an alternative Bretton Woods system dominated by China.

India can course correct BRICS

The 2026 Summit in Delhi provides an opportunity for course correction, and India has worked hard to persuade the new members to overcome their political differences. In a world in flux, India has to revive the original *raison d'être* of BRICS and shape the expanded grouping into a vehicle for reform and stability, while stopping others from hijacking it.

At the 2018 BRICS Summit in South Africa, Mr. Modi first articulated his vision of "reformed multilateralism" at the leaders' retreat. By 2019, this vision had found its way into the BRICS Summit document in Brasilia, with India, Brazil and South Africa pushing for it. The time has come to revive this agenda and make BRICS a strong voice for the "non-West" middle powers – and, by extension, for the Global South.

In Davos, the Canadian Prime Minister spoke about broadly West-centric middle powers coming together. A Global South middle power is very different. And if there is a credible organisation of Global South middle powers, it is BRICS. It has its problems. To begin with, China is hardly a middle power and has disproportionate influence within BRICS. India and China need to find greater synergy on emerging global issues, even as their bilateral differences are being contained. Further, some middle powers that ought to be there are not represented in BRICS. However imperfect its composition may be, it is clear that BRICS has great geopolitical and geo-economic potential.

At a time when the profile of BRICS is only increasing, with many countries wanting to join it, India should proactively embrace the BRICS reform agenda to serve its larger interest of multi-alignment. If India does not, others will take BRICS in a different direction.

GS 2 & 3: HEALTH AND SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

THE HINDU PAGE: 10

Are nicotine pouches beyond the law?

Does COTPA cover nicotine pouches? Why are they not covered by the law banning vapes? Could nicotine pouches be treated as food under Indian law? Can they be legally imported into India? Can nicotine pouches be sold at duty-free shops?

EXPLAINER

Murali Neelakantan

The story so far:
A new study led by the ICMR-National Institute of Cancer Prevention and Research has found that nicotine pouches are reaching Indian cities through online platforms, hookah shops and gig delivery services. The study comes after a warning from the World Health Organization in May 2026 about the dangers these products pose. Yet it is far from settled which Indian law, if any, governs them.

GETTY IMAGES

What are nicotine pouches?
A nicotine pouch is a small, tobacco-free, tea-bag-like sack containing nicotine, flavourings and plant-based fibres. Users place the pouch between the lip and gum for up to an hour, allowing nicotine to be absorbed directly into the bloodstream without smoke, vapour or spitting.

Does COTPA cover nicotine pouches?
The Cigarettes and Other Tobacco Products Act, 2003 (COTPA) governs the marketing, advertising and sale of cigarettes and other tobacco products. But its definition of tobacco products does not extend to all products containing nicotine. Had the legislature intended to cover every extract of the tobacco plant, it could have said so. Restrictions on the freedom of trade and commerce must be strictly construed and since nicotine pouches are not among the products listed in the Cigarettes Act, they fall outside it.

Are they regulated by the Drugs Act?
Nicotine is not listed as a drug in any schedule of the Drugs and Cosmetics Act, 1940. Nicotine patches and gums have, however, been approved as drugs by the Drug Controller General of India for therapeutic use in treating nicotine addiction. Schedule K under the Drugs and Cosmetics Rules, 1945 lists gums and lozenges and exempts them from licensing and prescription requirements if they contain less than 2 mg of nicotine.

If nicotine were not considered a drug at all, there would be no reason to exempt certain nicotine products in Schedule K. The very fact that only some nicotine products are exempted suggests that all others are meant to be regulated by the Drugs Act.

Against this, pouches are arguably unlike patches and gums. They make no therapeutic claim and do not purport to treat addiction; they are a substitute for cigarettes. On this reading, they do not qualify as drugs under the Drugs Act.

Why are they not covered by the law banning vapes?
The import and sale of vapes is banned by the Prohibition of Electronic Cigarettes Act, 2019 ("PECA"). If vapes were drugs, no separate legislation would have been needed: the government could have regulated them, or refused licences, under the Drugs Act. The enactment of PECA therefore suggests that the Drugs Act did not give it adequate power to ban them. Nicotine pouches are different from vapes: they contain no electronic device and produce neither smoke nor vapour. They are consequently not covered by PECA.

Could pouches be treated as food?
The Prevention of Food Adulteration Act and the Food Safety and Standards Act define food broadly: any processed, partially processed or unprocessed substance intended for human consumption. Court rulings on supari and chewing tobacco establish that the definition has a very wide amplitude, encompassing items that are chewed rather than swallowed. It is arguable, then, that nicotine pouches could fall within the broad definition of food.

Can pouches be imported into India?
Import restrictions flow from two statutes: the Foreign Trade (Development and Regulation) Act, 1992 and the Customs Act, 1962. The Foreign Trade Act empowers the Central government to prohibit, restrict or regulate imports; the Directorate General of Foreign Trade (DGFT) administers this and publishes the ITC-HS classification listing which goods are free, restricted or banned. Section 11 of the Customs Act allows the government to prohibit goods wholly or partly by notification, on grounds that include the protection of human, animal or plant life.

After the World Customs Organization updated the Harmonized System, a sub-category was introduced for oral nicotine products that do not involve combustion: 2404 91 30 covers tobacco-free single-use pouches of the Zyn or Lyft type, and 2404 91 90 covers other oral nicotine products not meant for therapeutic uses. These replaced a residual category for other manufactured tobacco substitutes; the codes for medicaments apply only where a product is strictly a cessation aid. Under the DGFT schedule and the rules of the Central Board of Indirect Taxes and Customs, goods under 2404 91 30 are "restricted". Unlike "free" items, they cannot be cleared merely on payment of duty, and unlike "prohibited" e-cigarettes, they are not banned outright – but they require a specific licence or permission. In deciding, the DGFT cross-references the health and other ministries.

What about duty-free shops?
Nicotine pouches are currently available at a few duty-free stores at Indian airports. Such stores are licensed under Section 58 of the Customs Act and cannot claim to be entirely outside Indian law.

It is sometimes said that a duty-free shop lies outside the territory of India, and that it is the passenger who imports the goods on crossing customs control. In *Flemingo Duty Free Shop Pvt. Ltd. v. Shri Kaushik Bhattacharya* (2024), the Calcutta High Court held that a duty-free store did not "import" goods into India, being deemed to be located outside it for the purposes of the Customs Act, and that legal metrology labelling requirements therefore did not apply. This should not be read to mean no Indian law applies to duty-free shops. If no Indian law applied to stores, could they stock arms and ammunition? If a crime was committed in a duty free store, which court would have jurisdiction to try the case? Which police station would have jurisdiction to register a case? That would be just too absurd.

Cigarettes, alcohol, jewellery, watches, food and small electronic items are some of the goods permitted at duty-free shops. Nicotine pouches are not – unless one can argue they are food. Given their customs classification as restricted, it is unlikely that any import licence has been granted.

What is the legal position?
The legal position is intricate, but the remedy is not. A notification under the Customs Act and the Foreign Trade Act banning the import and sale of nicotine pouches on health grounds would take minutes to issue. If the government moves as slowly as it did with vapes, pouches will become fashionable, and demand will settle in. A ban notified after that point will only produce smuggling on the scale we now see with vapes and cause damage to health that will be hard to mitigate.

(Murali Neelakantan is a lawyer)

THE GIST

- Nicotine pouches are not covered by COTPA or PECA, while their status under the Drugs Act is debatable. They could also arguably fall within the broad definition of food
- Tobacco-free, single-use nicotine pouches require a specific licence or permission under the DGFT's ITC-HS classification; they are not prohibited outright like e-cigarettes
- The government can prohibit their import and sale on health grounds. Delaying action could lead to established demand and smuggling, as seen with vapes

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GS 3: ENERGY

THE HINDU PAGE: 10

What could have prompted the latest hike in LPG prices?

How are under-recoveries shaping LPG pricing, and what could be its wider impact?

Saptaparno Ghosh

The story so far:

After two successive months of decline in LPG prices, oil-marketing companies hiked prices of the commercial variant of the bottled hydrocarbon gas by approximately ₹10 per cylinder across the country on September 1. The 19-kg cylinder in Delhi now costs ₹2,747.5 per cylinder whilst the price of the 14.2-kg cylinder remains unchanged.

What is the latest price hike about?

Industry observers state the latest hike in the commercial segment primarily caters to offset the under-recoveries (that is, the losses OMCs incur because of the difference in prices at which they sell to consumers against the price they should receive for meeting the cost of production and distribution) for the domestic segment.

The latest government data reported that India's State-owned oil-marketing companies were incurring under-recoveries of ₹188 per domestic cylinder in early August, down from ₹500 per cylinder in July and more than ₹700 per cylinder in June. According to data, the packaged domestic segment accounted for 90.4% of all LPG consumption in the country during April and June this year. Further, about 10.6 crore Pradhan Mantri Ujjwala scheme beneficiaries – approximately 33% of the domestic segment – receive an additional subsidy of ₹300 per cylinder.

Speaking to *The Hindu*, Prashant Vashisht, senior vice president and co-group head, corporate sector ratings, at ratings agency ICRA, said, "At present, the under-recovery on domestic LPG cylinders is hovering at about ₹200 per cylinder. Thus, the latest hike potentially tries to somewhat compensate for that amount, although the proportionate sales of commercial LPG are much smaller [compared to the domestic variant]. I would not read much into it".

What does the supply situation look like?

On the supply side, imports of petroleum, oil and lubricants (POL) products registered a decline of 45.1% between April and July this year, according to data from the government's Petroleum Planning and Analysis Cell (PPAC). It attributed this to "reduction in imports of liquefied petroleum gas (LPG), pet coke and fuel oil (FO) etc."

However, essential to note that India's oil-marketing companies ramped up their daily production of bottled hydrocarbon gas from 34,000 metric tonnes to 55,000 metric tonnes to offset the impact of lower imports. Further, following an August 13 directive, India's upstream companies, along with private and public oil-marketing companies have been set a daily production target of 63,810 metric tonnes.

Are we looking at a potential impact?

Speaking to *The Hindu* earlier, Manpreet Singh, treasurer at the National Restaurants Association of India, said the impact of the latest hike, standalone, would be "negligible" although it may prompt concerns about price increases in the future.

Although it is essential to note the impact from the industrial segment, which requires bottled hydrocarbon gas to run their furnaces, such as in the glass-making industry and elevated demand is expected to seep in because of the festive season. However, the segment too is increasingly transitioning to piped natural gas, seeking secure and consistent supplies. According to data from the Petroleum and Natural Gas Regulatory Board (PNGRB), industrial sales of piped gas increased by 30% between April and June this year compared to the same period last year.

THE GIST

- Commercial LPG prices rose by about ₹10 per cylinder as OMCs seek to offset domestic LPG under-recoveries
- Lower imports are being offset by higher domestic production, while the impact on businesses is expected to be limited for now

GS 2 & 3: VULNERSBLE SECTIONS AND DISASTERS

INDIAN EXPRESS PAGE: 10

What do we call these student deaths? 'Accident' reeks of both shame & sham

SAIKAT MAJUMDAR

THE STUDENT in India today lives between the violence of the cracking earth and flooding homes. The Cockroach Janta Party protests, led by Gen Z, may have stunned the political establishment, but clearly we have light-years to go before the sanctity of either life or learning can be assured for our students — particularly for those from vulnerable sections of society.

This is not about the *lathis* and water cannons whose threat to these students in Delhi's Jantar Mantar is still raw for us. The disaster that ended lives is the building collapse in Delhi's Satya Niketan on Sunday, killing seven and injuring many more. Close to Delhi University's South Campus, the building mostly housed students, most of whom were home on a Sunday afternoon. Their SoS echoed through the air and through the mobile phones of the dying: "Save us, save us." But the disaster was unforgiving.

These were some of our most vulnerable migrant students who sought a home near the university. Migrants are always vulnerable, more so migrants from the margins of state and society. But the migrancy of the student holds a dream of upward mobility that tinges her vulnerability with the darkest sadness. It screams the failure of a developing postcolonial nation where education and employment are still the only means of upward mobility, often the promise to breathe outside the miasma of poverty.

The building collapse bared the embers of another tragedy from 2024. That July, three UPSC aspirants drowned in the flooded basement of a coaching institute in Delhi's Old Rajinder Nagar. One survivor told a newspaper that in spite of charging a fee of Rs 2 lakh, the coaching centres lacked safety standards in spaces where the youth studied and spent time. Poor drainage and even electrocution deaths were common in these streets, and Delhi's monsoon caused the basement to flood. Student suicides remain in our memory. But what do we call these deaths? "Accidents" reeks of both shame and sham. How do we remember them? Do we remember them at all?

Flooding water and quaking earth are dark omens. What they possess is not the talismanic significance of ritual and religion, but the forces of neglect and profit. These two nonsensically contradictory realities frame the fate of the Indian student. Particularly those not rich enough to pay their way out of the country or lucky enough to win at the roulette wheel of entrance into elite institutes of technical and professional education.

Higher education, in most countries of the world, is the domain of the state. A few countries, most notably the US, have excellent private institutions that nevertheless cater to only a small, albeit highly influential, percentage of the population. As someone who has been educated at a mix of state and private institutions in India and the US and has taught for the last 21 years at a public university in Canada and private universities in the US and India, I have observed the state-private dynamic from many angles and I come up with the same answer every time: It is only public institutions that can truly educate a nation. Private institutions, if shaped by genuine philanthropy, can at best create tiny islands of excellence, combining the intellectually exclusive with the socially inclusive, and hoping that their identity does not end up the other way around.

> Flooding water and quaking earth are dark omens. What they possess is not the talismanic significance of ritual and religion, but the forces of neglect and profit

But what we did to the K-12 system is what we're now doing to the edifice of higher education. Not only the failure but the orchestrated onslaught on public institutions of higher education around the country led to the claustrophobic dead end that triggered the CJP protests at Jantar Mantar. But while the economy struggles and jobs fail to materialise, the greed of property development continues, and unchecked growth finally chooses as its prey the vulnerable body of the migrant student. That corrosive greed, Delhiites have already learned bitterly this year, does not discriminate between immediate stakeholders in either health or higher education — between those connected to hospitals or to universities.

Meanwhile, the migrant student, the provincial aspirant to educational and professional success, remains just as vulnerable to the greed of the private player, who has now gained destructive prominence due to the dysfunction of the public system. The glaring lacunae left by governmental failure have now been eaten up not only by profiteering private institutions of questionable quality, but by the toxic architecture of the coaching industry, the Kota Factory to most Indians. One doesn't know where the massive fees go, but as the family members of the dead UPSC aspirants now know, it is not being funnelled into the creation of a safe learning and living environment for customers. I'm sure India's many Kota factories have their shares of Jeetu Bhaiyas — the conscientious teacher-mentor from the Netflix show by that name — but I'm also sure their rarity and structural irrelevance make no impact on the landscape of the terrifying mental and physical health of the students stuck in their clutches.

We remember the suicides, as we must. We will never forget S Anitha, the poor Dalit student from Tamil Nadu, whose tragedy bared all that is dark and destructive in India today: The relentless attempt of the juggernaut of the central government to override state authority and dismantle federalism, the oppressive myth of "One Nation, One Exam", the structural violence and exclusion fated for the vulnerable. It took one death to reveal them but the suicides didn't stop.

The suicides stay with us and power protests. But a reality just as tragic greys our sky today. The students who may not take their own lives may just have their lives taken away from them. Death may come either from the strategic neglect of governments or the greed of private players who prey upon the anxiety of millions at the Great Roulette Wheel of seats or jobs. From earth or water. Who knows what else is next?

Majumdar's latest book is Open Intelligence: Education Between Art and Artificial

Sanskriti IAS

GS 2: INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS
THE HINDU PAGE: 08

Conscious AI & ethics of a machine that feels

THE MACHINE is intelligent, but is it also conscious? This is the question sparked by the revelation that the AI chatbot Claude Sonnet 4.5 may have something like an internal thought process — a team of researchers found that upon being prompted, the model's internal layers throw up words connected to the eventual output that remain invisible to the user. Anthropic, which has developed Claude, calls this "small collection of internal neural patterns" the "J-space" and has argued that it is comparable to the "workspace" of the human brain — a network of neurons that gathers, integrates and transmits information from different parts of the brain to the rest of the nervous system, making conscious thought possible.

For many, this development gestures to the startling possibility that machines with consciousness may no longer just be the stuff of science fiction. The argument put forth by, among others, AI pioneer Geoffrey Hinton is that the closer the technology gets to mimicking the actual workings of the human brain, the higher the possibility of conscious AI. The ongoing efforts to develop "biological" or "bio-hybrid" computers — where human neurons are mounted on silicon — only bring this eventuality closer. Yet, how the "consciousness" of AI is understood depends also on how consciousness itself is understood. Nearly half a century of research on the subject has yielded over 300 frameworks and theories, one of which is the global workspace theory being used to make the case for Claude's consciousness. Moreover, as neuroscientist Anil K Seth has argued, assertions about the possibility of "conscious" AI are often made based on evidence of its intelligence and the two are very different.

Consciousness, which comes down to subjective experience, would radically change the stakes. AI that is conscious would mean AI that experiences everything that a human does, including hate, jealousy and suffering, transforming it from mere machine into something with a moral underpinning. As more sophisticated models are developed and the frontiers of the technology are pushed into uncharted terrain, the hard task of responding to the questions they raise — including the ethics of consciously developing something that is itself conscious — can no longer be put off.