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The importance of cultural continuity

The question of India's former royal families – what they represent today, and how they should be understood – sits at the intersection of culture, history and politics. It is not a neutral subject. It provokes strong reactions, often shaped by one's lens be it aesthetic, ethical or ideological. At its core lies a deeper tension: how a modern democracy negotiates the preservation of cultural continuity, particularly forms of lived heritage, within the project of social and political reform.

A common critique is that the continued visibility of India's former royals – particularly in the realms of fashion, culture and spectacle – risks reinforcing structures of inequality that modern India has sought to move beyond. At its core is the idea that royalty, even in its post-political form, remains a symbol of inherited privilege. When presented through imagery such as dress, ceremony, and architecture, it can aestheticise hierarchy, transforming systems of historical power into objects of beauty. In a country where inequality remains deeply embedded, such imagery can appear disconnected from lived realities, or complicit in masking them. The historical realities of inequality that shaped these structures cannot be overlooked.

This critique also raises the question of who has the authority to represent India's cultural narrative. If that narrative is shaped by royals, designers or global intermediaries, then other voices, especially those of artisans and regional communities, risk being overshadowed. In this reading, culture is not neutral; it is a site of power.

A different perspective

And yet, there is another way of understanding this same reality.

India's former royal families no longer exercise sovereign political authority in the way they once did, though many remain socially and, in some cases, politically



Peter D'Ascoli

Designer and author whose work engages with textile traditions and cultural heritage

influential. Their role today is therefore more complex. In many instances, they have become the custodians of an extraordinary cultural inheritance which include systems of knowledge, architecture, ritual, and craft traditions that might otherwise disappear. The maintenance of palaces, for example, is not symbolic; it is an immense logistical and financial undertaking. Without active stewardship, these environments – repositories of centuries of craftsmanship – would quickly fall into disrepair or be lost to insensitive development.

Lived realities

Historically, Indian craft traditions have existed within systems of patronage. From the Mughal courts to regional princely states, artisans were sustained through networks that linked skill, aesthetics and power. In the absence of such structures, many of these traditions struggle to survive in a globalised economy. Contemporary cultural actors such as Padmanabh Singh, the erstwhile Maharaja of Jaipur, operate, in part, within this legacy, supporting artisans and creating platforms through which heritage can be sustained.

There is also the matter of cultural continuity. Many rituals and ceremonies depend on a framework of participation and meaning that has historically been anchored in these families. When such traditions are enacted, they are not merely performances for an audience; they are part of a living cultural system.

For example, in Italy, the author's ancestral homeland, processions and cultural rituals unfold under the authority of the Church. While these events are shaped by hierarchy, they are sustained not by institutions alone but by the communities that participate in them. They endure because they are lived, and not imposed. They are claimed as expressions of identity as much as faith. Over time, the distinction

between authority and community blurs; what remains is continuity. However, remove the structure entirely, and the coherence of these practices can erode. What may appear, from the outside, as hierarchy can, from within, function as a framework – one that enables participation, meaning and the transmission of culture across generations.

This tension becomes more complex when we consider the relationship between tangible and intangible cultural heritage, and what might be called lived heritage. Tangible heritage, such as architecture and objects, and intangible heritage, which include rituals, craftsmanship, and knowledge systems, can, in theory, be documented and preserved. But lived heritage depends on the continuity of context: on people, places, and systems of meaning that cannot be easily separated from their historical frameworks. When those frameworks are disrupted without careful transition, what remains is often a simulation – heritage as a performance rather than lived reality.

Social reform as essential

This is not an argument against social reform. The pursuit of greater equality is essential. But reform does not occur in a vacuum. It must contend with what is being transformed, and what risks being lost in the process. The erosion of lived cultural systems, however imperfect their origins may be, can result in a different kind of impoverishment. The question, then, is not whether change is necessary, but how change is negotiated. How does a society move forward without severing the continuities that give its culture meaning?

In the end, the conversation itself is necessary. It is through such dialogue that culture remains alive; neither fixed in admiration nor dismissed in critique, but continuously reinterpreted and understood anew.

Lived heritage depends on the continuity of context: on people, places, and systems of meaning that cannot be easily separated from their historical frameworks





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GS Paper I – Geography

Tamil Nadu and the climate question

Tamil Nadu heads to the polls as an increasingly climate-exposed State shaped by cyclones, floods, droughts, and heatwaves, while party manifestos signal a shift in climate language with promises on heat action, mobility, renewable energy, and resilience, the real test lies in institutional capacity, integration, implementation

FULL CONTEXT

Sanjiv Gopal

Tamil Nadu is one of India's most dynamic economies and, increasingly, one of its most climate-exposed. Take just the last three years, for instance – Cyclone Michaung cost the State over ₹10,000 crore in a single week in 2023.

The compounded floods and droughts of 2024 added another ₹10,000 crore in economic losses.

Cyclone Dikuah destroyed crops across 2.11 lakh hectares of land, roughly the size of three lakh football fields.

Add to this intensifying heatwaves across districts such as Madurai and Tiruchirappalli, along with significant loss of productivity due to extreme heat, and you have a State where political parties can no longer content elections without commitment to climate action.

On April 25, as Tamil Nadu heads to the polls, the important question is: how seriously have the parties engaged with the climate crisis already reshaping the State? To answer this, we have examined their manifestos through a climate lens – going beyond promises explicitly labelled as climate policy to identify measures linked to heat action, flood mitigation, coastal protection, water management, and agricultural resilience.

DMK: leading on climate

The Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam's (DMK) manifesto is among the more substantively climate-aware documents produced by any major party in Tamil Nadu for an Assembly election.

The standout section focuses on extreme heat. The manifesto promises to appoint District Heat Officers in every district and city – officials tasked with issuing localised heat warnings and enforcing workplace safety during extreme temperature events. Heat mortality in India is chronically undercounted, and the absence of accountable, district-level climate officers has long been a structural gap. If implemented, this single measure could save lives in the coming summers. Alongside this, AI-based automatic micro-grid weather stations in every district would provide localised cyclone and heat warnings – a meaningful upgrade over city-level forecasting, which leaves farmers and coastal communities without adequate time to respond.

On mobility, the DMK sets an explicit target of 30% vehicle electrification by 2030, with electric bus services expanded to five cities. Building on the Vidyalaya Payment scheme for women, the party has committed to inducting 30,000 new buses equipped with modern facilities and expanding mini-bus services to improve last-mile connectivity. The proposal for 'Complete Streets' with pedestrian pathways and shade trees addresses both the urban heat island effect and the lack of walkable public spaces that push people toward private vehicles.

The promise to convert at least 3% of urban land into 'sponge city' infrastructure is the language of serious climate adaptation. So does the proposal for a coastal green belt of native species – including coconuts, palmyra, progurra, and mangroves – from Karaikal to Tirunelveli to buffer sea surges and cyclonic winds.

The DMK has the advantage of incumbency and the building blocks to achieve this: the Tamil Nadu EV Policy



On mobility, the DMK sets an explicit target of 30% vehicle electrification by 2030, with electric bus services expanded to five cities, via metro

Beyond the promises, three factors will determine whether Tamil Nadu's next government can align growth with climate realities: institutional capacity, integration and equity

2023 is already in place, and renewable energy capacity has crossed 25 GW. The manifesto also includes early signals on circular economy pathways, such as bio-CNG and waste-to-energy infrastructure in several cities. It is one of the few manifestos to link climate action with systems such as transport, flood management, and public space design.

What is missing, however, are explicit commitments on coastal zone management and climate finance.

AIADMK: a significant RE push

The All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam's (AIADMK) commitment to converting all city buses to electric vehicles is more sweeping in ambition than the DMK's targeted expansion. A full fleet electrification effort (with timeliness) would be transformative for urban air quality and sustainable mobility. Metro rail expansions in Chennai, Coimbatore, and Madurai are also transit-positive. The manifesto further promises to extend the free bus scheme (currently for women) to men travelling on city buses.

The promise of a 300% government subsidy for solar pump sets for farmers is powerful. Agricultural electricity demand is a major driver of Tamil Nadu's carbon load, and solar pump sets could reduce both emissions and the burden on TANGEDCO. Rooftop solar subsidies for households, along with additional subsidies for micro and small industries, stand out as a decentralised solar push. The commitment to introduce climate change into the school curriculum is understated but meaningful.

Then there are the free refrigerators.

Providing 2.22 crore energy-consuming appliances with no accompanying energy-efficiency standards, grid-greening guarantees, or old-appliance disposal programme is contradictory. As temperatures rise, refrigerators may become unaffordable, but large-scale distribution into a grid still reliant on significant thermal power could increase the State's carbon load.

TVK: ambition without a track record

The Tamilaga Vetti Kazhagam (TVK) has put forward a climate chapter that is, on paper, the most ambitious among major parties. The centrepiece is a Climate-Resilient Tamil Nadu Master Plan 2045, with a 38-district framework backed by a dedicated ₹3,000 crore climate budget and a proposed sustained renewable economy division. If that institutional architecture is real, it would mark the first time a Tamil Nadu party has treated climate as a standalone fiscal and administrative priority.

On mobility, TVK promises 20,000 EV fast-charging stations by 2031, full electrification of 5,000 PASTC buses, and dedicated footpaths and cycling tracks across 25 cities – a non-motorised transport commitment unmatched by other manifestos.

The 'Vetri Solar Mission' targets 100% renewable energy for Tamil Nadu. On water, the numbers are staggering: restoration of over 39,000 irrigation tanks, five lakh new farm ponds, a 90% subsidy for drip irrigation and a ₹5,000 crore Cauvery Delta Protection Fund.

The critical question, however, is credibility. TVK has never governed, and its local manifesto commitments exceed 31.1 lakh crore. The vision is encouraging, but voters should press hard for the fiscal plan behind it.

NTK's overlooked green manifesto

Any discussion of Tamil Nadu's climate election cannot be complete without acknowledging that Seeman's Naam

Tamilak Katchi (NTK) has produced, by ideological conviction, the greenest manifesto. NTK commits to increasing forest cover from 20.21% to 33% within five years, explicitly names the Paris Agreement and UN climate guidelines as binding commitments, and pledges to cancel the Paradarai Airport project, ban coal mine expansion at NLC Neyveli, block hydrocarbon exploration in the Cauvery Delta, and oppose the Environment Impact Assessment Draft 2020.

NTK's manifesto is a document that future climate advocates in Tamil Nadu will reference and one that other parties should take note of.

A shift in political language

A simple keyword count across manifestos reveals something worth paying on. In the DMK's 2023 manifesto, 'climate change' appeared once; in 2028, it appears six times. The AIADMK, which made no mention of 'climate' in 2021, now includes it at least twice.

NTK's 2026 manifesto uses the word 'environment' 16 times, while TVK, in its first election, ticks five mentions of 'climate change'.

These are word counts, not policies. But together, they signal that the climate crisis has entered Tamil Nadu's political vocabulary in a way it had not before.

Beyond the promises, three factors will determine whether Tamil Nadu's next government can align growth with climate realities: institutional capacity, integration and equity.

Manifestos are documents of promise. On climate, they are also documents of preparedness. Tamil Nadu's next government will inherit not a distant environmental challenge, but an unfolding economic one. The question is not only who offers the most, but who demonstrates the capacity to implement coherently and consistently over time. (Sanjiv Gopal is Chief Strategy Officer, Aar Social Impact Advisors)

THE GIST

The DMK treats climate as a systems problem, though coastal management and funding plans are unclear.

The AIADMK combines a decentralised renewable push with policy contradictions, most notably the large-scale distribution of refrigerators without energy-efficiency or grid decarbonisation safeguards.

The TVK offers an expansive Climate-Resilient Master Plan and large-scale commitments, but credibility and fiscal sequencing remain unclear, while the NTK presents the clearest ideological climate stance.



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GS Paper II – Governance

Registration now mandatory for e-sports

The Hindu Bureau

NEW DELHI

The Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology (MeitY) on Wednesday notified rules allowing registration of e-sport games and the firms running them, which will come to effect from May 1. The rules come as subordinate legislation for the Promotion and Regulation of Online Gaming Act, 2025, which prohibited real money gaming in India.

The Online Gaming Authority of India (OGAI), which will run as an attached office within MeitY as a fully digital organisation, has been set up under the rules. Representatives from the Ministries of



The rules also have provisions to regulate age classifications of video games should the govt. deem it necessary. GETTY IMAGES

Home Affairs and Law have been added to the OGAI.

Under the new rules, registration for “online social games” will only be required and triggered when the Centre notifies a specific category of games as requiring such registration. Registration for e-sports is mandatory.

IT Secretary S. Krishnan told the media that the rules have enabling provisions to regulate and require age classifications of video games in the future, should the government deem it necessary to address issues like addiction.

The rules provide for a “code of practice” the the

IT Ministry could notify in the future covering video games, such as games with microtransactions.

“Most games which are not money games should be able to operate with no obligation to necessarily either be determined or registered,” Mr. Krishnan said. “That entire process is optional.”

On the issue of betting markets hosting wagers on Indian elections and cricket matches, Mr. Krishnan said that such sites were being blocked as and when they were brought to notice.

“Access through VPNs is a slightly thorny issue,” he added. “We are trying to see how we can regulate VPNs more effectively”.



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GS Paper II – Governance

Tribunal gives last opportunity to Odisha, Chhattisgarh to settle Mahanadi dispute

Satyasundar Barik

BHUBANESWAR

The Mahanadi Water Disputes Tribunal (MWDT) may soon deliver its judgment on the water-sharing formula between Odisha and Chhattisgarh with both States failing to place a concrete proposal for mutual settlement. The tribunal has given a last opportunity to the two States to come up with a formula by May 2, the next date of hearing.

An order passed by the MWDT, headed by former Supreme Court judge Justice Bela M. Trivedi, noted that though both States had jointly submitted on April 11 that the annual water availability would be finalised by the next date of hearing on April 20, Advocates General of Odisha and Chhattisgarh again sought more time to submit a concrete proposal.

“They have also not been able to place on record the suggestions with



The Mahanadi river, which originates in Chhattisgarh, flows for 494 km in Odisha before meeting with the Bay of Bengal. FILE PHOTO

regard to the recasting of issues already framed in both the reference proceedings to narrow down the disputes between the party States,” the tribunal observed.

Panel unhappy

The three-member MWDT - comprising Justice Trivedi, Justice Ravi Ranjan, and Justice Indermeet Kaur - expressed unhappiness over the manner in which the proceedings are being conducted. “We make it clear

that if they are not able to finalise the same or place on record any consensus on any of the issues by the next date, the tribunal will proceed with the proceedings on merits,” the tribunal noted.

The 851-km-long Mahanadi river, which originates from the Amarkantak hills in the Bastar plateau of Chhattisgarh, flows for 494 km in Odisha before meeting with the Bay of Bengal.

Following its formation as a separate State, Chhat-

tisgarh's demand for water skyrocketed, which led it to create major, medium, and minor irrigation projects, including industrial barrages. When Odisha found out there was considerable reduction in Mahanadi water in its territory, it noticed Chhattisgarh's extensive upstream construction and increased water usage.

According to the Odisha government, Chhattisgarh has built more than 500 aicuts and 30 barrages, many primarily for industrial use.

No headway

The then Naveen Patnaik-led government had moved the Supreme Court in 2018 for river-water sharing. With the case dragging on, the MWDT's formation was subsequently announced.

With BJP governments in both States after 2024, they submitted before the tribunal about settling the dispute amicably but haven't made much headway.



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GS Paper II – International Relations

India's post-LWE future, from red sun to new dawn

Fourteen years ago, in West Midnapore in West Bengal and Simdega in Jharkhand – two districts worst affected by Left Wing Extremism (LWE) – young tribal girls often practised hockey with battered sticks and boundless resolve, even juggling footballs on uneven earth amid fall forests. As Prime Minister's Rural Development Fellows with the Ministry of Rural Development, our close work with the District Magistrates in both districts, and, many other initiatives, helped set up an astroturf hockey academy and a block football training centre under the central government-financed Integrated Action Plan.

Today, Salima Tete carries forward Simdega's hockey legacy as captain of the Indian women's hockey team, and Mamta Hansda from that same rugged football centre in West Midnapore is now part of the Indian women's senior football team. These are sweat-soaked fields which speak a thousand words.

A change in the arc

In 2009, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh identified LWE as the most serious internal security threat facing the nation. In April 2010, India witnessed its deadliest Maoist attack on security forces, resulting in the loss of 76 Central Reserve Police Force personnel in Dantewada (Chhattisgarh). For years afterward, the violence did more than claim lives; it hollowed out the state's everyday legitimacy, crippled routine governance across vast areas, and normalised an abnormal reality in which citizens lived in fear of both gunfire and encounters.

Sixteen years later, on March 30, 2026, during the Budget session of Parliament, Union Home Minister Amit Shah informed the House that India is now free of Maoist insurgency. It is important to acknowledge what this has required – and what it signals. There has been visible political commitment, improved coordination, and a willingness to work closely with State governments across political parties, through joint strategic and operational planning, institutional focus and an insistence that security gains are consolidated. But if security has delivered a decisive outcome, governance in LWE-affected regions must now deliver a decisive transformation. Over the last decade and a half, in our work with dedicated governance action plans in some of these difficult regions, one lesson stands out: security gains do not complete the journey; they create an opening. What secures the peace dividend is governance credibility led by an empathetic and focused political and executive leadership.

For a post-LWE future, that credibility must translate into local value economies in erstwhile affected districts and blocks that have long lived with the double bind of extractive development and a resource curse. Learnings from dedicated



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Governance in Left Wing Extremism (LWE)-affected regions must evolve into inclusive transformation built on state legitimacy and trust

area-based plans – Jungle Mahal in West Bengal; Saranda and Budha Pahad in Jharkhand; Malkangiri in Odisha; and the recent multi-year Bastar plan in Chhattisgarh – point to a common direction; a community-centred, diversified economic strategy that strengthens local consumption, attracts patient public and private capital, and restores community stewardship over the commons. These plans have mattered not because they are perfect, but because they signalled a necessary shift – from episodic interventions to sustained reconstruction, with the state showing up not occasionally, but reliably.

The foundation to build on

That shift must now be deepened by strengthening forest produce systems with fair procurement and local processing; agroforestry and allied livelihoods; incentives for small and medium enterprises through capital support; community-led eco-tourism; and regional economic plans that enable stable employment close to home. Designed with safeguards, and ensuring benefit-sharing and genuine local ownership, these measures can lead to dignified livelihoods that end insecurity and fear.

However, this economic transition will be achieved only if administrative presence sustains beyond the strategic "area domination" exercise. Rural roads, schools, health services, banking access, women's collectivisation, nutrition systems and accountable frontline delivery must be pursued swiftly and predictably, alongside patient community listening and respectful citizen engagement – treating people not as "beneficiaries" but as rights-bearing stakeholders.

This is why the post-LWE moment is not an end in itself, but a moral threshold. We must acknowledge the paradox at the heart of the "red corridor" – the tribal citizen. The Adivasi household in a forested hamlet beyond the last motorable road has lived for decades between the state and the non-state – between the gun and the encounter, the slogan and the raid, forced levy and forced silence. A citizen, yet invisible; a rightful claimant of the Constitution, yet peripheral in its everyday delivery. When policy language speaks of "incidents" and "districts", it often forgets that the unit of pain is a human being: a mother whose son was recruited; a schoolgirl whose hostel barely functioned; forest-dwelling communities whose rights claims still await clearance; a young man who learnt to fear the uniform and the insurgent alike. These sons and daughters of red earth cannot be mere statistics; and peace is not merely the absence of firing. The danger now is quieter: as violence recedes, policy attention can recede too. But the harder work of legitimacy-building demands sustained presence. Thus, a humane

post-LWE approach, we feel, should signal a new dawn.

The framework

First, forthcoming policy focus in LWE areas should enable stronger rights, credible justice, functioning institutions and visible opportunity – with dignity as the organising principle. U.S. conflict expert John Paul Lederach's idea of conflict transformation is relevant here: conflict is not simply a malfunction to be suppressed; it signals broken relationships that must be rebuilt through institutions, trust and fairness.

Second, initiate a structured, region-specific post-LWE transformation action plan for identified districts and blocks, jointly designed and executed by the Union government and respective States, that ties outcomes to finance. Our public policy does not lack schemes; it lacks convergence and accountable delivery in hard and complex geographies. We propose the AIEEEE governance framework for this transition – accountability, innovation, evidence, equity, empathy and efficiency.

This framework can drive focused convergence – the Aspirational Districts and Aspirational Blocks framework for monitoring; tribal-first missions such as Pradhan Mantri Janjati Adivasi Nyaya Maha Abhiyaan (PM-JANMAN) and Dharti Aaba Janjatiya Gram Utkarsh Abhiyan (DAJUGA) for saturation and inclusion; the Adi Karmayogi Abhiyan for capacity-building of field systems; and constitutional provisions such as Article 275(1) and Tribal Sub Plan (TSP) grants, backed by 16th Finance Commission-enabled devolution – to close last-mile gaps at the panchayat level.

Third, the humane state must show up through a small set of non-negotiables, beginning with rights with respect. Justice must be believable: this requires humane policing, effective grievance redress, faster case disposal, legal aid, and a principled review of prolonged undertrial cases and minor-offence burdens disproportionately borne by Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes.

Finally, harness and consolidate youth aspirations towards a secure future. Sport has proved its quiet power in these landscapes – discipline, pride, pathways, belonging – but aspiration must extend beyond sport into higher education scholarships, residential schooling, skilling aligned to local economies and women-led enterprises.

The final mile in India's LWE journey is as much psychological as it is administrative, and this closing chapter must build strong structural confidence in the state and governance. These regions are not India's periphery; they are India's core, and the true spirit of cooperative federalism must enable a shift from counter-insurgency coordination to inclusion-led, post-conflict transformation.





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GS Paper II – International Relations

West Asia needs economic and strategic stability, not forever wars.

Common concerns India and South Korea can coordinate on weathering geopolitical storms

Strengthening trade and technology ties between India and Republic of Korea (South Korea) was at the top of the list of outcomes from the two-day visit of President Lee Jae Myung to Delhi and meetings with Prime Minister Narendra Modi. The visit, eight years after the last by a South Korean President and seven since Mr. Modi's trip to Seoul, was long overdue and focused on building futuristic ties amid the recent global turmoil. The two leaders committed to taking trade levels to \$50 billion by the end of the decade, launched a joint vision for the India-Rok Special Strategic Partnership, framework statements on shipbuilding and maritime logistics, energy resource security and sustainability, and signed 15 memoranda of understanding on cooperation in a number of economic areas. In particular, the two nations are seeking to use Korean technology skill and India's capacity to scale to build partnerships in critical minerals and quantum computing as they have in manufacturing heavy equipment and consumer goods; a number of Korean companies are household names in India, which has become the largest production base for many of these companies.

Despite the present-day successes, an ancient history dating back to Korean princess Suriratna (also known as Heo Hwang-ok) who was believed to have travelled from "Ayuta" or Ayodhya, and plans for the future, India-South Korea ties have belied their potential. The current level of \$27 billion in bilateral trade is particularly low for two economies among the world's top 15 by GDP. Korean dramas and K-pop are popular in India while Indian cultural and religious influence is evident in South Korea; yet, tourist flows remain low, and each has fewer than 15,000 resident expatriates. Before his departure to Vietnam from India, President Lee pointed out that while India's population is 15 times larger than Vietnam's, India has just 12,000 Korean residents while Vietnam has 2,00,000. Closer ties between them will require greater efforts for political and strategic relations, building stronger ties in the Indo-Pacific, and fast-tracking talks for the CEPA trade agreement which has failed to be finalised despite talks. Welcoming Mr. Lee, Mr. Modi listed three qualities – "democratic values, a market economy, and respect for the rule of law" – as "deeply embedded in the DNA" of both nations. Both countries have many common concerns and have much to lose at present from the effects of the U.S.-Israel war with Iran, disruptions in maritime trade and long-term energy shortages. The visit was a timely opportunity for India and Korea to seek new ways to engage with each other, and develop a common outlook on weathering future shocks arising from the war.

Beyond trade deals to building a new architecture

In just a few days in early 2026, India signed two major trade agreements – the India-European Union (EU) Free Trade Agreement, and a deal with the United States that lowered American tariffs on Indian goods. The EU deal was called the "mother of all deals". The U.S. agreement was seen as a strategic reset. Both are real achievements. But these deals also reveal a deeper problem: the system that allowed countries such as India to trade freely is breaking down. What you can buy and sell increasingly depends on politics, not just economics. No country can make everything it needs. India has great software engineers but needs advanced computer chips from Taiwan. It makes generic medicines but relies on China for the chemical ingredients. It has a huge market but needs technology and investment from others. For the past few decades, the global economy flowed smoothly – buy from whoever made things the best and cheapest. If someone refused to sell unfairly, international bodies would step in. The world operated on rules that countries mostly honoured. That is how India built its pharmaceutical industry and South Korea became a tech giant.

Politics dictates access

Today, access to what you need – computer chips, rare minerals and medical supplies – depends on world politics. The U.S. and China selectively block the sale of critical goods and services, using economic power as a tool of control. The international organisations meant to enforce fair trade have been sidelined.

China has restricted certain exports during territorial disputes with India. India imports a large share of its Active Pharmaceutical Ingredients from China – the chemical base for generic drugs. Similar dependencies exist in electronics, solar panels and rare earth minerals. After the Galwan Valley clashes in 2020, China demonstrated its willingness to weaponise these



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India must move from managing relationships with major powers to building partnerships with equals

trade lines. The U.S., despite positioning itself as India's strategic ally against China, has also used trade as leverage. In August 2025, Washington imposed additional tariffs on Indian goods to punish India for buying Russian energy resources. The economic damage was sudden and widespread. Markets took a hit. Foreign investors pulled out. South Korea and Canada also believed that they had solid deals with the Donald Trump administration, only to face new threats and renegotiations shortly after.

Historically, India could turn to Russia as a counterweight. But that option has weakened since the Ukraine war. Western sanctions have cut Russia off from global technology networks, and it now depends heavily on China for markets and political support. Where India once had room to manoeuvre between major powers, its choices have narrowed.

Dependence on either the U.S. or China for critical supply chains now carries unacceptable risks. They are bilateral arrangements subject to political shifts. They are tactical wins. India needs a long-term strategy alongside them.

Move toward smaller, focused partnerships

India's current approach of maintaining ties with all major powers without getting too close to any is no longer sufficient. The alternative is sectoral pluralism, as geopolitical backstops for dealing with volatile powers. Instead of forming large groups around vague shared values, India should build smaller, focused partnerships with a few countries in specific sectors. These groups would allow middle powers to set standards, develop capabilities, and create real interdependence on their own terms.

There is precedent for this. In 1951, six European countries formed the Coal and Steel Community, focused on just those two industries. By linking their supply chains, they made conflict too costly, even before any political union existed. They built trust through practical

cooperation, not declarations. Within a decade, this became the foundation of the EU.

This approach turns India's capabilities into lasting leverage instead of bargaining chips in one-off negotiations. India's UPI payment system handles massive transaction volumes. Its Aadhaar identity system and DigitalLocker platform are models that dozens of developing countries want to copy. A group of countries building shared, open-source digital standards could create a real alternative to China's surveillance model and America's big tech platforms. No bilateral trade deal delivers that kind of influence.

Consider artificial intelligence (AI). The world has two main players – U.S. companies dominating foundation models and Chinese firms building their own systems. But France leads in open-weight AI research, the United Arab Emirates has investment capital, Japan manufactures advanced chips, and India has engineering talent and a large market. Together, they could build and export an open AI system to markets in Africa and Asia where neither the American nor Chinese options fit well. Whoever sets technical standards in emerging markets first usually keeps the advantage.

The starting point

India should begin with three pilot partnerships – in space, digital infrastructure, and AI – where it has proven capabilities and prospective partners have urgent needs. These groups need real authority: the ability to set binding standards in their sectors without waiting for approval from U.S.-led or China-dominated global bodies. A partnership that can certify drug supply chains or set AI safety rules for its members is power.

A country that only manages relationships with big powers is reacting. Building partnerships with equals is shaping the future. India needs to move from one to the other.

The views expressed are personal

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

President Trump and Iran

This appears to be the umpteenth time U.S. President Donald Trump is either cajoling or threatening Iran with dire consequences if Tehran fails to agree to a deal to end the war. The American leader's apparent desire to dominate global affairs overlooks the growing hardship being caused to

the rest of the world due to the prolonged conflict. This increasingly resembles a case of absurd and outright warmongering. **Govardhana Myneedu**, Vijayawada, Andhra Pradesh

As the effects of the war in West Asia have reached the borders of almost every nation, it is the duty of the international community to

work harder to stop the conflict. Countries with good relations with the warring sides should be proactive in containing the flames of war.

Dr. D.V.G. Sankara Rao, Srikakulam, Andhra Pradesh

The last known crusade was in the late 13th century, its zeal exhausted by fatigue. When U.S. Secretary of

Defense Pete Hegseth invokes a "crusade" in the context of Iran, it is an inane appeal to civilisational binaries that are raw, lacking even a nuance. Mr. Trump sparring with the Pope Francis adds to the irony: faith as both prop and opponent. Crusades today are held forth in metaphors: convenient, combustible, and casually

invoked. The embers never died; we keep blowing on them, in fervent righteousness.

R. Narayanan, Navi Mumbai

Thiruvananthapuram tragedy

The blast at a fireworks unit in Thiruvananthapuram in Thiruvananthapuram (Front Page, April 22), in Kerala, the topography of temple

premises has changed – space has shrunk and the materials that are used in fireworks manufacture are highly explosive. These factors justify the avoidance of pyrotechnic shows associated with temples.

N. Sadasivan Pillai, Kikkalloor, Kollam, Kerala

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GS Paper II – Polity

Why quotas alone won't increase women's representation

While reservation can address the issue of underrepresentation, its impact is likely to be shaped by existing inequalities related to class, caste etc

DATA POINT

Krishangi Sinha
Sanjay Kumar

As debate around the Women's Reservation Bill surfaces, the central question is no longer whether quotas will increase representation, but whether they can overcome the deeper structural barriers that limit women's participation in politics. Evidence from a Lokniti-CSDS study suggests that while reservation may expand opportunities, it does not by itself ensure that more women are able to sustain political careers. Over the past decades, Indian women have become a significant electoral force. However, this rise in participation has not translated into representation. Women remain underrepresented as candidates and elected representatives, highlighting a gap between voting and political presence.

The Lokniti-CSDS study shows that while women vote in large numbers, their involvement in more active forms of political engagement remains low (Table 1). Across categories such as locality, education, caste, class, and age, a large majority of women (74%-84%) report being "not at all active" in electoral processes beyond voting. This pattern cuts across socio-economic groups, suggesting that limited political engagement is not confined to specific sections. While voting has become more inclusive, deeper forms of political participation remain restricted.

The limited presence of women in politics is also shaped by party-level decisions. Candidate selection remains a critical barrier (Table 2). Around 44% of women respondents agree that even when a man and a woman are equally qualified, political parties prefer male candidates. These perceptions point to a structural bias in candidate selection processes, where "winnability" is often invoked to justify the preference for

male candidates. When asked whether there is a lesser possibility for a woman to win against a man therefore women should not contest against men, 17% agreed.

Table 3 indicates that women's political participation is shaped by a combination of structural, social, and individual constraints. About 22% of women identify patriarchal structures as the biggest obstacle, followed by household responsibilities and barriers such as lack of awareness or interest.

Nearly two-thirds of women report some degree of patriarchal dominance within their households (Table 4). At the same time, about 66% report having no freedom at all to participate in political activities such as attending meetings or rallies (Table 5). The overlap between household dominance and limited political autonomy suggests that the private sphere remains a key site of political exclusion. Even before institutional barriers come into play, many women face restrictions within their own homes. These structural and social barriers also influence how women perceive politics as a career. Only about 28% of women expressed willingness to enter politics (Table 6).

Low willingness reflects not simply a lack of interest, but the cumulative effect of restricted autonomy, limited access, and exclusionary political structures.

Data suggests that women's political participation in India is marked by a paradox: high electoral participation alongside limited political engagement and representation. While reservation can address the issue of numerical underrepresentation, its impact is likely to be shaped by existing inequalities related to class, caste, education, and access to resources. Without parallel changes, including greater inclusion in party candidate selection and enhanced autonomy within households, quotas alone may not substantially broaden the pool of women entering politics.

Existing setbacks

The data for the tables were sourced from Lokniti-CSDS study

TABLE 1: Women's electoral participation across socio-economic groups. All figures in %

	Active electoral participation		
	Not at all active	Somewhat active	Highly active
Locality			
Rural	76	16	8
Urban	80	15	5
Level of education			
Non-literate	84	12	4
Upto primary	75	19	6
Upto matriculation	75	17	8
12th pass/intermediate	75	17	8
College and above'	78	15	7
Age groups			
18 to 25 years	83	13	4
26 to 35 years	78	17	6
36 to 45 years	75	18	7
46 to 55 years	75	17	9
55 years and above	75	16	9
Caste/communities			
Upper castes	78	15	7
OBC	75	18	7
SC	81	14	5
ST	81	15	5
Muslims	70	22	8
Others	81	12	6
Economic class			
Poor	83	13	4
Lower	78	16	6
Middle	74	19	7
Upper class	78	14	9

TABLE 2: Public perceptions of gender bias in candidate selection and electoral success

Statement	Agree	Somewhat agree/somewhat disagree	Disagree
Even when a man and a woman are equally good candidates, political parties always prefer a man over a woman while giving tickets	44	30	15
Lesser winning probability of women compared to men	17	31	41

Note: All figures are in percentage. Others did not know



TABLE 3: Perceived barriers to women's political participation

Type of barrier	(%)
Patriarchal structure	22
Household responsibility	13
Individual barriers	12
Cultural norms	7
Constraints related to finance or political structure	6
Negative image of politics	3
Other barriers	1

TABLE 4: Extent of patriarchal dominance within households

Level of dominance	(%)
Strong dominance	12
Some dominance	23
Low dominance	31
No dominance at all	28

TABLE 5: Women's autonomy in participating in political activities

Level of freedom	(%)
No freedom at all	66
Very little freedom	12
Some freedom	12
A lot of freedom	10

TABLE 6: The willingness of women to enter politics

Willingness	(%)
No	61
Yes	28
No opinion	12

Krishangi is a researcher with Lokniti-CSDS, Sanjay Kumar is a Professor, Psephologist and Election Analyst. Views expressed by the authors are their own independent views, it does not reflect the views of the institution



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GS Paper II – International Relations

Goodwill is the only saviour for Indian exporters hoping for U.S. tariff refunds

T.C.A. Sharad Raghavan
V. Kamalakara Rao
NEW DELHI

Exporters in India say they took on a portion of the cost of the 50% tariffs imposed by the U.S. in order to retain American customers, but now the only way they can benefit from the refunds process started by the U.S. government is by relying on the goodwill of their American business associates. They have no official recourse.

The U.S. government on April 20 started the process for refunding the reciprocal tariffs imposed by its President Donald Trump since April last year. The system is to function through an online mechanism, and only American importers are eligible to avail the refunds.

The refunds come after the U.S. Supreme Court in February 2026 ruled that the mechanism under which Mr. Trump had imposed the tariffs was illegal. According to industry estimates, the total refund would be about \$166 billion, with around \$12 billion linked to goods imported from India.

"When the tariff was imposed, many exporters had done an adjustment with their U.S. importers and given some rebate or discount just so that the duty, which was 50%, could be shared so that the importer did not go to some other exporter who did not attract such a high

The only way for Indian exporters to receive any benefit is to request their U.S. importers to share it

tariff," Pankaj Chadha, chairman of the Engineering Exports Promotion Council of India explained.

However, despite sharing the burden of the tariffs, the Indian exporters are not eligible for any refunds since those refunds are aimed at U.S. importers who paid the tariffs to the government.

The only way Indian exporters can receive any benefit is if they request their U.S. importers to share some of the benefit.

"It depends on your relationship with your customer," Mr. Chadha said.

"First, your customer should still be buying from you. You must have an existing relationship. Second, if the exporter and importer have a good relationship and the exporter has shared some portion of that duty, then they can possibly ask for a price increase in the next consignment equal to the discount earlier given. It is all on goodwill."

Of the approximately \$12 billion of refunds that are linked to Indian exports, about \$4 billion are linked to engineering exports, according to Ajay Srivastava, founder of the trade think tank GTRI.

Extreme heat threatens food systems, warn UN agencies

Routem

Extreme heat is pushing global agrifood systems to the brink, threatening the livelihoods and health of more than a billion people, according to a new report by the UN's food and weather agencies.

The United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and the World Meteorological Organization (WMO) said heatwaves are becoming more frequent, intense and prolonged, damaging crops, livestock, fisheries, and forests.

For livestock, the report details a thermal humidity index that, when

Extreme heat intensifies droughts and pest outbreaks, and cuts yields once critical temperature thresholds are breached

breached, will trigger acute heat stress.

In dairy cattle, this manifests as a 25% to 25% drop in milk production and significant drops in fertility rates.

Scientists have noted similar stressors in poultry, where extreme temperature spikes can lead to mass mortality events in facilities without industrial-level climate control.

"Extreme heat is rewriting the script on what farmers, fishers, and foresters can grow and when they can grow. In some cases it is even dictating if they can still work," said Karim Zahedi, head of FAO's climate change office. "At its core, this report is telling us that we face a very uncertain future," he said.

Recent climate datasets show global warming is accelerating, with 2025 ranking among the three hottest years on record, triggering more frequent and severe weather extremes.

Acting as a risk multiplier, extreme heat intensifies droughts, wildfires, and pest outbreaks and sharply cuts crop yields once critical temperature thresholds are breached.

The report said higher temperatures are shrinking the safety margin that plants, animals, and humans rely on to function.

Beyond just dehydration, extreme heat disrupts the rest period of plants. High nighttime temperatures force crops to maintain high respiration rates after dark, consuming the energy stores they built through photosynthesis during the day.

This exhaustion stunts growth and leads to pollen sterility in staple crops like maize and rice, whose heat during the critical flowering window can altogether prevent fertilisation, resulting in empty husks. Marine heatwaves are also becoming more frequent, depleting oxygen levels in water and threatening fish stocks. In 2024, 91% of the world's oceans experienced at least one marine heatwave, the report said.

Risks rise sharply as warming accelerates. The intensity of extreme heat events is expected to roughly double at 2C of warming and quadruple at 3C, compared to 1.5C, the report said.

Mr. Zahedi said every one-degree rise in average global temperatures cuts yields of maize, rice, soya, and wheat by around 6%.

The FAO and WMO said piecemeal responses were inadequate and called for better risk governance and early-warning weather systems to help farmers and fishers take preventive action.



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GS Paper III – Science & Technology

Forty years since the disaster, Chernobyl is a story that keeps finding new retellings

Three books on the tragedy provide a detailed understanding on what transpired, drawing on Soviet archives, KGB documents, interviews, and testimonies by survivors to reveal both the system that failed and the human cost it left behind

Yasudevan Mukunth

The Bhopal gas tragedy killed more people. The Soviet Union's nuclear tests in Semipalatinsk irradiated a larger area over a longer period. Why then has the Chernobyl disaster endured so pronouncedly in the popular imagination?

During a flawed safety test, the nuclear reactor at the heart of the Chernobyl disaster entered an unstable state, culminating in explosions at 1:23 a.m. on April 26, 1986. The first firefighters arrived at the plant within minutes, expecting an ordinary fire. By then, the reactor core had exploded. When the personnel climbed on the roof, they stepped on blast debris. They didn't know what it really was.

Two lieutenants led teams that managed to prevent the fire from spreading to adjacent units. But within a few hours, they were vomiting, and most of them died within weeks.

An illusory prestige

In *Chernobyl: History of a Tragedy*, Serhii Plokhy, a noted historian of Eastern Europe, established that scientists had warned about the reactor's instability. The Soviet leadership had ignored these warnings in the interest of what Plokhy called "atomic prestige" – the international status that came with taming nuclear power in the post-war era. The Communist leadership could trumpet this prestige within the country, considering nuclear physics was believed

to sit at the top of a hierarchy of knowledge.

The events at Chernobyl in 1986, however, exposed this prestige to be illusory. The power plant was located near Prypiat. The city, until then a statement of Soviet modernity, quickly became a ghost town. The disaster also happened around the same time that Mikhail Gorbachev was ramping up industrial output. The expectation resulted in senior staff at the plant being caught between the obligation to deliver dangerous levels of power and the desperation not to face the consequences of non-compliance. In his 2019 book, *Midnight in Chernobyl*, the British journalist Adam Higginbotham diagnosed this trap as an obsession with scale that outpaced safety.

A thorough account

Midnight is in fact one of the best books on the Chernobyl disaster for those interested in its people. It is replete with interviews and provides a thorough account of how the disaster unfolded without being overwhelming. Chernobyl's complexity was always going to make for confusing history, and any historical account that claimed otherwise would be mistaken. *Midnight* includes conflicting details to illustrate this, aside from also showing up where the 2019 HBO show *Chernobyl* gets its facts wrong. It also has a few mistakes of its own, such as when it says the hydrogen atom has a neutron. But these details are trivial in the narrative, which is the real treasure.

On the other hand, Plokhy's book is

perhaps the most complete single-volume account of the disaster. The historian drew on Soviet archives, KGB documents, and testimony by survivors that writers before him couldn't. He pieced together the disaster's immediate aftermath in such fine detail that the book often reads like a novel. Because of the authority of his sources, Plokhy's voice is confident, including when he dissects the Soviet bureaucratic culture that rendered the disaster a matter of time. Its only downside, admittedly an important one, is that it sometimes understates the disaster's health effects. It is nonetheless an excellent reference for those seeking to understand what actually happened.

Voices from Chernobyl, by the Russian journalist Svetlana Alexievich, opens with the testimony of Lyudmilla Ignatenko, whose husband was one of the first fire-fighters at the plant. She recalled following him to a hospital in Moscow, hiding her pregnancy to remain at his bedside. His skin cracked, his hair fell out, and pieces of his lungs and liver came out of his mouth. He died in 14 days. Her own daughter only lived four hours: the doctors told Lyudmilla the foetus had absorbed radiation from her womb.

The desperate efforts to safeguard the reactor came to be called the Battle of Chernobyl, with a twist: the enemies here – more immediately, radiation, and more importantly, the state – were invisible. The plant was in Ukraine but 70% of the radionuclides fell in Belarus. The government didn't evacuate Prypiat for two days. The Kremlin only issued a statement on April 28, when radiation

triggered alarms at a nuclear plant in Sweden. Gorbachev even encouraged citizens to participate in May Day parades – an act Plokhy argued was the moment Ukrainians became permanently disillusioned with the state.

At the level of the body

Of the many ways to understand Chernobyl, from scientific to political, *Voices from Chernobyl* brought to bear the existential. Alexievich interviewed hundreds of survivors over many years but her principal contribution was her voice. She removed herself from the narrative, instead setting out the testimonies of fire-fighters, physicists, and re-settlers without imposing any arguments on them. She seemed to be saying no synthesis could ever capture the events at Chernobyl. Against the meticulousness of Plokhy and Higginbotham, Alexievich argued that the disaster could only ever be legible at the level of the body, even if such bodies number in the thousands. Since the disaster, Chernobyl has been complicated as much by sci-fi lore and military video games – which treated the defunct facility as an ominous battleground – as by haunting photographs and, today, a dark tourism industry. Scholars have described the Zone of Exclusion as a unique place where it is now possible to bodily experience a historic politico-technical failure. Even Fukushima didn't manage this, thus avoiding slipping into mythology. In fact, Fukushima was a disaster. Chernobyl is a story that keeps finding new retellings.