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GS Paper I – History

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SCHOOL CHILDREN RENDERING *VANDE MATARAM*. FILE PHOTO

Vande Mataram and the challenge to multicultural nationalism

The decision to sing the full version of *Vande Mataram* at government events has revived debate over the song's communal undertones and its compatibility with the secular and multicultural foundations of the Indian state

Venkatanarayanan S.

The official oath-taking ceremony of C. Joseph Vijay, as the 13th Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu, on May 10 saw the playing of the national song *Vande Mataram* at the beginning and end of the event, before the national anthem and the Tamil anthem (*Tamil Thai Vaazhthu* – a song praising Mother Tamil). Written in 1871, the Tamil anthem has been sung at all Tamil Nadu government events since 1970, following an order issued by the then Chief Minister, Mr. Karunanidhi. It is a secular song that praises the language and culture of the land without invoking any specific religion.

In 2018, controversy erupted when the Kanchi Pontiff, Shri Vijayendra Saraswathi Swamikal, refused to stand during the Tamil anthem. A legal case was filed, and in 2021, Justice G.R. Swaminathan of the Madurai Bench of the Madras High Court said that the Tamil Anthem was only a prayer song and that there was no executive or statutory order requiring people to stand. Then, the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) government under M. K. Stalin declared *Tamil Thai Vaazhthu* the State song and mandated that everyone, except persons with disabilities, should rise while it is sung. It has been performed before the national anthem at all State government events.

Vande Mataram has long been controversial due to its glorification of one religion. In February 2026, the Government of India made it mandatory to play or sing the full song at all government events. According to the order, the song should be rendered during the arrival and departure of the Governor at formal State functions. *Vande*

Mataram was sung at Mr. Vijay's oath-taking ceremony in this order. But why did the opposition parties, including Congress, oppose singing the full verses of *Vande Mataram* at government events? While the song is celebrated for its literary excellence and its role as a slogan during the freedom struggle, the song has a strong communal undertone, glorifying the Hindu religion, which is against the secular and multicultural values of the Indian state.

Historical origins

Bankim Chandra Chatterji's Bengali novel *Anandamath*, written in 1882, has the song *Vande Mataram* ("Hail to the Mother"). The novel was translated into English as *Abbey of Bliss* by Nares Chandra Sen-Gupta in 1906. The original novel's context was the Sannyasi rebellion against Muslim rule, where the author welcomed British rule and its positive potential for transforming India.

During the national independence movement, the novel was translated again by Basanta Koomar Roy in 1941. This version sanitised all its communal aspects to suit the Indian independence movement.

In the preface to the 1941 translation, William J. Jackson, Professor, Department of Religious Studies at Indiana University-Purdue University, mentioned that the original author would not have approved of various omissions made in the new translation. The 1941 translation, which is widely available today, does not reveal the original context of the novel or the song *Vande Mataram*.

In the prefatory note to the original 1906 translation, *Abbey of Bliss*, Nares Chandra Sen-Gupta stated that anti-Muslim sentiment and Hindu

nationalist feelings were significant aspects of the novel. He wrote: "Two very sinister consequences are seen to flow from this conception of a religious basis of nationality in the present work. The first is the attempt to rehabilitate the Hindu Pantheon with new-fangled patriotic gods and goddesses, and the second is the morbid dislike of *Mussulmans* that seems to be indicated in this work" (pages vii-x). He further observed that the heroes of the novel were hostile to *Mussulmans*, and this led him to think thrice before placing the work before a larger public through translation.

The novel not only glorifies the Hindu religion but also expresses anger that the caste system is not being protected under Muslim rulers. One passage states: "In every country, the bond that binds a sovereign to his subjects is the protection that he gives; but our *Mussalman* king – how does he protect us? Our religion is gone; so is our caste, our honour and the sacredness of our family, even! Our lives even are now to be sacrificed. Unless we drive these tipsy long beards away, a Hindu can no longer hope to save his religion."

It is not only the Muslim rulers who are opposed in the original novel; hatred against ordinary Muslims is widespread. In some sections, the villagers are urged to set fire to the Muslim homes and pillage them. The novel also mentions the Sannyasi rebellion as a means to make the British, the sovereigns of India, who are friendly and can instill knowledge of Hinduism. One passage reads: "The true Hinduism is based on knowledge and not on action. To revive it, therefore, you have first to disseminate objective knowledge. The English are great in objective sciences, and they are apt

teachers. Therefore, the English shall be made our sovereign".

The present debate

During the pre-independence period, the leaders did not reject *Vande Mataram* completely but tried to restrict it to the first two stanzas, as the other stanzas glorified religion. Jawaharlal Nehru read the original English translation, *Abbey of Bliss*, to understand the song's background and agreed that it would irritate Muslims. In 1937, a Congress sub-committee resolved to sing the first two stanzas, which praised the beauty and abundance of the motherland. The other stanzas were excluded from the singing. During the Constituent Assembly debates, many Bengali members, including Syama Prasad Mookerjee, praised the song, but finally, *Jana Gana Mana* was adopted as the national anthem.

An idea or a text derives its meaning from the context in which it emerges; without that context, it becomes a mere ritual. Nationalism and patriotism are not mere rituals; they carry emotional and moral duties towards the political state. The revival of the song and its imposition at this period, when accusations against the ruling regime of its communal polarisation reeked more ideological than nationalistic. Indian nationalism can never be confined to a monocultural identity, and we need stronger voices from Opposition parties and civil society to protect the multi-cultural foundations of the Indian state.

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GS Paper II – International Relations

The Iran war, India's strategic autonomy challenges

United States President Donald Trump's tariff wars against friend and foe over the last year now pale in comparison to the upheaval created by the unprecedented Israeli-American attack on Iran and counterstrikes. For decades, India's stakes in a stable and friendly Tehran have been huge for energy security, geopolitical advantage, and space for strategic autonomy. If the Ukraine war tested India's foreign policy agility and independence, the Iran war is a generational challenge. The slew of economic and defence deals that India signed with European countries recently was popularly seen as a signal of major geo-economic and geopolitical shift in India's favour. In this new West Asian war scenario, it is already clear that deals with France and the European Union (EU) hardly give India a stronger hand.

Strategic autonomy is difficult

The 114 Rafale fighter jet purchase from France and the India-EU Free Trade Agreement (FTA) pointed to historic achievements. These surprisingly quick denouements (after 20 years of slow negotiations on the FTA and extended talks on the Rafales since 2016) were mostly rearguard actions against Mr. Trump's punishing tariffs. But New Delhi and some European countries such as France seemed to believe they were important steps toward a more distributed multipolar world order against American unilateralism. Washington's disregard for potentially catastrophic effects from the attack on Iran on global commerce and security are showing that U.S. unipolarity is holding fast.

Until Mr. Trump's coercive tariffs, New Delhi did not have to worry much about independence in economic policymaking. That is because unlike the post war American-led military order with the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and Asian formal treaty alliances, Washington's liberal economic order tended to be open and inclusive, driven largely by market forces. The double whammy of economic and military unilateralism will now make it more difficult for countries such as India to exercise strategic autonomy.

President Trump is changing the economic system in ways that mirror the exclusivist military system. The U.S. government is increasingly demanding a greater alignment of the economic policies of other countries with American strategic interests. This is a fundamental break from the earlier practice and it threatens the entire post-Second World War liberal economic order. New Delhi has been able to pick and choose close economic tie-ups with the U.S.



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Despite the defence, commerce and trade deals, India needs to be aware of a possible European alignment with the United States

while, at the same time, keeping its distance from alliance politics. That had not stopped the U.S. from nurturing commercial ties with India in a big way since 2000. Indeed, the U.S. overtook China as India's largest trading partner in 2021-22. But note that China was at the top of India's economic partners even as U.S.-China relations were sharply declining. All this is to say that until very recently, economic and strategic relations could co-exist along competing trajectories.

For India and the U.S., a convergence of interests about a rising China had brought their relations to a level that appeared irreversible. Even as this meeting of the minds occurred, India's diversification of big power partnerships remained intact. India's ability to maintain good relations simultaneously with the U.S., Russia, China, Iran, Israel, Vietnam, and the major European powers – without taking strong sides, even under duress – is the clearest expression and exercise of strategic autonomy.

Mr. Trump's arbitrary demands to discontinue crude oil imports from Russia, forego the strategic partnership with Iran on Chabahar port, desist from even considering a de-dollarise option in BRICS, and clearly align with American geo-economic and geopolitical interests, pose the biggest challenge to India's strategic autonomy in decades. America's 30-day waiver for Russian oil purchases owing to energy supply chain disruptions came as a brief reprieve for India, yet on terms set by Washington. It was more than just an embarrassment for India when a U.S. submarine sank an Iranian naval ship (*IRIS Dena*) in the Indian Ocean that was returning from the Indian Navy's International Fleet Review 2026 naval exercise on March 4. India's image as the key regional naval power took a big hit.

Deals with Europe have not eliminated risks

India's FTA with the EU and historic Rafale fight jet deal with France are two developments that many interpreted as India trying to manage the new autonomy dilemma created by Mr. Trump. New Delhi chose French fighter jets over Russian and American jets with the hope that it would finally get the technology transfer and domestic production it has long sought. India is growing, and so is its military; it will keep buying, and France is locking itself into a huge commercial deal.

For India, while the spending is extremely high, it will not get a better deal with the U.S.; and it will not get a better performing fighter jet from Russia. In this geopolitical climate, this deal helps both India and France as they want to diversify partners and protect their strategic autonomy.

But there is some doubt about just how much tech is being transferred and the fact that source codes and algorithms will be under French control. This means that India will be wedded to the French for upgrades. This also could undercut India's 'Make in India' aspiration.

As for the FTA, we could see this in the context of Mr. Trump's economic assaults and a rushed attempt to save the idea of a liberal economic world order. But there are domestic political hurdles in India to overcome, from farmers and industrial workers who are a big electoral chunk. Moreover, France and the EU might be using commerce and trade now as a way to gain leverage over India. De-risking from Mr. Trump's uncertainties through the FTA has obviously not eliminated political or economic risks.

America's long shadow

What seems the flimsiest basis for strengthening strategic autonomy is the novel idea of a common perception of a new world order. Geopolitically speaking, India is much more in favour of global multipolarity than western countries. Europe (less France) tends to fall into line with the U.S. under pressure. At this particular moment of Mr. Trump's high-handedness with Europe, it is not surprising that Europe is turning to countries such as India. But historically they have followed the American lead.

U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio's speech at the Munich Security Conference in February 2026 made it clear that Europe and America belong together, casting it in common civilisational and identity terms which leaves the Global South out in the cold. He minced no words, openly whitewashing western colonial expansion and calling for a "western supply chain" to regain its position. This suggests that a new geo-economic alliance system of this sort would be hierarchical. The Global South seems to be less partners, more targets of competition. The standing ovation for Mr. Rubio from a supposedly critical European audience spoke volumes.

In this era of culture contests and tribalism, it is hard to see a natural affinity between Europe and India when the going gets tough. As the world remains shell shocked by the Iran war, it is clear that European states will effectively facilitate American and Israeli interests despite the display of reservations by pronouncements such as "not our war" on the West Asian conflict. In any new regional order that emerges, it is also clear that New Delhi will hardly be able to count on the Europeans for Indian strategic autonomy purposes.



GS Paper II – Governance

Building a preventive health culture in India

India has made remarkable strides in health care over the past four decades. It has built institutions of global repute, trained exceptional clinicians, and expanded access to advanced treatments. Yet, even as it celebrates these achievements, it must confront a deeper truth: it has built a system that responds to illness far more effectively than it preserves health.

For too long, health has been viewed as something to recover after it is lost, rather than something to protect every day.

After four decades of building the institutions of modern medicine in India, I have come to understand that the greatest threat to our national health is not the disease we have failed to cure. It is the disease that we have failed to prevent.

We, as a civilisation, have confused the treatment of illness with the pursuit of health. These are not the same endeavour. One begins when something is already broken. The other is an act of continuous, deliberate care for oneself, for one's family, for the generations that will inherit the consequences of choices made today. India has built a world-class capacity to heal. It must now build the culture and the will to protect.

A civilisational reckoning

Non-communicable diseases – heart attack, strokes, cancer, diabetes, and infectious diseases – are now the leading cause of death in India, surpassing infectious illnesses. Approximately



Dr. Prathap C. Reddy

Founder Chairman,
Apollo Hospitals

The country's economic and social progress depends on citizen health and longevity

270 million Indians live with chronic disease today, the majority unaware of their condition until the body has already begun to fail. This is not a medical statistic. It is a measure of a society that must learn to listen to itself.

The economic consequences for a young democracy can be severe and compounding. Preventable illness diminishes the contribution of individuals who might otherwise have given their best years not to illness but to their work, their children, and their country. A nation cannot reach its highest potential while its people are quietly losing ground to conditions that need not have taken hold.

The window for action

Insights from large-scale health assessments, including Apollo Hospitals Health of the Nation Report 2026, point to a critical window in early adulthood. The decade between 30 years and 40 years of age is emerging as a turning point. It is during these years when individuals are most engaged in building careers and supporting families that early metabolic and cardiovascular risks begin to take hold.

By the age of 40, a significant proportion of individuals are no longer disease-free. The concern is not only the presence of disease but also the absence of awareness. Most people do not seek care because they do not feel unwell. By the time symptoms appear, the opportunity for early reversal is often lost.

And yet, there is reason for optimism. The

human body is remarkably resilient when intervention is timely. Early detection, lifestyle correction, and sustained monitoring can prevent, delay, or even reverse many of these conditions. The window exists – but it does not remain open indefinitely.

This is why India must now embrace a new paradigm: one of self-stewardship.

Push for transformation

Prevention is not a programme. It is not a policy intervention or a campaign to be launched and forgotten. It is a philosophy – one that asks each of us to understand that the stewardship of our own health is among the most consequential duties we carry. Not only for ourselves, but for everyone who depends upon us, and for a nation whose extraordinary promise rests entirely upon the vitality of its people.

India has the knowledge and the infrastructure. What remains is the transformation of habit – a culture of early action, of routine checks, of health understood not as the absence of disease but as the active, daily commitment to life.

The legacy a nation leaves is measured in the health and the hope it passes forward. The ambitions we hold for India – economic, social, and global – rest on the strength, vitality, and longevity of its citizens.

That reckoning can begin not in a hospital but in the choices that homes and families make before one is ever needed.



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GS Paper II – Polity

Cooling doctrine

Access to safe indoor temperatures must be a public-health entitlement

Over the past decade, India's response to extreme heat has settled into a familiar choreography. Summer comes and the National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA) regurgitates its tally of rising preparedness. The 16th Finance Commission has gone further, recommending that heatwaves be notified as a national disaster – a designation that would unbolt the door to dedicated central funding. But the heat action plan, as currently conceived, has reached the limits of what it can do. Even the NDMA concedes that the quality of these plans is uneven – several are imitations of plans drafted elsewhere. Where implementation happens at all, it leans heavily on short-term palliatives such as water kiosks, public advisories, and shaded waiting areas at bus stops. While these measures save lives at the margins, they do not alter the underlying exposure of the tens of millions of Indians who work, commute and sleep in conditions that are becoming, in the most clinical sense of the word, biologically untenable.

What India needs is something larger and more ambitious – a national cooling doctrine; a scalable framework that treats sustained access to safe indoor temperatures as a public-health entitlement to be guaranteed. The doctrine must begin where the harm is most acute: mandatory minimum cooling standards for indoor workplaces – factories, warehouses, commercial kitchens, call centres, delivery hubs – backed by an honest and fair inspection regime. Technology will have to do the heavy lifting by deploying passive cooling materials, reflective roofing deployed at scale, district cooling systems for dense urban zones, and cheaper, more efficient air conditioning calibrated for the peculiarities of Indian grids. But the problem cannot be solved by importing solutions designed for the temperate, wealthy economies of the global North. India's heat is wetter, longer and more humid than the dry European summers that produced much of the existing cooling literature. Most Indians cannot afford the energy bills that western-style mechanical cooling implicitly assumes, as the grid in India, even on its best days, can supply at most 60% of its installed capacity. There is no quick fix on offer but to keep printing heat action plans while indoor temperatures climb is no longer a serious answer – it is theatre.

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GS Paper II – Polity

Activists question impartiality of SIR, electoral process

The Hindu Bureau

NEW DELHI

As the Election Commission of India (EC) rolled out the third phase of the special intensive revision (SIR) of electoral rolls on Thursday, civil society activists, including former Election Commissioners, questioned the impartiality of the exercise, alleging that it was weakening democracy.

"In Bengal, people who have been left out [of electoral rolls] have passports and birth certificates. But the Supreme Court says don't vote this time, you can vote next time," transparency rights activist Anjali Bharadwaj said at a discussion on "SIR—Elections—One Nation, One Election" on Thursday.

The event was organised by the Constitutional Conduct Group and the Group on Federalism and Elections.

'Vote dacoity'

Ms. Bharadwaj pointed out that of the 27 lakh people left out after the adjudication process in West Bengal, only 2,000 had been heard by the EC-appointed tribunals so far.

"In 150 seats, the winning margin was less than the number of deletions. That is almost 50% of the seats," she said, adding that the EC was not willing to share the CCTV footage

of the polling booths. "How will the common man know whether elections took place properly? Are the elections free and fair? That is the big question."

Bureaucrat-turned-activist Harsh Mander held that no impartial observer can say that free and fair polls are taking place in India now. "In Bengal, not vote *chori* but vote dacoity took place openly," he alleged.

There is a need to understand not just how but also why elections are being stolen in this country, Mr. Mander said. "If we don't understand this, then we don't understand how grave this situation is," he said.

Former Election Commissioner Ashok Lavasa said he had many questions about the SIR, the answers for which have not been found in the past 11 months. "The ECI had said that the SIR was being conducted under Article 326 of the Constitution. Will the ECI now share data that under Article 326, how many people have been kept out of the electoral rolls," he asked.

Mr. Lavasa observed that the Supreme Court had earlier said that if there were mass deletions under SIR, then it would intervene. "Now mass deletion has happened. When will they intervene?" he asked.



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GS Paper II – Polity & Governance

India's labour market shows gains, but challenges persist

PLFS 2025 points to improving employment trends alongside structural gaps in skills and participation

Phalasha Nagpal

Every year, about 740 million young Indians enter the labour market. They are better educated than any generation before them – the average years of formal schooling for those aged 15 and above has reached 10 years nationally – and with hopes and expectations to match. This raises key questions: Can India's economy productively absorb the current generation of new workers, including youth and women? Under what conditions? And how can India ensure that its demographic potential translates into meaningful employment and economic growth?

The recently released Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) 2025 report offers some key insights.

It points to measurable progress across several dimensions, while also underlining some challenges that must be addressed to fully leverage India's demographic dividend.

Encouraging trends in employment

The Labour Force Participation Rate stands at 59%, the Workforce Participation Rate at 57%, and the unemployment rate at 3%. These are robust headline indicators. Youth unemployment has declined since 2024, with gains for rural and urban youth. Monthly PLFS bulletins through 2025 also point to improving trends in women's participation. Female LFPR in rural areas rose across successive months through September 2025, reaching its highest level since May. These trends show a sustained and directional improvement across multiple survey rounds.

The quality of employment has also improved. The share of regular wage and salaried employment increased from 22% to 24%, with gains recorded for both men and women. Correspondingly, the share of self-employment declined from 58% to 56%. Since formal salaried employment is associated with higher earnings and access to social protection, this shift in the nature of employment is among the more

important signals in the 2025 data.

Wage trends reinforce this pattern, particularly for women. In regular salaried employment, female earnings grew by 7%, compared to 6% for men. In self-employment, female earnings rose by 9% against 8% for men, while in casual labour, women's wages increased by 5%, even as male wages largely remained unchanged.

At the same time, there remains scope to further narrow gender gaps in absolute earnings. Analysis of the data indicates that women earn about 76% of male wages in salaried work, around 69% in casual labour, and just 36% in self-employment. While disparities remain substantial, the shift towards salaried employment is beginning to offer more tangible economic gains for women.

Structural transformation is also creating better employment opportunities. Agriculture's share of employment has declined to 43%, while manufacturing and services have grown to around 12% and 13%, respectively.

Young people, particularly young women, are increasingly entering manufacturing and service sectors. Caste- and gender-based occupational segregation among younger cohorts is measurably lower than among older ones, reflecting the cumulative effects of expanded access to education and rising social mobility now beginning to translate into more inclusive labour market outcomes.

Gaps in skills and job creation

The first is the education-to-employment transition. India has significantly expanded tertiary education enrolment, making higher education more accessible across income groups. Yet gaps remain. For instance, between 2004 and 2023, roughly 5 million graduates entered the labour market annually, but only about 2.8 million secured employment of any kind.

Limited access to formal skills training also poses a challenge. Only 4% of individuals aged 15-59 have received formal vocational or technical training. Yet among those who have, workforce participation is substantially higher – 83% for men and 51% for women – underscoring the strong link between skills training and employment, which needs to be both harnessed and scaled up.

Another challenge lies in women's sustained workforce participation. While most men outside the labour force cited education as the primary reason, women pointed to childcare and household

responsibilities, revealing structural constraints rooted in the unequal distribution of unpaid work. For instance, urban self-employed men worked approximately 17.5 hours more per week than women, and in regular salaried employment, the gap is about 7.9 hours per week, reflecting a persistent double burden of paid and unpaid labour that women experience disproportionately.

The fourth challenge is the NEET group. Around 25% of those aged 15-29 fall into this category. Moreover, these individuals are not counted in unemployment figures. Without timely intervention, this disengagement can lead to young people becoming detached from the workforce in the long term.

The way forward

The PLFS 2025 data points to a labour market that is moving in the right direction. However, translating these gains into meaningful and productivity-led economic growth will require more targeted interventions: scaling industry-relevant skills training, enabling women's workforce participation through gender-responsive interventions, and strengthening pathways to stable job employment with expanded social protection and a focus on green sectors. Targeted programmes like apprenticeships will also be crucial to re-engage NEET youth as active contributors to the economy. (Phalasha Nagpal is Livelihoods and Gender Lead, Oxford Policy Management)

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THE HINDU

GS Paper II – Polity & Governance

Free and fair elections are dependent on a truly independent poll body: SC

Top court questions neutrality of Prime Minister-led selection panel for Election Commissioners, highlights absence of even 'one absolutely neutral person'; Attorney-General says the court cannot become a 'second chamber of Parliament'; Bench suggests referring petitions to Constitution Bench

Krishnadas Rajagopal
NEW DELHI

The Supreme Court on Thursday nudged the Union government to address concerns over its dominant role in the appointment of Chief Election Commissioners and Election Commissioners, observing that free and fair elections depend on a truly independent Election Commission.

The court highlighted the absence of even "one absolutely neutral person" on the Prime Minister-chaired selection committee. It questioned the presence of a Cabinet Minister on the panel, observing that such a Minister could not be expected to defy the Prime Minister. The court also asked whether the presence of the Leader of the Opposition on the committee was merely "ornamental" as appointments could be made without a unanimous vote.

The court was hearing a batch of petitions challenging the Chief Election Commissioner and other Election Commissioners (Appointment, Conditions of Service, and Term of Office) Act, 2023.

The petitioners contended that the Act "defeated" a Constitution Bench judgment in the *Anoop Baranwal versus Union of India* case, which had constituted a selection panel comprising the Prime Minister, the Leader of the Opposition in the Lok Sabha, and the Chief Justice of India. The 2023 Act, passed within months of the judgment, replaced the Chief Justice with a Cabinet Minister nominated by the Prime Minister.

Judicial restraint

Describing the *Anoop Baranwal* judgment as a "classic example of judicial restraint and statesmanship", the court indicated that the 2023 Act handed the power to the Executive to "call



Judgments of this court from 1950 are eloquent on the point that the Executive cannot call the shots as far as elections are concerned... Free, fair elections are an important part of the Basic Structure

JUSTICE DIPANKAR DATTA
Supreme Court Judge

the shots" in the appointment of the Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) and Election Commissioners (ECs).

"Judgments of this court from 1950 are eloquent on the point that the Executive cannot call the shots as far as elections are concerned... Free fair elections are an important part of the Basic Structure. It can only be accomplished by having an independent Election Commission of India. The Election Commission can only be independent if it has independent Commissioners," Justice Dipankar Datta, heading a Division Bench, told Attor-

ney-General R. Venkataramani, appearing for the Union government.

Mr. Venkataramani said one cannot make a "hugely hypothetical assumption" that the Act would result only in subservient CECs and ECs unless there was an actual lapse on the ground.

"Unless you taste the pudding, how can you say the pudding is bad," Mr. Venkataramani asked.

Justice Datta replied that it was not enough for the Election Commission to be independent, and that the poll body should also appear to be independent.

The judge asked the top

law officer which law he thought occupied the "pride of place" immediately after the Constitution.

"After the Constitution, which law occupies the prime place? There are thousands of legislations, which one would you place right next to the Constitution... I would say, the election laws. Would I be wrong? Without democracy, there is nothing," Justice Datta said.

A-G's argument

Mr. Venkataramani argued that the Supreme Court could not become a "second chamber of Parliament". The petitioners, he said, cannot expect Parliament to enact laws blindly in consonance with Supreme Court judgments.

"Can somebody come to the court and say Parliament disregarded your judgment when it was bound entirely to the word of the court? The court can declare the law while ex-

amining the legality of a legislation or a state action. But the court cannot decide what a law should look like and expect Parliament to follow suit by enacting a law faithfully mirroring the court's vision," the Attorney-General submitted.

Mr. Venkataramani said the court did not declare any law under Article 141 in the *Anoop Baranwal* judgment. It had merely put in place a stop-gap arrangement for the CEC and EC appointments until Parliament enacted a law under Article 324(2).

Towards the end of the hearing, the Bench suggested referring the petitions to a Constitution Bench. The petitioners strongly opposed the move, arguing that the pleas involved a "conventional" challenge to the 2023 Act and not a "substantial question of law" warranting reference to a larger Bench under Article 145(3).



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GS Paper III – Economic Development

Bursting at the seams

The current rise in inflation is not transient, but systemic

India's April retail inflation, at a 13-month high of 3.48%, is only marginally higher than its March print of 3.4%, and continues to remain deceptively benign. Wholesale inflation has more than doubled to 8.3% in April from 3.88% in March – a 42-month high – signalling that substantial upstream price pressures are still working their way through the economy. Unsurprisingly, the spike in the Wholesale Price Index (WPI) has been led by soaring fuel and power prices, which rose 24.71%, while petroleum and natural gas prices surged 67.2%. This clearly indicates that the full impact of rising energy costs has not yet been passed on to end-consumers. However, such a pass-through now appears imminent. Union Petroleum Minister Hardeep Singh Puri recently indicated that the Centre may have little choice but to raise retail petrol and diesel prices, with public sector oil marketing companies reportedly absorbing “under-recoveries” of nearly ₹30,000 crore a month since the U.S.-Israeli war with Iran began. Any increase in retail fuel prices will have economy-wide implications.

April retail inflation has already been driven chiefly by food, with the Consumer Food Price Index rising to 4.2% from 3.87% in March. Predictably, restaurants and accommodation services witnessed among the sharper increases, reflecting the cascading effect of rising commercial LPG prices. The price of the widely used 19.2 kg commercial LPG cylinder has risen by roughly ₹850-₹1,000 over revisions since the conflict began, while the 5 kg canister has reportedly seen increases of over ₹200 in several markets. The canister is extensively used by migrant wage labour across the country, directly feeding into food basket costs and potentially dampening consumption demand. This comes even as Prime Minister Narendra Modi has appealed to people to refrain from “extravagant spending on weddings and travel abroad” and to cut back on buying precious metals for a year. Consequently, the Centre doubled import duties on gold and silver in an attempt to discourage safe-haven investments and ease pressure on the rupee, which has depreciated by nearly 8.5% against the U.S. dollar in the past two-and-a-half months since the conflict began. For context, the rupee had depreciated by roughly 2%-3% annually on average over the previous five fiscal years. The current slide is therefore exceptionally sharp. It is increasingly evident that retail inflation is bursting at the seams and will likely find fuller expression in the months ahead. The sharp divergence between the Consumer Price Index and WPI suggests that producers are still absorbing a significant share of rising costs, a situation that is unlikely to remain sustainable. This leaves the Reserve Bank of India with limited room but to eventually tighten monetary policy in order to keep inflation within its tolerance band of 2%-6%. What is unfolding is not merely transient inflation driven by commodity volatility, but also broader systemic inflationary pressure, with limited manoeuvring space for both the government and the central bank.



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GS Paper III – Economic Development

Capital flight and pressure on the rupee

India's economy is witnessing significant capital outflows and depreciatory pressures on the rupee amid rising oil prices and global uncertainty, coupled with a widening current account deficit, future interest rate increases abroad could place further stress on India's external account and underlying vulnerabilities

ECONOMIC NOTES

Rahul Menon

The recent announcement by Prime Minister Narendra Modi urging individuals to reduce their consumption of gold and petrol brought to the fore what many analysts have warned about: India's situation on the external front is far from rosy. The rupee has witnessed significant depreciation over the last few weeks, while the rise in LPG prices has caused hardships for the working classes and triggered a reverse migration of workers back to villages.

Let us focus on the question of capital flows. The outbreak of hostilities in the Persian Gulf and the closure of the Strait of Hormuz have led to an outflow of foreign capital and a weakening of the rupee relative to major currencies. These are to be expected given the profound uncertainty that has gripped global markets. What makes the situation doubly worrying for India is that these outflows and depreciation have occurred even though interest rates in the U.S. and the U.K. have not changed. If foreign central banks do raise interest rates, it might lead to even more pressure on India's external account in the future.

The taper tantrum

Emerging market economies such as India offer higher returns, but they are also exposed to currency and inflation risks. A rise in Indian inflation and/or a depreciation of the rupee can lower the net return to a foreign investor on holding Indian assets. The returns on Indian assets would have to be higher relative to those on foreign assets to compensate for these risks. In simple terms, the decision to hold Indian assets relative to foreign ones depends on the difference between Indian and foreign interest rates.

If Indian interest rates remain fixed, an increase in foreign interest rates can prompt foreign investors to reduce their



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holdings of Indian assets. This leads to depreciation of the rupee as it is exchanged for dollars. The only way – apart from capital controls – to arrest such a slide is to raise domestic interest rates, but that would negatively affect domestic investment. Monetary policy in emerging economies is tied to that of the U.S.; any increase in U.S. interest rates often forces smaller economies to consider raising their own rates to defend their currencies.

Given the ease with which capital can flow across borders, these outcomes can occur merely on the expectation that interest rates will rise, even before any actual rise. Such an outcome was seen in 2013. With interest rates hitting the zero lower bound in the wake of the 2008 Great Recession, the U.S. Federal Reserve announced a possible end to quantitative easing. The mere expectation of higher future interest rates caused a massive withdrawal of capital from emerging market economies. This was known as the 'taper tantrum'.

What is happening currently is somewhat similar, with capital flight occurring even though interest rates have not actually risen. What is worrying about

the current scenario is that India's depreciation and capital flight have occurred even though foreign central banks have not made any definitive signal that they intend to raise interest rates in the future.

Uncertainty in monetary policy

Despite turmoil in energy markets, central banks in developed economies did not initially raise interest rates. The U.S. Federal Reserve and the Bank of England have maintained interest rates at 3.75% since December 2025. Their initial forecasts were built on the idea that the war – and the subsequent oil price increase – would be temporary, with prices returning to normal levels. Raising interest rates in such a scenario would only prove deflationary.

However, the longer the war continues, the greater the possibility that oil prices will remain elevated, thereby increasing inflationary expectations. Rising wages and prices, as economic agents fought to maintain their purchasing power in the face of rising energy prices, would result in rising inflation.

As the war drags on, the possibility of interest rate increases to combat

inflationary pressures rises.

The beginning of the war provided confusing signals to central banks. While the futures market in the energy sector anticipated an eventual decline in prices, interest rate futures assumed heightened inflation. In dealing with this profound uncertainty, the central banks of the U.K. and the U.S. initially maintained interest rates, providing detailed forecasts outlining different scenarios. And yet, foreign capital exited the Indian economy despite foreign central banks making no commitment to raising interest rates and forecasting the rise in energy prices as being merely temporary.

The rupee had been facing depreciatory pressures for some time; the war gave impetus to a process already occurring. Perhaps one could argue that foreign capital has priced in the possibility of future interest rate hikes and has already acted upon these expectations. The future rise in interest rates – if it were to occur – may not have much of an effect then. But this is to assume that foreign wealth holders have completely discounted the initial stance of Central Banks that inflation was temporary. This is a dangerous assumption to make in a situation of such profound uncertainty.

The Prime Minister's announcement diagnoses the problem the economy currently faces. The current account deficit is widening owing to rising oil prices. Coupled with capital flight, it puts significant pressure on the rupee. But moral suasion cannot be a policy response.

The RBI had initially intervened by imposing restrictions on certain foreign exchange derivative contracts, and the government has recently announced the imposition of import duties on gold. But this has not resolved the underlying vulnerabilities. If interest rates were to rise in the future, these vulnerabilities would come under further stress. The economy is not out of the woods yet. (Rahul Menon is associate professor at O.P. Jindal Global University)

THE GIST

▼ The outbreak of hostilities in the Persian Gulf and the closure of the Strait of Hormuz have created profound uncertainty in global markets, leading to capital outflows from emerging market economies such as India.

▼ Foreign investors may have already priced in the possibility of future interest rate increases abroad, while the war merely accelerated the depreciatory pressures that the rupee had already been facing for some time.



GS Paper III – Economic Development

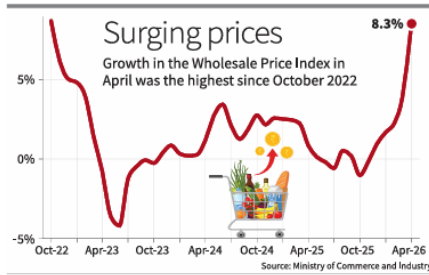
WPI more than doubles to 8.3% in April

India's WPI inflation rises to its highest level in 3.5 years on the impact of the West Asia crisis on prices in India; experts say that this jump in wholesale prices could soon be passed on to consumers, and could also start hurting the profitability of companies if it is not passed on

T.C.A. Sharad Raghavan
NEW DELHI

In the first sign of the impact of the West Asia crisis on prices in India, wholesale inflation in India jumped to 8.3% in April 2026, its highest level in 3.5 years, driven by the sharp rise in crude oil and natural gas prices. Inflation in this category stood at 67.2% in April.

Data on the Wholesale Price Index (WPI) released by the Ministry of Commerce and Industry on Thursday showed that the last time wholesale inflation in India was higher than this was in October



2022. It had stood at 3.9% in March 2026.

Notably, food inflation at the wholesale level remained relatively low, at 2% in April 2026, compared with 1.9% a month

earlier. "The first sign of the impact of war on the Indian economy has been seen in the WPI inflation number for April which came at 8.3%," Madan Sabnavis, chief economist at

the Bank of Baroda said. "This is a direct result of the global developments which have manifested on the oil front."

Shashwat Singh, Fundamental Analyst at Bajaj Broking too said that the rise in wholesale inflation was largely driven by higher crude oil prices, fuel and power costs, imported inflation, and elevated input prices amid the ongoing geopolitical tensions in West Asia.

Within the index, inflation in the crude oil and natural gas sectors stood at a 46-month high of 67.2% in April 2026, coming on the back of a 39-month

high in March.

While the higher international prices of both products are a driving factor for this, there is also a significant base effect pushing the inflation numbers up. That is, the sector witnessed deflation of 7.6% and 15.5% in March and April of last year.

Fuel inflation

The fuel and power category, too, saw inflation rise to 24.7% in April 2026, the highest since October 2022. This was driven by inflation in the mineral oils category, which rose to 39.5% in April 2026.

Mr. Singh pointed out

that this elevated wholesale inflation could soon pass on to the retail level and directly affect consumers. He added that it could also hurt the profitability of companies.

"Higher logistics, freight, and commodity prices are now increasingly getting reflected in wholesale inflation, which could eventually pass through to consumer inflation as well," Mr. Singh said.

"The spike also suggests margin pressure for manufacturing and industrial companies if cost increases cannot be fully passed on to consumers."