# THE G.R.F MONTHLY

RE-ASSESING NATIONAL PRIORITIES IN AN AGE OF UNCERTAINTY

*No Foreign Conflict, No Indian Exception: Protecting India's Interests in the Iran-US War*

*The Drone Battlefield: Can India Build the Next Generation of Unmanned Warfare?*

And more inside



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# A Message from the Founder's Desk

Rudraksh Aneja; Director, The Geojuristoday Research Foundation



Dear Readers,

The fourth edition of GRF Monthly arrives at a moment when uncertainty has become the defining condition of our times. War in West Asia, a new security axis on our western flank and Europe's carbon border tax are reshaping the world around us. Protests are spreading across Europe, and elections in major countries are poised to redraw the political map. Closer to home, questions just as pressing demand our attention. This edition therefore asks: what should India prioritize when certainty can no longer be assumed?

Our answer begins with institutions. Clean electoral rolls, reliable land records and classrooms that deliver real learning are not administrative details; they are the foundations of a credible Republic. We then examine the return of food inflation, the gap between defence contracts and combat readiness, and whether India can build the drones that will define future wars. We also ask how heritage can become cultural power, and how New Delhi can protect its interests without surrendering strategic autonomy.

Uncertainty is not a reason for paralysis. It is a call for clarity, for knowing what matters most and acting on it with confidence. That is the spirit of these pages.

Happy Reading.

# Letter from the Editor-in-Chief

Samridhi Seth: EiC The Geojuristoday Research Foundation



Dear Readers,

From economic growth and employment to technological disruption, social change, national security, and India's evolving place in the world, the questions confronting India today are complex and deeply interconnected. Understanding them requires more than following the news. It requires looking beyond headlines, examining competing perspectives, and asking what the available evidence tells us about the way forward.

This is the approach I want us to bring to public discourse. Whether we are examining a policy decision, a social challenge, an economic reform, or a geopolitical development, our objective is not simply to identify what is working or what is failing. It is to understand why, recognize the trade-offs involved, and explore what can realistically be done better.

I believe good analysis must be both critical and constructive. Uncritical optimism overlooks genuine problems, while persistent cynicism leaves little room for progress. India needs neither. We need honest assessments of our challenges, an appreciation of what is working, and a willingness to consider solutions that account for institutional realities and the people affected by them.

Our focus is not merely on commenting on developments, but on understanding their implications for India and its people. This means engaging with different viewpoints, questioning our own assumptions, and evaluating ideas on their merits. A solution-oriented approach does not mean that every article must offer definitive answers. It means that our analysis should help move the conversation beyond the problem towards a more informed discussion of the possibilities.

In this fourth edition, we continue to examine the developments shaping India's policy landscape, society, economy, security, and international engagement. Across these subjects, the larger question remains the same: how do we understand the challenges before us, and what can we do to address them?

I hope this edition offers you not just information, but perspectives worth considering and questions worth asking.

Happy reading!

# Letter from the Managing Editor

Kuvamjeet Singh: COO, The Geojuristoday Research Foundation




Dear Readers,

The strength of a nation is seldom measured by the power it commands alone; it is equally reflected in the institutions it sustains, the interests it safeguards, the challenges it anticipates and the capacity it possesses to adapt to an ever-changing world. It is the truest measure of a country's ability to preserve its sovereignty, uphold its institutional foundations and secure its long-term aspirations.

This edition seeks to examine the many dimensions of this undertaking. From the modernization of India's armed forces and the evolving character of unmanned warfare to the strategic implications of emerging regional alignments. Beyond the conventional understanding of security, however, resilience must also be examined through the strength of the institutions that govern us. Electoral integrity, property rights, educational outcomes and state capacity are not isolated administrative concerns; they are integral to the credibility and durability of the Republic.

The edition further explores India's engagement with the wider world through the questions of cultural heritage, diplomacy and economic stability. Whether it is the preservation of historical sites, the implications of carbon border measures or the persistent pressures of food inflation, these subjects remind us that national strength is built as much through domestic preparedness as through international engagement. A country cannot aspire to exercise meaningful influence abroad without cultivating institutional confidence and societal resilience at home.

I extend my sincere appreciation to our contributors, editorial team and every individual who has invested their time and intellectual effort in bringing this edition to fruition. Their work is a testament to the importance of research and informed public discourse and as always, I hope this edition encourages you, our beloved reader to develop a new perspective.

Happy Reading!


NITI
नीति

# The Vote Must Count: Electoral Roll Reform & the Fight for Electoral Integrity

On 12 October 2026, thousands of protesters led by the INDIA bloc marched through central Delhi towards the Supreme Court under the banner of 'Chalo Delhi – March for Democracy'. Opposition leaders, lawyers, students and civil society groups demanded the removal of Chief Election Commissioner Gyanesh Kumar, an immediate halt to the Special Intensive Revision (SIR) of electoral rolls, and accountability for what they described as large-scale wrongful deletions or "vote chori". But the allegations on such level not only question the integrity of the entire body of Election Commission of India (ECI) but also undermine one of the biggest tools of democracy i.e., electoral rolls of the eligible citizens of India. To understand the issue better let's delve deeper.



The Special Intensive Revision (SIR) is a large-scale exercise conducted by ECI to verify and update electoral rolls through house-to-house verification, enumeration forms and checks against older voter records and it aims to remove duplicate, deceased and ineligible entries while ensuring that all eligible citizens are registered to vote. It involves intensive house-to-house enumeration by Booth Level Officers (BLOs), verification of existing entries, and identification of names that need to be added or removed. In other words, this exercise is meant to verify, authenticate and update the voter's list through certain measures ensuring that all the eligible voters get the right to vote while maintaining the accountability of the ECI; which in itself is self-explanatory on the importance of this process. But the current SIR, launched in phases from mid-2025, has triggered intense controversy. Critics, including opposition parties, civil society groups and some former election officials, have raised several categories of allegations.

Across different draft electoral phases in multiple states of India, approx. 13 crore rolls were removed. These were further categorized as;

1. **Shifted / Relocated Voters (~6.3 Crore)** - Electors who moved permanently to another constituency, city, or state for any purpose and failed to re-register at their current place,

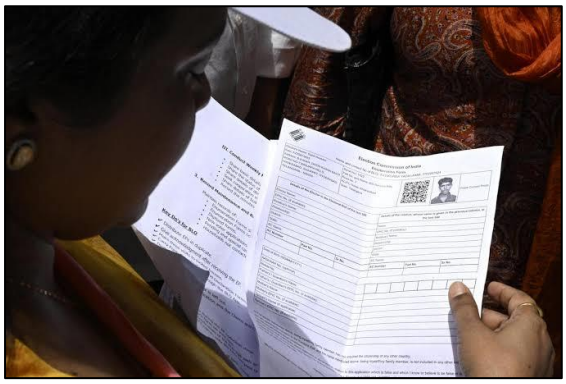
2. **Deceased Voters (~2.8 Crore) -** Individuals whose names remained on the electoral roll after passing away due to unrecorded death updates,

3. **Untraceable / Absent Voters (~3 Crore) -** Electors who could not be verified or located at their registered address during multiple visits by

BLOs during the house-to-house enumeration phase, and

4. **Duplicate / Multiple Entries (~1 Crore) -** Voters registered in more than one constituency or holding duplicate records in the same polling station area.

To put the first problem in perspective, let's consider an example- let’s say a person X has shifted its residence from A to B due to his/her work. Previously his/her electoral roll was registered on place A, but now since the person has shifted to B, he/she has to re-register at his/her current place putting the entire burden of responsibility on the person itself. Here the critics argue that regardless of the migration of people within the country, the overall numbers must balance out featuring more or less the same number of rolls. But as the above stated figures, this has been a major issue of efficiency and mis-implementation by the authorities especially at a rapid pace worsening the situation, as argued by the opposition. On the other hand, the enumeration forms are to be filled out by the people themselves and submitted to the ECI; this also has been pointed out by the critics as problematic due to the unavailability of such forms to migrant workers or newly-wed housewives, etc.



The second major issue is the category of “logical discrepancy.” Unlike earlier SIRs that relied on manual verification by Booth Level Officers, the current process uses automated software that matches present voter data against the 2003 baseline rolls on the basis of family links, age gaps and name consistency. A logical discrepancy is a software-generated red flag when the system detects an apparent biological or historical inconsistency, such as an unusual parent-child age gap or a name mismatch. In practice, most of these flags arise from simple typographical errors or variations in the transliteration of names from local languages into English. In West Bengal, of the 90.82 lakh names removed, roughly 65 lakhs were attributed to deceased, shifted, absent or duplicate voters, while about 27 lakh were declared ineligible after adjudication and 33 lakh were retained as eligible. The fact that over 90% of decided appeals resulted in restoration indicates that many genuine voters were initially excluded due to such automated flags.




But the voices of dissent were not only coming from outside but from inside as well. The ECI consists of 3 officers, a Chief Election Commissioner and 2 Election Commissioners (Dr. Sukhbir Singh Sandhu & Dr. Vivek Joshi) with equal rights and position; but two of the three people in ECI formally objected at least 14 times over a period of 10 months to the decisions taken during the SIR of electoral rolls. Their objections covered:

- Changes to Form 6 (the form for new voter registration), which they described as “unauthorized and illegal”
- Growing centralization of the electoral roll database (ECINet) that restricted the powers of local Electoral Registration Officers

- Decisions related to addition, deletion and restoration of voters
- Mass filing of appeals against judicial decisions restoring voters

For e.g.; In Goa, EROs found 97 voters flagged for "logical discrepancy" to be eligible after examining their documents, yet the software prevented them from reversing the earlier deletions, so the names remained missing from the final roll. In West Bengal, the same software allowed lakhs of appeals against judicial restorations of voters to be filed massively at the click of a button under a single officer's name, without clear authorization. All of these happening with the TWO Election Commissioners in dark implying a 'growing centralization' of the software allegedly under one man.



Congress president Mallikarjun Kharge announced three "non-negotiable" demands: the resignation of CEC Gyanesh Kumar, the cancellation of the SIR exercise, and a return to paper-ballot voting. In a similar vein, Rahul Gandhi mocked the election chief on social media, tweeting: "Gyanesh, it's done, bro. Time to resign." On Tuesday evening, the confrontation escalated when Delhi police detained Rahul Gandhi and several other opposition MPs as they marched towards the Election Commission headquarters to press for Gyanesh Kumar's resignation.




Although the aforementioned irregularities cast a dark cloud over the ECI's conduct and point fingers towards its transparency, resignation of one man will not bring about any objective change in the overall process.

Instead there can be amendments in the selection process of the Chief EC and can be demanded for more transparency. When decision-making power is concentrated like that in the case of growing centralization, the credibility of the entire electoral system suffers; this must be decentralized for local officers to make their own decisions (as seen in Goa) and enable mass appeals at the click of a button.

"Clean rolls" and "voter protection" are not mutually exclusive in the context of electoral integrity. The only long-term solution to safeguard the integrity of the rolls and the legitimacy of India's democratic institutions is through transparent processes, verifiable data, and easily accessible remedies. Each and every eligible vote must be counted and perceived as such.

**Authored By:**
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# Who Owns the Land? Digitization, Property Rights & the Test of State Capacity

Ask a landowner what their plot is worth, and they will tell you about soil, water, and road access. Ask them whether it is truly theirs, and the answer gets more careful. A name in the record, a boundary on a map, and a registered deed do not always point to the same person or the same piece of land. This explains why land sits at the centre of over 66% of court cases in India.

Ask a landowner what their plot is worth, and they will tell you about soil, water, and road access. Ask them whether it is truly theirs, and the answer gets more careful.

The Centre has now approved the Digital India Land Records Modernization Programme (DILRMP) 3.0, a scheme that aims to link maps, registrations, ownership records and court data in one system. Better records would certainly help, but would a, but would a recorded database make ownership more certain, or would it make the old uncertainty more rigid?

**Background: Digital Records, Unfinished Foundations**



For decades, villages kept land records in registers and maps were often worn out or out of date. A sale deed was registered in one office, with the revenue record being updated in another, if at all it was updated. The problem arose when they did not match. This creates uncertainty for owners and prospective buyers.

The National Land Records Modernization Programme began in 2008 and was restructured as DILRMP in 2016. On paper, it actually looked great. As of January 2026, 99.8% of land records have been computerized, and 97.4% of cadastral maps have been digitized, as per the Standing Committee on Rural Development and Panchayati Raj.

However, the reality is broader than what it looks like on paper. Only 76.16% of land parcels have been fully georeferenced (tying the map to real coordinates), while 85.24% of records have achieved integration between ownership information and spatial maps. A survey by Daksh, a research institution, found that about two-thirds of civil cases in district courts relate to land and property. DILRMP 3.0 tries to address this by building a GIS-based *Land Stack* in each state, giving every parcel of land a 14-digit Bhu-Aadhaar (ULPIN), georeferencing cadastral maps, and connecting registration and court data. The aim is to allow different departments to exchange information while retaining state-level control over their respective datasets.

**What Integration Could Change**

Today, a single plot can have three stories: the map, the revenue record, and the registered deed. A ULPIN gives all three one shared label, so a buyer, a bank, or an officer can check them together.




Registration is also meant to trigger the transfer issue, the step where the buyer's name enters the records. Imagine a family buys two acres of land and registers the deed. If the transfer or mutation takes eighteen months, the seller's name stays in the record all that time. The seller could take a loan against the sold land and sell it again. Though hypothetical, it is a kind of problem that linked systems are aiming to eliminate. Until now, registration and transfer have been separate processes, but the Standing Committee links them to avoid delays and mismatches.

Automatic mutation following registration. The committee has also asked for SMS alerts to owners whenever a transfer request is filed against their land, placing a safeguard against the problem. DILRMP 3.0 could reduce the need for citizens to carry the same documents between offices, making property transactions easier to verify and help courts access the documents more quickly.

**Uneven Foundations Across States**

National averages, however, hide a lot. Georeferencing has covered only half of India's villages (3,26,776 of 6,57,397), according to Department of Land Resources figures reported by IMPRI. By contrast, Odisha has computerized over 2 crore land records and prepared maps for all of its villages.

A CAG audit found delays in processing applications to add, delete, and correct land records in Tamil Nadu, even though much of the system was already online. Linking an old textual record to an old map can simply carry an error into a new system. How fast records are digitized does not tell the story of whether those records are right.

**A Record Is Not a Title**

This is a limitation no database can remove. In India, a revenue entry shows who is in possession and who pays the land revenue. It does not prove ownership. In Suraj Bhan v. Financial Commissioner (2007), the Supreme Court held that a revenue entry does not confer title; only a competent civil court can decide that.

Registration matters more, and the Court reaffirmed in Shakeel Ahmed v. Syed Akhlaq Hussain (2023) that unregistered documents cannot transfer property titles. Even so, a registered deed is only presumptive evidence. A buyer still has to trace the chain of earlier owners to stake a true claim. PRS Legislative Research has described land titles in India as presumptive for exactly this reason.



A ULPIN identifies a land parcel, and georeferencing locates it. Neither talks about who has the better claim. If a wrong entry is digitized, the computer simply shows the wrong answer faster and more affirmatively. The solution is for the state to certify ownership and stand behind it. Because land is a state subject, that shift depends on each state's own laws and willingness to act.

**Accountability, Privacy and Inclusion**

Technology brings its own risks. A land stack holds sensitive information about who owns what, and the committee has recommended consent-based Aadhaar and mobile linkage. The Centre for Policy Research has cautioned about state surveillance. It can undermine the digital land schemes. Also, women, Adivasis, and Dalits risk being left out if their claims were never properly recorded. The scheme keeps data ownership with each state in a federal structure, but it also means that state governments would carry the duty of security, correction, and complaint handling.

A citizen who finds a wrong entry needs a clear way to fix it, a deadline, and a way to track their application. The committee has recommended fixed timelines for disposing of mutation and faster computerization of revenue courts. Without any enforceable deadline and an officer answerable for delay, an online portal can become just a faster way of waiting.

**Way Forward**

DILRMP 3.0 is a sensible step because it treats land records as a connected system rather than a collection of separate files. Its success, however, would be judged by accuracy, title, and accountability, not simply by the number of records scanned. Four steps need to be taken: States should complete surveys and correct errors with public verification before records are finalized. Mutation should follow registration automatically in every state with fixed timelines. States should move towards conclusive titling backed by a state guarantee. Grievance redressal, appeals, and data protection need to be written down in rules, not left to goodwill.

Observers should watch how many states reach full georeferencing, how long mutations take in every state, and whether land cases are actually solved. This is how the land records can actually be realized rather than showing a glorifying picture on paper and changing nothing in reality.

DILRMP 3.0 shifts India's fragmented land administration systems to move towards easier verification and better access to records. Yet these outcomes are not guaranteed by technology alone. The real measure of success would be whether citizens can establish and protect their legitimate claims without moving from office to office. This requires accurate surveys, coordination between departments, and grievance redressal.

India should treat this effort at digitizing land governance as a reform of public administration, not simply as an information-technology project. One question, at the end, remains open: When a certified record turns out to be wrong, who bears the loss: the citizen, or the state that issued it? Till that is answered, citizens would wait on their judgment to affirm the reforms as any success.

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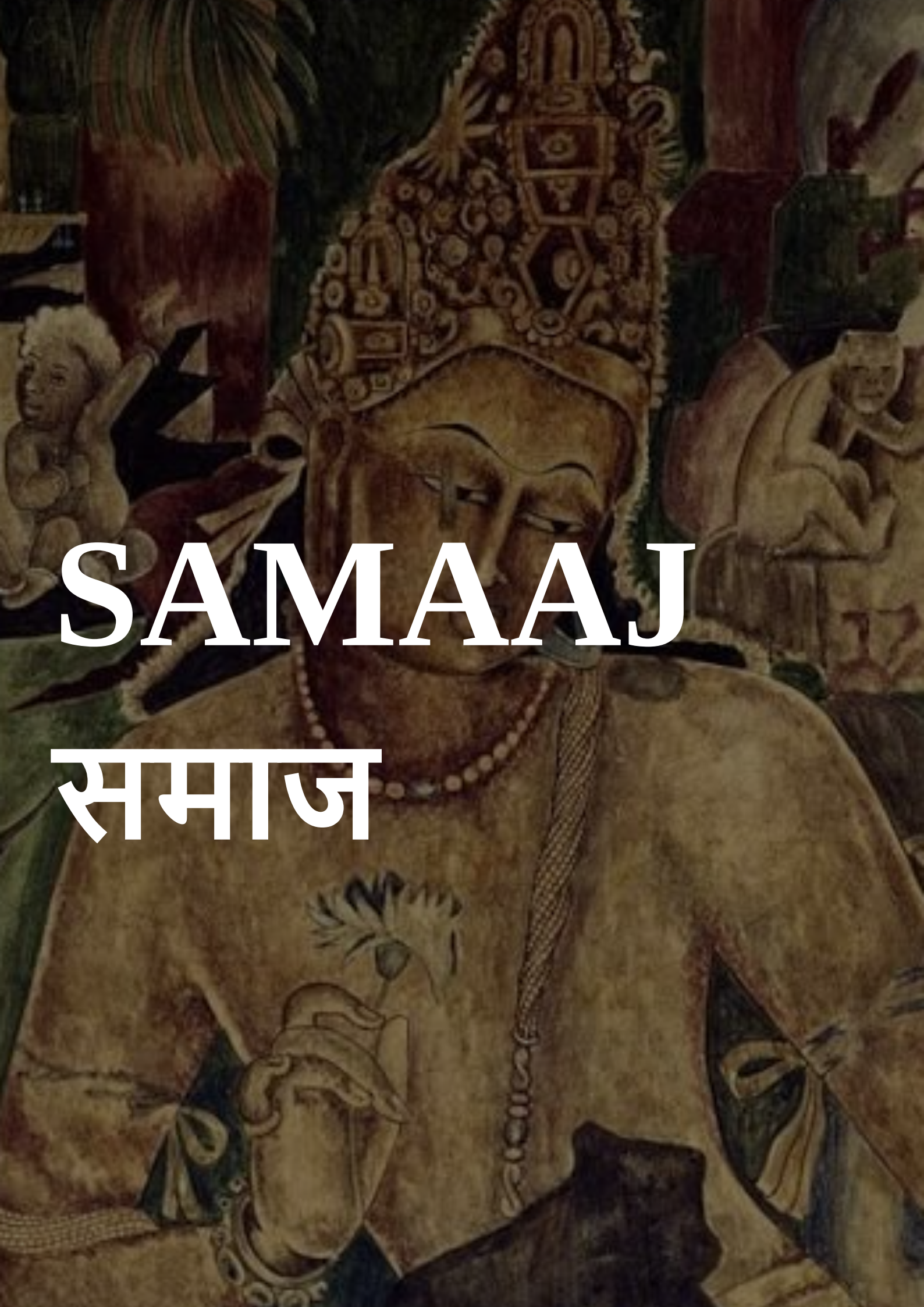

# SAMAAJ

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# Beyond Enrolment, Towards Learning: *Is India's School System Delivering for Its Children?*

Picture a child whose name shows up on every attendance sheet, who completes every assignment the teachers give and is promoted every April; now give her the reading material meant for Class 2 students and ask her to read. She hesitates right after the first line and is barely able to grasp the information given in the paragraph.

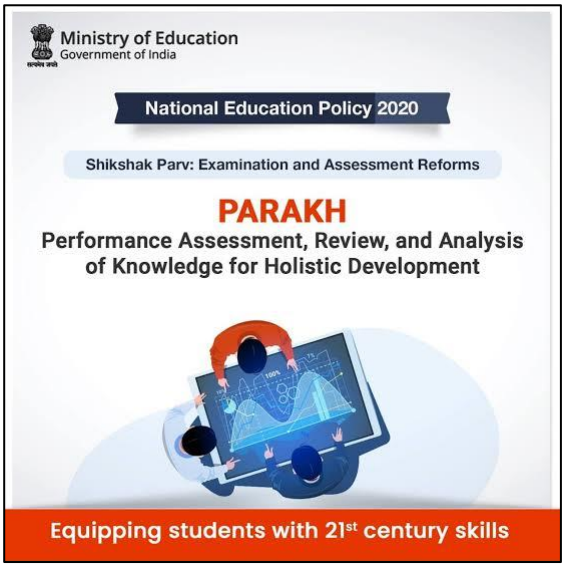
The school completed its administrative work by keeping a record of her name and essentials, but did it deliver what was promised to that child?

Today, this difficult question sits at the centre of India's ongoing discussion about education. For many years, the yardstick against which we evaluated the success of our education system was based on the number of individuals entering through the gates of educational institutions. And in this regard, the country has made considerable progress. However, the battle that lies ahead for India is not access to these institutions but the quality of education provided within those four walls.

**What the numbers say**

In 2024, 649,491 children were surveyed across 605 rural districts for the Annual Status of Education Report (ASER). It was found that 48.8 % of Class 5 students could read a Class 2 text, up from 42.8 % in 2022. That is a real recovery from the pandemic slump. It also means roughly half of Class 5 students cannot read at that level. In Class 3, only 27.1 % could, and just 30.7 % of Class 5 students could solve a division problem.

The government's own survey is, if anything, more optimistic, though hardly cheering. PARAKH Rashtriya Sarvekshan 2024, which tested over 21 lakh children in Classes 3, 6 and 9, found 57% proficiency in language and 65% in maths in Class 3. The reason for the discrepancy with ASER lies in the difference in methodology: the latter asks the child to read out loud to the surveyor, while PARAKH uses multiple-choice questions on paper.




But the more intriguing finding is how scores fall as children climb the grades. Maths averages 60% in Class 3, 46% in Class 6 and just 37% in Class 9. The same survey also found that only 53% of Class 6 students know their tables up to 10.

Within this average too, there is a huge difference based on the kind of school attended. State government schools in states like Maharashtra, Punjab, Tamil Nadu and UP recorded better results than private schools in class 3. Meanwhile, the reverse was true in Assam, Bihar, Odisha and Haryana.

**Why is the learning gap growing?**

The issue with learning outcomes is that they are like loans. When the borrower is unable to pay the instalment, the principal grows. If a child was unable to acquire reading skills in Class 2, he will be faced with a larger problem in Class 4 when he is unable to process the curriculum due to the increased difficulty. As a result, he begins to rote learn a lot of information and eventually loses interest in learning.

The issue with learning outcomes is that they are like loans. When the borrower is unable to pay the instalment, the principal grows.

Another challenge is that in a classroom, children come from different socio-economic backgrounds that have had varying exposure to pre-school education. Yet all are expected to achieve the same outcome as if they shared the same starting point.



Teachers are the linchpin of the education system, and it would be wrong to blame them for the failings of the system, as they are the least that reform can address. At the foundation stage, India's pupil-teacher ratio is 10:1, and it has more than a crore teachers across all stages. Meanwhile, the reality is that approximately 1.01 lakh schools continue to function with a single teacher teaching multiple classes (UDISE+ 2025-26). Moreover, teachers are overburdened with administrative tasks, are poorly trained and inadequately supported, which gives rise to rigid learning practices and rote learning.

Inequality is a deciding factor too. Children of wealthy parents receive parental support, easy access to books and a proper study environment. Families that can afford it go the extra mile to enroll their kids on private tuition. Reports show that 27% of students are enrolled in such additional classes, including 30.7% and 25.5% in urban and rural areas, respectively. This has the effect of a 'shadow private' school that is only accessible to the affluent.

**A policy that has the right idea**

India has a significant advantage over many nations in one respect: it has acknowledged the problem. The National Education Policy 2020 identifies foundational literacy and numeracy as a mission. This goal has been given a time frame of 2026-27 by the NIPUN Bharat Mission for achieving universal foundational literacy and numeracy in Class 3. With the deadline approaching, a parliamentary panel headed by Digvijaya Singh has recommended that the mission be extended to 2032.

**What works**

At the same time, the trials identified the main reason for the failure of the approach in states like Bihar and Uttarakhand: insufficient buy-in from the system.

Pratham's Teaching at the Right Level (TaRL) groups children according to their ability, rather than their age, and fills gaps in learning through targeted interventions. Randomized control trials by J-PAL have shown that it helped students in Gujarat, Maharashtra, Uttar Pradesh, and Haryana, with learning levels improved by up to 0.70 standard deviations in Uttar Pradesh. At the same time, the trials identified the main reason for the failure of the approach in

states like Bihar and Uttarakhand: insufficient buy-in from the system.




There is an example to be drawn from Brazil's Sobral, a city of approximately 200,000 people that ranked 1,366th in the country in education in 2005. By 2017, it had ranked first in the country. The principles were simple: specific targets for literacy rates, frequent and systematic assessments that informed teaching strategies, materials designed on the basis of these assessments, and financial incentives for achieving targets. It is a lesson in perseverance and political will that India can benefit from.

**What needs to change**

Foundational literacy and numeracy need to be prioritized at all levels, and not just as a one-year campaign. There needs to be scope for regular diagnostics and appropriate remediation, without the child feeling 'held back'. Teacher training should take centre stage, with mentoring and teaching support provided at every level and administrative responsibilities lightened. Exams should be designed to encourage higher-order thinking skills. At the school administration level, officials must be given access to data and the freedom to intervene when necessary.

**Looking before leaping**

It is not enough to think about today's child. The adolescents of today who were unable to acquire foundational literacy and numeracy need to be prioritized as well. Only 51.9% of children who enter class 1 reach class 12, making it glaringly evident that the onus should shift to the school to create age-appropriate catch-up programs, so that the adolescent does not continue to be a child forever.

**What the Classroom is for**



A school is not a waiting room. It is the only institution that can give a country a fair chance to educate its citizenry, to prepare them for the job interview where they need to think faster, the contract that they have to understand before signing, the medicine that they have to be able to read in order to take. A child who exits the education system with a certificate and no skills has not been educated; she has been certified, and she may discover the difference when she is 22, a decade late to fix the issue.

That is why enrollment is not a particularly interesting metric. It speaks to the number of children who have been admitted to the system, not the number that have exited it equipped to climb out of the circumstances they were born into. India has the former; now it needs the latter.

**Authored By:**
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# From Forgotten Sites to Global Recognition: *Can India Turn Heritage into Cultural Power?*

**A Personal Anecdote**

There is a weird paradox I encountered recently during my visit to Amritsar. Collectively, as a people, Indians tend to be incredibly proud of their history and yet, seem equally ignorant of the same. While visiting the historic city, I made it my mind to see and document as much as I could and thus, identified every historical site, apart from the ever-divine Golden Temple that eclipses everything around it, that was close enough to visit in my limited timeframe. Long had been the tales of exploits at Rambagh, the summer palace of the Legendary Maharaja Ranjit Singh of the erstwhile Sikh Empire and I ached to visit it.



Boarding a rickshaw almost all Indian cities now seem to be crawling with, I was failed not just by the cluelessness of the driver who was supposed to take me there, but also Google Maps which failed to correctly guide me to the monument. It took more than an hour to track it down, every local around seemed equally confused and sharing pictures available on the internet got conflicting answers. Thankfully, we chanced upon an aged elder who provided the directions towards a desolate ruin home to sheds shabbily put up by construction workers who seemed to be restoring the place.

The occasional pair of bride & groom walked by aiming to conduct photoshoots in fashion evocative of the lost imperial age the ruin stood for and the core monument itself, alongside the beautiful museum, was completely empty, devoid of any visitors. The Walls seemed excited to speak, to tell tales of the man who once dwelt here, if only, they had more ears to listen.

**A Milestone for Others Forgotten**

In September of 2026, India announced the inclusion of five heritage sites and proposals in UNESCO's Tentative List, bringing the country's grand total to 78. The additions included the Caves of Bagh & Udaigiri, Temples from the Chambal Valley, the Fortress of Ginnorgarh and an interesting proposal seeking classification for transnational Sites of Satyagraha, showcasing the remarkable diversity of India's historical and cultural landscape, spanning ancient rock-cut architecture, religious traditions, temple heritage,

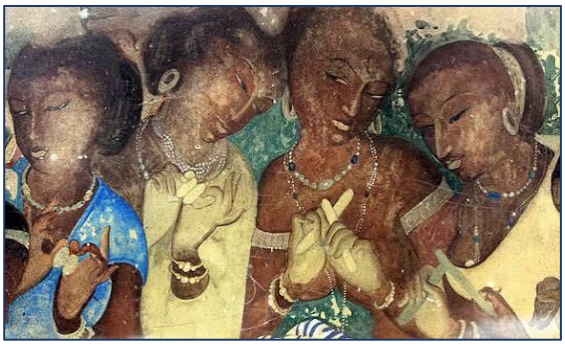
medieval fortifications and the legacy of non-violent resistance. While their inclusion marks an important step towards international recognition of India's cultural heritage, it is essential to distinguish recognition from preservation: a place on the Tentative List does not guarantee conservation, and its historical significance must be matched by sustained protection, restoration and responsible heritage management. Thus, we arrive at our principle question:

*Does India possess the institutional capacity to not just preserve its expanding heritage portfolio but also to bolster it into an instrument of power?*

Before proceeding, we must address the elephant in the room. What exactly does this move achieve? Simply put, Inclusion in UNESCO's Tentative List is but an initial step towards potential World Heritage recognition, and thus, is not formal inscription. To qualify, a site must demonstrate what is seen as Outstanding Universal Value (OUV); i.e. possessing a cultural or natural significance of exceptional importance to humanity as a whole. UNESCO assesses all such nominations against ten selection criteria: six cultural, covering human creativity, architectural traditions, cultural exchange, historical associations and living traditions, and four natural, addressing exceptional natural phenomena, geological processes, ecological significance and biodiversity. Cultural properties must also demonstrate authenticity, meaning their heritage values are credibly expressed through their historical attributes, and integrity, referring to their overall completeness and the adequacy of their protection.

Once a State Party places sites on its Tentative List, they must prepare and submit a detailed nomination dossier which is evaluated in turn either by the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS) if it is a cultural site, or the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) for natural sites. The final decision remains with the UNESCO World Heritage Committee which either provides or denies inscription. This means that India's September 2026 additions represent an opportunity for further research, documentation, conservation planning and institutional preparation, rather than a guarantee of international recognition. Ultimately, inscription depends not merely on the undeniable historical significance but on the ability to actually demonstrate OUV successfully.

## Five Sites, Five Historical Narratives



Like millions of my fellow citizens, this was the first time I myself had ever heard of these sites. Questions raced in my mind about what these five sites represent and seeking to answer them, I discovered five distinct historical narratives:

1. **Bagh:** The Buddhists of ancient India had an affinity for rock-cut architecture, leaving behind these caves in Madhya Pradesh, dotted with mural paintings, which talk of forgotten hands with artistic excellence to surpass names we celebrate today, glimpses of patronage & cultural traditions that survive in one form or another, to this very day.
2. **Udaigiri:** Dating to the period we celebrate as "The Golden Age" of our civilization, these caves offer important insights into the evolution

of religious architecture sanctioned by the distant Gupta Dynasty 1,700 years ago, particularly through the celebrated Varaha sculpture depicting the Vishnu Incarnate Boar who rescued Mother Earth from the Cosmic Ocean. A place rife with religious symbolism, royal patronage and political authority.

3. **Chambal Valley Temple Group:** Comprised of the shrines of Bateshwar, Padavali and Kakarmath, this group is a testament to not just the glory of the Gurjara-Pratihara & Kachchhapaghata Dynasties of the 8th and 11th centuries, but also to sharpness of the swords of marauding invaders, the fury of nature and, surprisingly, to Bandits & Dacoits who inadvertently kept away antique smugglers, vandals and those who would desecrate the hallowed ruins marked with neglect.
4. **Ginnorgarh Fort:** Associated with the Gond kingdoms, Ginnorgarh reflected the political, military and architectural history of central India's regional powers. Its defensive structures are proof of the strategic wisdom of indigenous kingdoms often left out of conventional historical narratives. The plants there grow healthy, nourished by the blood of those who fell victim to political intrigue within its walls.
5. **Sites of Satyagraha:** In stark contrast to the previous monument, this unprecedented transnational heritage proposal connects India and South Africa through places associated with Mahatma Gandhi's political evolution and the development of Satyagraha as a legitimate political doctrine in defiance of colonial tyranny.

**The Institutional Challenge: Can India Protect Its Heritage?**

The Archaeological Survey of India (ASI), functioning under the Ministry of Culture, bears the principal responsibility for the conservation, preservation and maintenance of India's centrally protected monuments and archaeological sites. Its mandate extends across more than 3,600 centrally protected monuments, encompassing temples, forts, caves, inscriptions, historic buildings and archaeological remains spread across the country, a mandate it takes very seriously. Harken back to the Temples of Chambal, many know of Nirbhay Singh Gujjar, the bandit made famous in the Valley's Volksgeist as a "Baaghi", fewer know that a Superintending Archaeologist, K.K. Muhammed, called him out to his face for smoking in the dilapidated temple and, unbelievably managed to convince dozens of other dacoits to actively assist and restore the monument.



The enormous geographical and historical diversity of India makes conservation a complex institutional undertaking, requiring not merely structural repairs but specialized expertise in archaeology, architectural history, material science, chemical preservation and environmental management. The challenge is particularly pronounced at sites such as the Bagh Caves, where fragile mural pigments require intricate conservation techniques. Consequently, the effectiveness of ASI's mandate depends not simply on the number of monuments under its protection, but on its ability to distribute technical personnel, funding and conservation infrastructure

according to the specific requirements of individual sites.



Naturally, managing this, places considerable demands on its administrative, financial and technical capacity. Against a budget that averages between ₹1,000 to 1,200 Crore, Conservation expenditure has also fluctuated: official figures record allocations of ₹392.71 crore in 2022-23, ₹443.53 crore in 2023-24 and ₹313.43 crore in 2024-25. Although these figures indicate substantial public investment, the distribution of resources remains an important concern, particularly where sites require specialized interventions rather than routine structural maintenance. An important institutional instrument in this regard is the National Mission on Monuments and Antiquities (NMMA), which was first launched in 2007 to create comprehensive inventories of India's built heritage, archaeological sites and antiquities.

Such documentation is essential for establishing the historical significance, physical condition, ownership, location and conservation requirements of heritage assets, enabling informed prioritisation and long-term monitoring. However, significant enforcement challenges persist. A 2023 Parliamentary Standing Committee report identified encroachments at 531 centrally protected monuments, noting that only nine had been cleared since 2015; a subsequent parliamentary disclosure in March 2026 reported 36,083 instances of illegal construction within prohibited and regulated areas surrounding protected monuments.

These figures expose the limitations of existing enforcement mechanisms, particularly the dependence on coordination between ASI, district administrations, police authorities and state governments. Moreover, the Comptroller and Auditor General's 2025 audit highlighted shortcomings in staffing, documentation and implementation of conservation plans, including instances where approved annual conservation programmes were not executed as planned. While ASI possesses specialised branches and regional circles, its existing institutional arrangements require stronger technical capacity, better resource distribution, updated archaeological inventories and more effective enforcement.

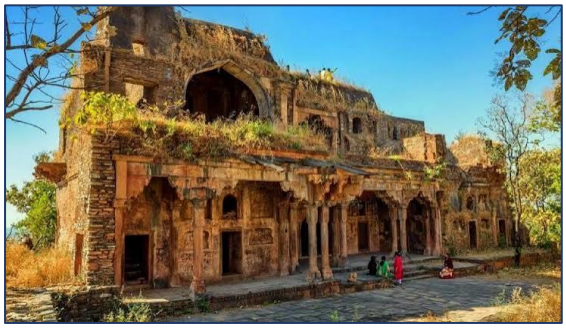
## Beyond Physical Preservation: Documentation and Scholarship

As a consequence of human expanse and its psyche as a species, effective heritage conservation must therefore extend beyond the physical preservation of monuments to encompass systematic archaeological surveys, epigraphic studies, architectural documentation and the digitization of historical records. Comprehensive documentation of inscriptions, sculptures, structural features and archaeological remains is essential to reconstructing and in turn, sharing the past with the coming generations.



Emerging technologies such as three-dimensional (3D) mapping, Geographic Information Systems (GIS), photogrammetry and digital archiving have also facilitated precise structural assessments, spatial documentation and long-term monitoring, while scientific conservation techniques, including material analysis, pigment preservation and non-invasive archaeological investigation, is slowly minimizing damage to heritage which was once excavated using TNT detonations in a bygone era. Achieving and successfully implementing this at every level requires stronger research partnerships between the ASI and universities, enabling historians, archaeologists, architects, chemists and conservation specialists to undertake interdisciplinary studies and develop site-specific preservation strategies. Equally important is the translation of inscriptions and historical manuscripts, the creation of accessible digitized archives, the strengthening of museum collections and the publication of credible historical research for wider public engagement. Perhaps one day, wishfully in our time, will we be able to understand what those from the Indus Valley meant to say.

## The Paradox: Preservation, Commercialization & Acknowledgement



UNESCO recognition significantly enhances a heritage site's international visibility, attracting tourism, private investment and opportunities for local employment through hospitality, transport, handicrafts, guided tours and cultural enterprises. This is not mere conjecture mind you; it is a fact backed by data. A global econometric study analyzing World Bank and UNESCO data found that each additional UNESCO site a country gains is associated with an average increase of 2.03 million international tourist arrivals. A panel data analysis focused on 27 European Union nations revealed that the UNESCO brand significantly influences travel choices, with each new inscription leading to a 0.22% overall rise in national tourist numbers and in a systematic review of economic, social, and governance dimensions, it was revealed that in developing countries, the designation functions as a strong quality signal, boosting visitor numbers by 6.7% to 10% during peak national holiday periods.

However, increased visitor numbers, if inadequately regulated, can place considerable pressure on fragile monuments through overcrowding, structural deterioration, commercialization, waste generation and environmental degradation. These concerns make visitor-capacity assessments, regulated access, designated tourism zones and scientifically informed site-management plans essential components of heritage conservation.

Equally important is the participation of local communities, whose involvement in heritage management, traditional craftsmanship, guided tourism and livelihood generation can transform conservation from an exclusively institutional responsibility into a shared social commitment. Local residents must be recognized as stakeholders and custodians of their cultural heritage rather than passive beneficiaries of tourism revenue. Ultimately, UNESCO recognition should generate a sustainable relationship between heritage, tourism and economic development, in which commercial activity

remains subordinate to the preservation of historical and cultural value. Tourism must serve conservation, not become the very force that undermines it.

## Heritage as Cultural Diplomacy and Soft Power

India's heritage constitutes an important instrument of international cultural influence, enabling the country to communicate its civilizational history, intellectual traditions and cultural contributions beyond its geographical boundaries owing to the religious significance of dozens of such sites to some of the world's largest religions. UNESCO recognition will indeed strengthen this influence by creating endless opportunities for international museum collaborations, travelling exhibitions, scholarly exchanges, archaeological research and institutional partnerships that introduce India's historical legacy to wider audiences. Something that the India has already been building towards, evidenced by the total budget allocation for India's Ministry of Culture, which oversees national museums, heritage infrastructure, and cultural schemes, surging from ₹865.27 crore in FY 2005-06, ₹2,500 crore in FY 2015-16 to ₹3,360.96 crore for FY 2025-26.



The proposed Sites of Satyagraha offer a particularly significant example of transnational cultural diplomacy, connecting India and South Africa through Mahatma Gandhi's political evolution and the development of non-violent resistance as an international political philosophy. Such initiatives can transform shared historical experiences into platforms for academic cooperation and diplomatic engagement. The Indian diaspora, composed of roughly 13 million NRIs and 18 million PIOs, forms an irreplaceable human pipeline driving remittances, tech networks, and international trade that remains tethered to the mainland owing to connections beyond the family. Beyond our kin, India maintains valid, active Cultural Exchange Programmes (CEPs) with 98 countries, setting up a framework for joint museum, heritage, and performing arts projects across continents.

## Conclusion: Recognition Must Translate into Responsibility

India's heritage is far more than a collection of historic monuments; it is an enduring archive of the country's artistic achievements, intellectual traditions and political history. While UNESCO recognition provides international visibility and affirms cultural significance, meaningful preservation demands sustained institutional commitment, adequate funding, scientific conservation and community participation. Ultimately, India's cultural standing must not be measured merely by the number of UNESCO designations it secures, but by the quality of the heritage it protects, the historical knowledge it preserves and the legacy it safeguards for future generations.

Beyond the halls of Ministries, there is also the need for collective push towards recognition. For how long can policy survive if not supported by those it aims to govern? In the end, all I would like to say is that it is but my earnest hope, albeit a bit sheepish, that may I never chance upon an empty museum ever again.

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ARTHA
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# From Green Diplomacy to Data: India's Carbon Border Race

**Why this matters now**

Europe's move to put a carbon cost on imports is becoming a practical test for Indian industry. The European Union's Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM) entered its definitive phase on 1st January 2026, making production emissions relevant to the cost of covered exports. The stakes are significant for India: NITI Aayog's Trade Watch Quarterly reports that the EU received 39.3% of India's iron and steel exports and 15.6% of its aluminum exports in 2025, although these shares do not show how much trade CBAM covers or what firms will owe. With the first annual declaration and certificate surrender due on 30th September 2027, preparation cannot wait. India must seek fairer treatment while helping firms build reliable emissions records.

India needs to push for fairer rules while preparing its industry to meet them.

**When missing data raises the bill**

CBAM seeks to prevent carbon leakage, where production shifts abroad or carbon-intensive imports replace European goods because carbon constraints differ. The authorized CBAM declarant, usually the EU importer or its indirect customs representative, must surrender certificates whose price is linked to the EU Emissions Trading System (ETS). The calculation also takes account of remaining free allowances and eligible carbon prices paid abroad. Under the Commission's definitive-period guidance, using actual emissions figures requires verified producer data. The rules also allow prescribed default values instead.

Using defaults can be costly for a producer whose actual emissions are lower. The EU's default-value rules use country-specific product averages with conservative mark-ups. Where reliable country data are unavailable, the fallback draws on the ten highest-emission exporting countries with reliable data. For steel and aluminum, the mark-ups are 10% in 2026, 20% in 2027 and 30% from 2028. These are additions to default emissions values, not tariff rates on export prices. A cleaner plant can therefore lose the benefit of its lower emissions if it cannot document them.

Firms that want their actual emissions used in the calculation therefore need verified data. A buyer could ask for a lower price to absorb certificate costs, or favor suppliers whose verified figures mean a smaller bill. What happens will still depend on demand and bargaining power. Lost orders and competitive gains are both possibilities, not certainties. For covered steel and aluminum products, current rules count direct emissions; cleaner electricity alone does not automatically reduce the declared emissions for these goods.

**India's uneven capacity to respond**

India's steel producers do not all work in the same way. As the Ministry of Steel's structural account explains, large integrated plants using blast furnaces and basic oxygen furnaces coexist with a dispersed secondary sector of sponge-iron producers, electric arc and induction furnaces, and rolling mills. These categories overlap: large companies also use electric furnaces, while electric-furnace producers may use coal-based direct reduced iron, or sponge iron. Furnace type alone tells us neither how large a firm is nor how well it performs on emissions.

This mix of producers makes records from individual suppliers important. A downstream engineering exporter selling covered goods may need information from several upstream producers, and a missing record can prevent it from using actual emissions figures. Smaller firms with limited technical staff and lower export volumes may face higher verification costs relative to sales than integrated producers. That risk needs attention, but it does not mean every small producer is disadvantaged.

Industry associations should offer shared technical services and standard supplier-data templates. Government should assess verifier availability, fees and waiting times, while exporters and their European buyers agree who will provide which data. Funding should help firms cut emissions in ways recognized by the calculation method for their products, alongside improving measurement systems. The aim should be to help firms build their skills and systems, rather than permanently subsidize their compliance bills.

**The carbon market gap and India's choice**

India's domestic carbon market raises a further question for negotiations. The Bureau of Energy Efficiency's Carbon Credit Trading Scheme (CCTS) uses an intensity-based baseline-and-credit mechanism: regulated entities face targets for emissions per unit of output, earn credits by reducing intensity below target, and surrender certificates for shortfalls. By contrast, the EU ETS caps total covered emissions and requires allowances against emissions released. Comparing certificate prices alone therefore does not show whether firms face equivalent carbon costs. A firm performing better than its Indian intensity target may earn credits while still producing goods with emissions relevant to CBAM. A firm that misses its target may buy certificates, but those purchases do not automatically count as a deductible payment for every exported product. EU recognition requires evidence of the eligible carbon price effectively paid for the declared embedded emissions, after accounting for rebates or compensation. The difference between the two systems makes it harder to link payments to particular products. It does not mean CCTS payments are automatically excluded.

Negotiations should clarify how firms can link qualifying payments to products and provide the evidence needed. This does not mean all spending on domestic climate policy is deductible. India's system must also give producers clear records of their obligations and what they have paid. That would give both sides something more specific to work with than a general request for recognition, and help firms weigh investments against their likely carbon costs.

India needs to push for fairer rules while preparing its industry to meet them. New Delhi should contest discriminatory provisions through WTO and other multilateral channels while supporting workable compliance at home. International engagement should seek rules that recognize credible domestic action, and industrial policy should equip producers to demonstrate it. The two efforts should reinforce each other. India's challenge will be stronger with evidence of the barriers firms face, while practical preparation will keep their options open as negotiations continue

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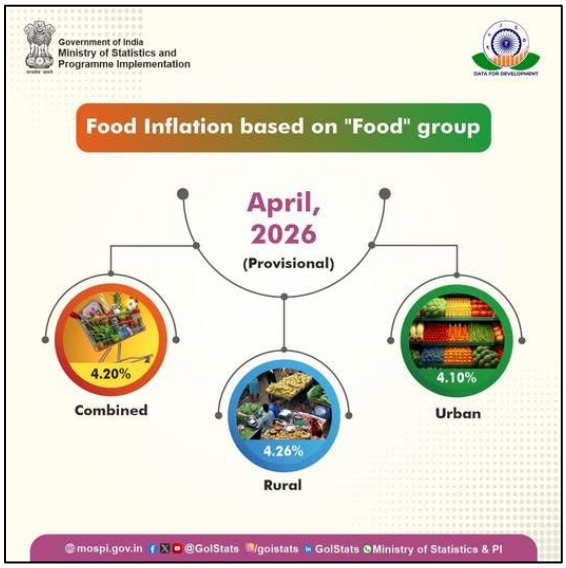
# The Price of Everyday Life: *Can India Rein in Food Inflation?*

India's retail inflation rose to 5.54% in September 2026 from 4.83% in August according to the MoSPI data released on 12 October. Food inflation rose to 7.74%. The rise followed a weak monsoon and then sharp jumps in onion and sugar prices and a year in which many farmers were paid too little to plant or store.




Last September, a kilogram of onion retailed at Rs 27.4. This September it retailed at Rs 52.8, the highest monthly average since November 2024. Over the same months, India's GDP grew 7.8% in April to June above the RBI's own projection and while both the facts are true together, only the second one bothers a citizen at the vegetable stall.

The 7.74% figure is the Consumer Food Price Index. The food and beverages division of the headline CPI is a separate measure. It carries a 36.75% weight in the new 2024-base series, rose 7.36% and contributed 2.71 percentage points; about half of the 5.54% headline. The old series gave food 45.86%. The weight matters for context: the same food shock now moves the headline less than it once did and it still supplies half of it.

Rural inflation rose from 5.24% to 6.08%, while urban inflation rose from 4.31% to 4.88%. Headline inflation has stayed above the RBI's 4% midpoint for four consecutive months.

A low base explains part of the jump. Food inflation was -3.91% in November 2025, and headline inflation in October 2025 was 0.25%, the lowest reading in the current series (after a GST reduction). The base explains part of the size but not the direction. The RBI's review found price increases across meat, eggs, sugar and spices with double-digit inflation in each. About 37% of the CPI basket now shows inflation above 4%.

**The Commodities Behind the Rise**



*Onion.* The RBI puts the rise at about 85% between end-June and end-September sharper than the usual seasonal pick-up. The cause began a year earlier. Prices

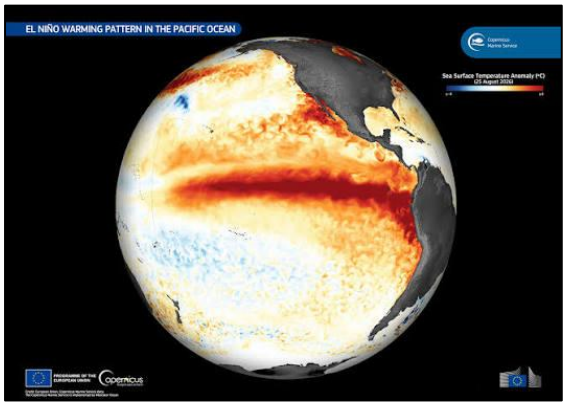
stayed low for two to three years, some farmers could not recover their costs and many cut back or stopped storing. The cost of producing and delivering a kilogram has risen from about Rs 10 to at least Rs 12.5. Output was 30.74 million tonnes in 2025-26 against 30.77 million tonnes the year before. The harvest held. What changed was how much stock farmers kept after last year's crash.

*Sugar.* Prices rose about 34% from early July to Rs 64 per kg by end-August. The RBI attributes this to a tight demand-supply balance and precautionary stocking by intermediaries. The government now estimates production at 30.6 million tonnes, 11% below the initial 34.3 million, citing disease and waterlogging.

*Rice and edible oils.* Rice retailed at Rs 46.1 per kg, 7.7% above last year even though production rose 2.6% and central stocks rose 3.1%. All five edible oils were at their highest September price since 2019. India meets only 44% of its edible oil demand and spends over $20 billion a year on imports.

*Pulses.* Top producing states received up to 30% less rain than average this monsoon, and the government is considering lower import duties on lentils and yellow peas.

**Weather and Water**




The monsoon is ending with a 13% deficit, the fourth lowest rainfall since the turn of the century. The IMD confirmed El Niño on 12 June. Food inflation in El Niño years has historically run about 170 basis points higher than in normal monsoon years.

The damage has not yet shown fully in sowing. Kharif sowing lagged last year's level by only 1.5% in late August despite the 13% deficit. The risk now moves to the rabi crop. The Central Water Commission's 15 October bulletin put 178 reservoirs at 68.58% of usable storage. On 24 September, storage stood at 70% against a ten-year average of 76.62%. The southern region was the weakest, at about 50% of capacity. A strong El Niño could also bring a shorter, warmer winter that hurts wheat, mustard, pulses, potato, onion, garlic and spices.

**Where Storage and Transport Fail**



India stores grain far better than it stores vegetables. Cold-storage capacity was 40.22 million tonnes across 8,815 facilities in June 2025. About three-quarters of it is used for potatoes, and more than half sits in Uttar Pradesh and West Bengal. Between 2015 and 2025 capacity grew about 26% while horticultural output grew about 32%. Central-pool food grain storage, at 91.78 million tonnes is more than twice the cold-storage capacity. Only about 4% of perishables move through organized cold chains. A NABCONS study estimated losses of 11.97 million tonnes of vegetables

worth Rs 27,459 crore. A WRI study of three Madhya Pradesh districts found about 15% of tomatoes were lost at the farm and 12% at retail.

The farmer sees little of the final price. An RBI working paper from 2024 estimated that farmers receive about a third of the consumer price for tomato, onion and potato. The share is about 75% for chana, 70% for moong and 65% for tur.

Transport adds fuel risk. The president of the All India Motor Transport Congress says diesel is 40% to 45% of a truck's operating cost and small operators make up over 70% of the sector. After four fuel price hikes in 11 days earlier this year, freight rates on major routes rose 10% to 15%. Brent crude neared $110 on 20 October (its highest in nearly five months) though pump prices at public-sector retailers were unchanged that day.

**What the Government Has Done**

*Onion.* The government procured 121,000 tonnes for the buffer against a 200,000 tonne target and began releasing at Rs 35 per kg. A Pune trader said the buffer "has not made much difference in our market." The buffer procurement price was raised 13% to Rs 2,125 per quintal from 4 July. That is Rs 21.25 per kg against a retail price of Rs 52.8.

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*Sugar.* Measures include a 400-tonne dealer stock limit, a 15-day consumption cap for bulk buyers, duty-free import of 1 million tonnes of raw sugar, and an earlier crushing start of 15 October. The RBI records that these helped ease pressure, and prices retreated gradually in September. A retired Maharashtra sugar commissioner expects speculation to return after January and says imports of 2 to 3 million tonnes may be needed next year.

*Edible oils.* On 24 September the government cut the duty on crude sunflower oil to zero and on crude soybean and palm oil to 5%.

*Grain.* This is the one area of comfort. The central pool held 925.85 lakh tonnes of wheat and rice on 1 July against a norm of 411.20 lakh tonnes, and September stocks were still about 2.8 times the 1 October norm. The grain buffer is large and it does nothing for onion, sugar or vegetable prices.

On 7 October the MPC raised the repo rate by 25 basis points to 5.50% and shifted its stance from neutral to calibrated tightening. It raised its FY27 inflation projection to 5.2%. It was the first increase since February 2023. The RBI projects third-quarter inflation at 6.0%, the upper limit of its tolerance band.

The RBI's own reasoning shows the limits of the tool. It found some evidence of higher inflation expectations but only limited signs that supply shocks are entering firms' pricing. A rate hike

restrains demand and guards' expectations but, in any case, does not refill a reservoir or restock an onion warehouse. The pain is not near its end: SBI Research expects inflation above 6.5% in October and November, easing below 6% in early 2027, and ICRA expects food and beverage inflation to cross 8% in October.

The onion shows both failure modes in two consecutive years. Low prices drove farmers out in 2025 and high prices hit consumers in 2026. The following proposals are arguments built on the evidence above.

1. **Buy when prices fall, release when they rise.** An agricultural researcher says NAFED bought and stored onions last year and released them as farmers' stocks ran down which kept prices stable. The 121,000-tonne shortfall this year shows what happens when that discipline slips.
2. **Publish the triggers.** Every response above came after prices had already moved: stock limits, duty cuts, import permissions. Pre-announced thresholds for buffer release, import duties and stock limits would let farmers and traders plan, instead of guessing which curb comes next.
3. **Build the first mile.** The industry report's targets include about 48 million tonnes of cold storage, 125,000 pack-houses, 400,000 reefer vehicles and 14,000 ripening chambers. Spending should favor pack-houses and onion, tomato and vegetable storage outside the two potato states.
4. **Shorten the chain.** The RBI paper points to marketing reforms, storage, processing capacity and climate-resistant varieties as the routes to a larger farmer share.
5. **Grow what we import.** With oils at 44% self-sufficiency and pulses dependent on imports, even tariff choices carry planting signals: the government is weighing keeping the chickpea duty to encourage a larger sowing area.



India does not lack grain. The central pool sits at nearly three times its norm. What India lacks is the ability to carry an onion, a tomato or a potato from a good month to a bad one without losing it or pricing it out of reach. Until storage, transport and market access improve, each poor monsoon will bring the same duty cuts and stock limits, and households will pay for them at the stall. So far, the Republic's stomach endures, it just needs far more to prosper.

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SHAKTI
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# Beyond the Contract: *Is India's Defence Modernization Delivering Combat Readiness?*

On 8th September 2026, the Defence Acquisition Council (DAC), chaired by India's Defence Minister, sanctioned capital acquisition proposals worth ₹1.10 lakh crore, representing a significant milestone in national security history.



As reported by the PIB, the Acceptance of Necessity (AoN) encompasses major acquisitions across the three-armed services. Indian Army Procured Chemical, Biological, Radiological and Nuclear (CBRN) Recce Vehicles, High Mobility Vehicles (HMV), Self-Propelled Mechanical Mine Layers (MML), Advanced Light Helicopters (AHLs), Trawl Tanks, and the Sarvatra Bridge system.

Acquisition of Arudhra Radars and Marine Gas Turbines, alongside designated design and development initiatives, was done for the Indian Navy. Indian Air Force accorded the procurement of Ground-based multi-purpose jammers (GBMPJ) and implementation of the Defence Forces Secure Access Card (DEFSAC) system. These acquisitions are designed to reinforce multiple facets of India's national security architecture by addressing critical operational requirements across domains. Chemical, Biological, Radiological, and Nuclear (CBRN) Recce vehicles detect, identify, monitor, and mark contaminated areas. Advanced Light Helicopters (ALHs) feature operational support across all operational conditions. High Mobility Vehicles (HMVs) provide mobility across challenging terrains, while Self-Propelled Mechanical Mine Layers (MMLs) will facilitate rapid mine-laying in remote environments.

Arudhra radars are slated to replace legacy air route surveillance installations, and Ground-Based Multi-Purpose Jammer (GBMPJ) radars offer tactical advantages to the Indian Air Force by blocking adversaries' radar systems. Marine Gas Turbines (MGTs) for warship propulsion will reduce reliance on foreign suppliers. Additionally, the Defence Forces Secure Access Card (DEFSAC) system modernizes security administration by replacing paper permits with an interoperable, radio-frequency identification-based smart card platform.



**Stages of Acquisition**

Initially guided by the Defence Procurement Procedure (DPP), 2002, India's defence acquisition framework underwent a major shift with the 2026 edition. The updated standard moves

beyond “Made in India” to “Owned by India,” mandating that vendors possess critical design data, source code, and upgrade authority rather than a simple assembly license. Furthermore, DAP 2026 mandates a minimum threshold of 60% indigenous content under the Buy category.

**Mechanism of Acquisition**

The defence acquisition process starts when service headquarters identify and define a capability gap. This leads to drafting the Services Qualitative Requirement (SQR), which is subsequently incorporated into the Services Capital Acquisition Plan and the long-term Integrated Capability Development Plan. After formulation, the proposal is presented to the Defence Acquisition Council (DAC) to secure an Acceptance of Necessity (AoN), establishing the standard procedure for the procurement case. Following AoN approval, the DAC issues a Request for Proposal (RFP) to vetted vendors. The proposal then undergoes a technical review by a Technical Evaluation Committee, rigorous field trials, a Staff Evaluation, and scrutiny by a Technical Oversight Committee.

Next, a Contract Negotiation Committee carries out a commercial evaluation to identify the lowest-cost compliant bidder (L1). Ultimately, depending on the project's financial threshold, the case is submitted for final approval and contract execution to the designated financial authority such as the Defence Minister, the Cabinet Committee on Security, or delegated lower authorities.




Under DAP 2020, acquisition categories are prioritized based on their level of indigenization: Buy (Indian-IDDM), Buy (Indian), Buy and Make (Indian), Buy and Make, and Buy (Global). This version also introduced the Buy (Global-Manufacture in India) category, which enables foreign vendors to secure contracts provided they set up manufacturing facilities within India.

**Significant historical Acquisitions**



The DAC has granted numerous AoNs under DAP, including Light Combat Aircraft Tejas Mk-1A fighter jets, Light Combat Helicopters (LCH) Prachand, Rafale Marine aircraft, Apache AH-64E, Chinook CH-47F Helicopters, and Kamov-226T & ALH Dhruv/Prachand expansions. Further, S-400 Triumf Air Defence Missile System, BrahMos Supersonic Cruise Missiles, Akash Missile Systems, Tunguska Air Defence Upgrades, M777 Howitzers, K-9 Vajra-T Tracked Self-Propelled Howitzers, Sig Sauer Assault Rifles (SIG 716), Akbar/Tatra & High-Mobility Logistical Vehicles, INS Vikrant, Scorpène-class Submarines (P-75), and P-8I Poseidon Long-Range Maritime Patrol Aircraft & Maintenance Deal are some of India’s defence acquisition over the decade. Even though defence procurement announcements showcase India's dedication to modernizing its armed forces, sanctioned spending does not automatically translate into operational readiness. New Delhi encounters several key hurdles:

**Procedural & Policy Discrepancies (The DAP Gap)**

A marked divide persists between policy objectives and actual implementation. Reports from the CAG and parliamentary standing committees highlight that procurement timelines remain lengthy despite efforts to streamline procedures. Additionally, stringent field-trial demands discourage international suppliers, while elevated indigenous-content requirements prove challenging to audit and confirm.

**Procurement Delays**



Protracted acquisition cycles such as the two-decade Rafale procurement, along with setbacks in acquiring Tejas Mk-1A multi-role fighter jets and the Future Infantry Combat Vehicle (FICV), jeopardize national security. Notwithstanding substantial financial commitments, indigenous combat aircraft development has progressed slowly, perpetuating India's dependence on imports. Procuring state-of-the-art armaments presents a major financial strain, whereas integrating them into current force structures poses significant operational hurdles. Achieving interoperability, such as establishing seamless communication among French Rafale jets, Russian S-400 air defence systems, and the domestic Netra system, presents complex engineering demands that require advanced technology, costly components, dedicated personnel, and ongoing training. Collectively, these impediments escalate defence expenditures for a developing nation like India.

**Integrated defence planning**

Driven by major policy updates, record budgetary allocations, and a resolute commitment to domestic self-reliance (Atmanirbhar Bharat), India’s defence procurement paradigm has evolved from mere "Made in India" to true "Owned by India." To fortify defence supply chains, reforms have been executed through initiatives like SRIJAN DEEP alongside dedicated Defence Industrial Corridors in Tamil Nadu and Uttar Pradesh. Concurrently, Strategic and Space Capabilities received a major boost under Mission Shakti, establishing India as the world's fourth nation to demonstrate Anti-Satellite (ASAT) operational capability.

Institutional restructuring in 2020, marked by the establishment of the Department of Military Affairs and the post of Chief of Defence Staff, integrated the Integrated Capability Development Plan into the overarching planning framework. Subsequent revisions to the Defence Acquisition Procedure (DAP) incorporated emergency procurement pathways to address urgent operational needs. Furthermore, initiatives such as Innovations for Defence Excellence (iDEX), the ADITI Scheme, the Technology Development Fund (TDF), defence-academia partnerships, and private sector participation are actively deployed to curb maintenance costs while elevating domestic production.

India's defining challenge remains not the volume of capital acquisition approvals, but its efficiency in constructing and sustaining actionable combat readiness.

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# The Drone Battlefield: Can India Build the Next Generation of Unmanned Warfare?

In May 2025, during Operation Sindoor, Pakistani forces sent unarmed drones and loitering munitions towards Indian targets. According to Chief of Defence Staff General Anil Chauhan, none of them managed to damage Indian military or civilian infrastructure. The outcome was reassuring, but it pointed to a larger shift: cheap unmanned systems now force even well-defended states to spend heavily on defence.



Against that backdrop, the Indian Air Force (IAF) held its first Dronathon at the Pokhran Field Firing Range in Jaisalmer from 14 to 16 September 2026. India has shown that it can build both drones & counter-drone tools. The harder test is whether it can make them reliable, produce them at scale, operate them jointly across the three services and avoid dependence on foreign technology.

## What drones are doing to warfare

Two families of technology are at issue. Unmanned aerial systems range from reconnaissance drones to armed drones, loitering munitions that circle a target area before diving onto it, and swarms of small aircraft acting together. Counter-drone systems try to detect, disrupt or destroy them, using radars, jammers, guns, missiles and, increasingly, directed-energy weapons.

Neither is new. What has changed is how cheap and numerous drones have become, and the economics is what makes this consequential. A small drone can cost a fraction of the aircraft, missile or air base it threatens, and the defender often pays far more per interception than the attacker pays per drone. In the Red Sea, the US Navy has fired missiles costing around $2 million to stop Houthi drones worth a few thousand dollars. In Nagorno-Karabakh in 2020, drones and loitering munitions stripped away Armenian air defenses and armor. Ukraine has shown that cheap drones can be produced and used in very large numbers, and that mass and saturation attacks can overwhelm defenses built for a few expensive threats. India has seen a version of this itself: on the night of 8 May 2025, according to the government's briefing, Pakistan sent 300 to 400 drones towards 36 locations from Leh to Sir Creek.

General Chauhan drew the same lesson after Sindoor, saying recent conflicts show how drones can disproportionately shift the tactical balance, and calling self-reliance in UAVs and counter-drone systems “a strategic imperative”.

## Dronathon: from demonstration to operational effect

The IAF’s first Dronathon was inaugurated by the Vice Chief of the Air Staff, Air

Marshal Ashutosh Dixit, and brought together more than 20 defence companies, start-ups, MSMEs and public-sector units. The IAF said the aim was to move beyond technology demonstration towards operational effect. Systems were assessed for reliability, effectiveness in contested environments and adaptability to changing threats. Demonstrations covered surveillance, autonomy, swarms, electronic warfare and counter-drone systems, and one indigenous system, Vayu UTtaM, was reported to track military and civilian unmanned aircraft in real time. On the opening day the IAF also released a UAS Roadmap setting out its capability priorities, so that industry, academia and research bodies can align their work with future requirements.




This is a meaningful change of method. But a single event does not prove scalability. Public reporting so far says little about how individual systems performed, so the real measure will be what follows: whether trial results lead to orders, common standards and production lines, and whether firms that impressed at Pokhran can deliver in numbers. Without that follow-through, Dronathon risks being a well-run demonstration and nothing more.

## Offence and defence: two sides of one problem

Armed forces now use inexpensive drones for intelligence gathering, targeting, resupply, electronic warfare and precision attack. For India, reconnaissance and strike drones offer a way to hold targets at risk without exposing crewed aircraft. During Sindoor, according to an ORF analysis, India reportedly used Israeli-origin Harop and Harpy loitering munitions against Pakistani military and air-defence targets, while the indigenous Nagastra-1 only entered Army service in 2024. Swarms are the next step: many cheap aircraft sharing information and overwhelming defenses by numbers. Dronathon included swarm demonstrations, but fielding swarms reliably is a much harder task. The question is maturity: which systems are proven in operational conditions, and which are still experimental.

Defence is the harder problem. A small, slow, low-flying target is difficult to detect. The system must also identify it, which matters when military, hostile and civilian aircraft share the same sky, and then neutralize it at a sensible cost. Layering helps, because cheaper tools such as jammers and guns can handle most threats while costly missiles are kept for the rest.

Electronic warfare is the weak point to watch. Drones depend on radio links and satellite navigation, which are exactly what an adversary will try to jam or spoof. A system that performs well on a clear range may fail in a contested spectrum. Publicly available information on common testing standards for this kind of resilience is thin. If India does not test its systems against a shared and demanding standard, it risks finding their weaknesses in combat.

## Doctrine, training and the ecosystem

The IAF's roadmap gives industry clarity on its own needs, and the Army has used lessons from Sindoor to test offensive and defensive drone concepts in exercises such as Vayu Samanvay-II in late 2025. The open question is whether the Army, Navy

and Air Force will share standards, data links and command arrangements, so that a counter-drone network built by one can work with another. Incompatible systems are expensive and leave seams for an adversary to exploit.

Training is another gap. Operators, maintainers and commanders need to adapt as tactics change, and in drone warfare adaptation is measured in weeks rather than years. Ukraine's experience shows that units which feed battlefield lessons back to designers within days hold the advantage, so Indian training has to be continuous rather than a one-time course.

Industry is the third test. A September 2026 IndraStra analysis, citing unnamed official sources, puts the share of imported components in Indian drones at 50 to 60%, though estimates vary. India barred Chinese parts from military drones in 2023, and in July 2025 Reuters reported plans for a three-year, ₹20 billion (about $234 million) incentive scheme aiming for at least 40% domestic content in key components by the end of FY2028. Assembling airframes at home is not the same as self-reliance. Dependence tends to hide in motors, sensors, communications and propulsion, which is why it matters that Dronathon looked beyond airframes. A supplier base that cannot scale, or that relies on a single foreign source, would fail the first-time supply is disrupted.

Views differ on how fast India should move. One view holds that rapid indigenization, backed by incentives and domestic orders, is the surest way to avoid wartime dependence. Another holds that insisting on fully domestic supply too early could slow fielding or lower quality, and that trusted imports remain useful while the domestic base matures. A related debate concerns balance: drones are cheap and flexible, but crewed aircraft and missile defenses still do jobs that drones cannot. Testing many suppliers in one place, as Dronathon did, is one way to weigh these trade-offs, although detailed results are not yet public.

Dronathon marks a shift from showcasing unmanned systems to testing them for operational effect. The central question is whether that shift carries through to production, standards and joint use. Four steps follow from the analysis above: common testing standards, including for electronic-warfare resilience, joint doctrine and shared architecture across the three services, multi-year orders that give domestic firms the certainty to scale, and the gradual indigenization of critical components.

> The outcome was reassuring, but it pointed to a larger shift: cheap unmanned systems now force even well-defended states to spend heavily on defence.

Three developments are worth watching: whether the IAF publishes Dronathon results or follows it with orders, whether the Army and Navy issue comparable roadmaps, and how far the planned domestic-component incentives are implemented. Open questions remain on how systems perform under electronic jamming and how quickly smaller firms can scale. The answers will show whether early progress becomes dependable capability.

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# VISHWA

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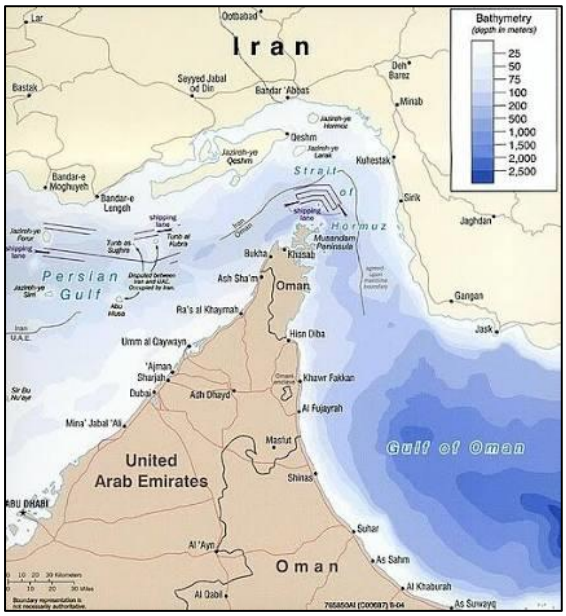
# No Foreign Conflict, No Indian Exception: *Protecting India's Interests in the Iran-US War*

In autumn 2026, hostilities between the United States and Iran, following the war that began on 28 February 2026, have intensified again. Accompanied by expanded secondary sanctions under the US Treasury's Operation Economic Outcast, the conflict has once again placed the Strait of Hormuz at the centre of global energy anxiety.




For India, the principle of "no foreign conflict, no Indian exception" cuts both ways: New Delhi is not insulated from the economic fallout of a distant war, and it is not obliged to set aside its own interests to align with either side. Navigating the crisis requires a clear assessment of India's energy security, maritime trade routes, regional connectivity and strategic autonomy.

**What Is at Stake for India**

India's energy vulnerability is structural and closely tied to West Asian stability. According to data from the analytics firm Kpler, nearly half of India's crude oil imports and around 80 per cent of its LPG imports pass through the Strait of Hormuz. In September 2026, driven largely by geopolitical risk premiums, India's crude oil import bill rose 47 per cent year-on-year to $15.4 billion, even though import volumes grew only modestly.

Assessing India's real vulnerability requires distinguishing strategic reserves from overall national cover. The underground caverns of Indian Strategic Petroleum Reserves Limited (ISPRL) hold 5.33 million tonnes, roughly 9.5 days of crude requirement. In a written reply to the Rajya Sabha in March 2026, the government put total storage capacity for crude oil and petroleum products, including oil companies' tanks, at about 74 days. Supplier concentration compounds the risk: a handful of producers, led by Russia, Iraq, Saudi Arabia and the UAE, supply the bulk of India's crude.

Maritime and human risks add to the pressure. War-risk insurance premiums for ships entering the Gulf rose to between 3 and 10% of hull value in July 2026, according to the insurance broker Marsh, from about 0.25% before the war. Freight rates for crude and product tankers have also spiked during periods of escalation. With nearly nine million Indians living in the Gulf and thousands of Indian seafarers working in the region, contingency planning requires naval escorts under Operation Sankalp, advisories from the Directorate General of Shipping, and evacuation protocols modelled on precedents such as Operation Sindhu in 2025.

**Between Tehran and Washington**

India's relations with Washington and Tehran rest on different foundations. The partnership with the United States is broad: according to the Office of the US Trade Representative, bilateral trade in goods and services reached an estimated $239.6 billion in 2025. Defence ties are anchored in the ten-year Framework for the U.S.-India Major Defense Partnership signed in October 2025, alongside procurements such as MQ-9B drones and the planned co-production of GE F414 jet engines.



Yet the relationship has its own frictions. The 2025 US tariff measures linked to India's purchases of discounted Russian crude showed that Washington's priorities can directly conflict with Indian economic interests.

India's engagement with Tehran now centres on connectivity rather than energy, since India largely stopped importing Iranian crude in 2019; total bilateral trade was only about $1.6 billion in 2025. The key asset is the Shahid Beheshti terminal at Chabahar, operated by India Ports Global Limited (IPGL) as a gateway to Afghanistan, Central Asia and the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC). Its position has become precarious. The 2018 US sanctions exemption for Chabahar was revoked in September 2025 and replaced by a conditional waiver that expired on 26 April 2026. The Ministry of External Affairs said in August 2026 that India remains in contact with all partners and stakeholders on the port's operation, but without a waiver, banking, insurance and payments for the project are exposed to US secondary sanctions.

**The Pressures on New Delhi**

Under Operation Economic Outcast, pressure on New Delhi is arriving on several fronts at once. Washington expects major partners such as India to enforce sanctions targeting "shadow fleet" tankers, non-compliant insurers and third-country financial intermediaries. For Indian firms, compliance carries direct costs. Refiners pay more when they turn away discounted barrels, banks risk losing access to dollar clearing if designated by the Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC), and shipping firms can face insurance exclusions if linked to sanctioned entities. Non-compliance, however, would risk damaging India's integration into Western financial and technology supply chains.




Tehran, for its part, retains leverage through its position on the Strait of Hormuz and its role as India's gateway to Central Asia and Russia via the INSTC. A complete Indian withdrawal from Iran would cede strategic space to China, which has steadily expanded its economic footprint there, and write off years of infrastructure investment. Gulf states such as Saudi Arabia and the UAE, meanwhile, are prioritizing de-escalation and the protection of energy infrastructure while maintaining their security ties with Washington. Pressure from either side to force a binary choice should therefore be met with clarity:

unconditional alignment with either would undermine India's long-term interests.

**What New Delhi Can Do**

Thus, "No foreign conflict, no Indian exception" means that India is neither immune to the economic disruption of war in West Asia nor bound to compromise its strategic independence at the behest of others.

India retains meaningful freedom of action if its response is grounded in its own interests. Four practical measures stand out.

First, accelerate supply diversification and reserve expansion. India should deepen long-term crude and LNG contracts with suppliers in the Americas and Africa, and expedite ISPRL's Phase II reserves at Chandikhol and Padur.

Second, sustain high-level engagement with both Washington and Tehran. New Delhi should make clear that while India formally recognizes only UN Security Council sanctions, Indian firms will manage their exposure to US measures, and that projects such as Chabahar serve regional stability and humanitarian access to Afghanistan.



Third, give domestic firms practical compliance support. The Reserve Bank of India, the Directorate General of Shipping and the Ministry of Petroleum and Natural Gas should jointly guide refiners, shipping lines and banks on OFAC designations, and help establish sanctions-compliant payment channels for permitted trade.

Fourth, protect Chabahar and maritime corridors. This means negotiating a renewed waiver for humanitarian and non-sanctioned trade, ring-fencing port operations from restricted banking networks, and continuing naval escorts under Operation Sankalp.

Thus, "No foreign conflict, no Indian exception" means that India is neither immune to the economic disruption of war in West Asia nor bound to compromise its strategic independence at the behest of others. Protecting Indian interests demands neither reflexive alignment nor ideological defiance, but steady, pragmatic statecraft rooted in national priorities.

Key developments to watch in the coming months include:

- OFAC designations: whether new sanctions rounds extend secondary targets to non-US banks handling non-dollar energy payments.
- Hormuz freight and insurance: whether war-risk premiums ease or force lasting rerouting of tankers around the Cape of Good Hope.
- Chabahar: whether India can secure a renewed waiver or a workable payment channel before the project's commercial viability erodes.
- Strategic reserves: the pace of funding for ISPRL Phase II and new long-term LNG contract

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# A New Security Axis? What the Saudi-Pakistan-Türkiye Defence Pact Means for India



On 7 August 2026, Türkiye, Saudi Arabia and Pakistan signed the Makkah Joint Defence Agreement. According to the joint statement, the pact is intended to "strengthen collective deterrence against any act of aggression" and treats an armed attack on any one of the three states as "an attack against them all." It builds on the Saudi-Pakistan Strategic Mutual Defence Agreement of September 2025 and on decades of Pakistani military deployments in the Kingdom, and it brings in Türkiye, a growing defence-industrial partner for Pakistan. For India, the pact matters because it strengthens Pakistan's strategic role in West Asia, widens its access to Gulf security partnerships and adds an institutional layer to its ties with Saudi Arabia, one of India's key strategic partners.

The pact is intended to "strengthen collective deterrence against any act of aggression" and treats an armed attack on any one of the three states as "an attack against them all."

**What the Makkah Text Says**

The joint statement emphasizes deterrence, but the full text published by The National on 21 October is more limited. Article 2 ties support to an "objective assessment of assistance required," so assistance is not automatic. The agreement creates no joint military command; Article 8 instead sets up a Strategic Political and Defence

Committee with a secretariat in Saudi Arabia, and Articles 9-10 cover intelligence sharing and logistics. New members can join only by consensus under Article 8(4). The text is silent on proxy attacks and non-state actors, leaving open whether such attacks count as an armed attack and how a joint response would be commanded.

**The Pact's First Test**



On 8 September 2026, Pakistan's Defence Minister Khawaja Asif told Geo News that the pact would "definitely" become operational in the event of "unprovoked aggression or spillover of whatever is happening in Yemen into Saudi Arabia." His remarks came amid Houthi missile and drone attacks on Saudi Arabia, including strikes in and around Riyadh and Madinah. The three states' military chiefs met under the pact on 25 September, but the pact was formally activated only on 5 October, at an emergency meeting of defence and foreign ministers in Riyadh.

Activation did not mean an offensive campaign against the Houthis. Pakistan and Türkiye described the response as defensive, aimed at protecting Saudi territory and critical infrastructure. Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan said Ankara would not send combat troops, and Türkiye has not publicly detailed any deployment; the joint statement speaks only of providing "the agreed military forces and capabilities." The first test therefore points to a framework built for reassurance and support rather than joint war-fighting.

**How the World Reacted**

Pakistan presented the pact as inclusive and defensive: Foreign Minister Ishaq Dar called it "purely defensive in nature" and open to other countries. Türkiye sought to allay fears of an anti-Iran bloc, with Vice President Cevdet Yilmaz saying it "was not aimed at any specific country." Parliamentary Speaker Numan Kurtulmuş went further, hoping the "Mecca Agreement" could become "a broader agreement for the Muslim world" that Iran could also join.

Iran was dismissive: senior parliamentarian Ebrahim Rezaei wrote that "a paper agreement with Türkiye and Pakistan does not bring them security." Analysts largely rejected the "Islamic NATO" label, reading the pact as a hedge against uncertain American guarantees; the Atlantic Council called it "NATO-lite." After the October Houthi strikes, Egypt's Foreign Minister Badr Abdelatty pledged "all kinds of support" to Saudi Arabia, a statement of solidarity short of a membership bid.

**What It Means for India**

The pact could widen Pakistan's diplomatic space, its access to technology and its ability to internationalize bilateral disputes. India's response therefore rests on three tracks: protecting its western flank, deepening its value to Saudi Arabia and the Gulf, and limiting the reach of Türkiye's political posture.

**Saudi Arabia: India's Counterweight**



Saudi Arabia remains India's most important strategic counterweight in the

region. The relationship now runs through a Strategic Partnership Council; a Ministerial Committee on Defence Cooperation was added during Prime Minister Narendra Modi's April 2025 visit to Jeddah. The ties carry real weight: bilateral trade stood at US $41.88 billion in FY 2024-25, Saudi Arabia supplied 13.58% of India's crude imports, and about 2.74 million Indians live in the Kingdom. Riyadh's balancing was visible in May 2025, when Minister of State Adel al-Jubeir travelled to both New Delhi and Islamabad to help de-escalate the crisis.

India can build on this interdependence by expanding joint naval exercises, maritime-domain awareness, counter-terrorism and cyber cooperation with Riyadh, and by pursuing defence co-production where Indian industry has credible capacity.

**Türkiye's Defence-Industrial Role**

Türkiye's challenge is different: its defence-industrial cooperation with Pakistan is concrete and ongoing. Under a 2018 contract, Pakistan ordered four MILGEM/Babur-class corvettes, two built in Istanbul and two in Karachi; PNS Babur was commissioned in September 2023, and PNS Khaibar was delivered in April 2026. Pakistan has also inducted the Bayraktar TB2 drone and has shown interest in Türkiye's KAAN fifth-generation fighter, though no acquisition has been finalized. These programmes can strengthen Pakistan's naval surveillance, unmanned strike capacity and long-term production base.





Turkish-origin drones were reportedly used against India in May 2025, although Ankara denied directly supplying arms to Pakistan. Politically, President Erdoğan raised Kashmir again at the UN General Assembly in September 2025, drawing a formal protest from New Delhi. Yet Ankara's interests are diverse, and its commitment to Pakistan does not mirror Pakistan's dependence on Türkiye.



India's consistent position, as stated by the Ministry of External Affairs, is that Jammu & Kashmir is an integral part of India and needs no outside mediation. New Delhi can register objections firmly through diplomatic channels while continuing trade and people-to-people ties where they serve Indian interests.

**Pakistan's Gains**

Pakistan's principal gain is likely to be diplomatic and psychological: a claim to greater regional relevance after years of economic strain, building on renewed engagement with Washington and the 2025 Saudi defence agreement. India's interest is to deny Pakistan the role of indispensable

regional security provider. New Delhi's test remains counter-terrorism: no external security arrangement substitutes for credible action against terrorist groups on Pakistani soil.

**The Maritime Dimension**




The pact's first practical relevance for India lies in the Arabian Sea and western Indian Ocean. Any expansion of naval activity, drone deployments, logistics or intelligence sharing by the three states in the Gulf and Red Sea will affect India's maritime awareness and sea lines of communication.



India already has instruments to build on. The Indian Navy maintains anti-piracy and shipping-protection deployments in the Gulf of Aden and the Arabian Sea; the Information Fusion Centre-Indian Ocean Region (IFC-IOR) in Gurugram provides maritime-domain awareness and liaison with partner navies; and logistics access at Duqm in Oman supports forward operations and replenishment. Deeper port access and security agreements with Gulf states would build on these.

**A Cause for Worry?**

India need not meet every new regional grouping with alarm. The Makkah Pact does not erase the asymmetry in India's favor: a larger economy, a deeper technology base, a stronger navy and wider partnerships. The appropriate posture is calm preparedness: strengthening Saudi and Gulf ties, holding a firm line on Kashmir and terrorism, and monitoring Turkish-Pakistani defence cooperation.




Several developments will show how much the pact matters: whether Türkiye's parliament ratifies it, whether Pakistan's long-standing military presence in Saudi Arabia expands, whether Egypt or others seek entry under Article 8(4), and whether its scope stays limited to Gulf and Yemen contingencies. If the pact remains a consultative, Saudi-centred arrangement, its impact on India will be modest; if it hardens into a standing military bloc, New Delhi will need to revisit its West Asia calculus.

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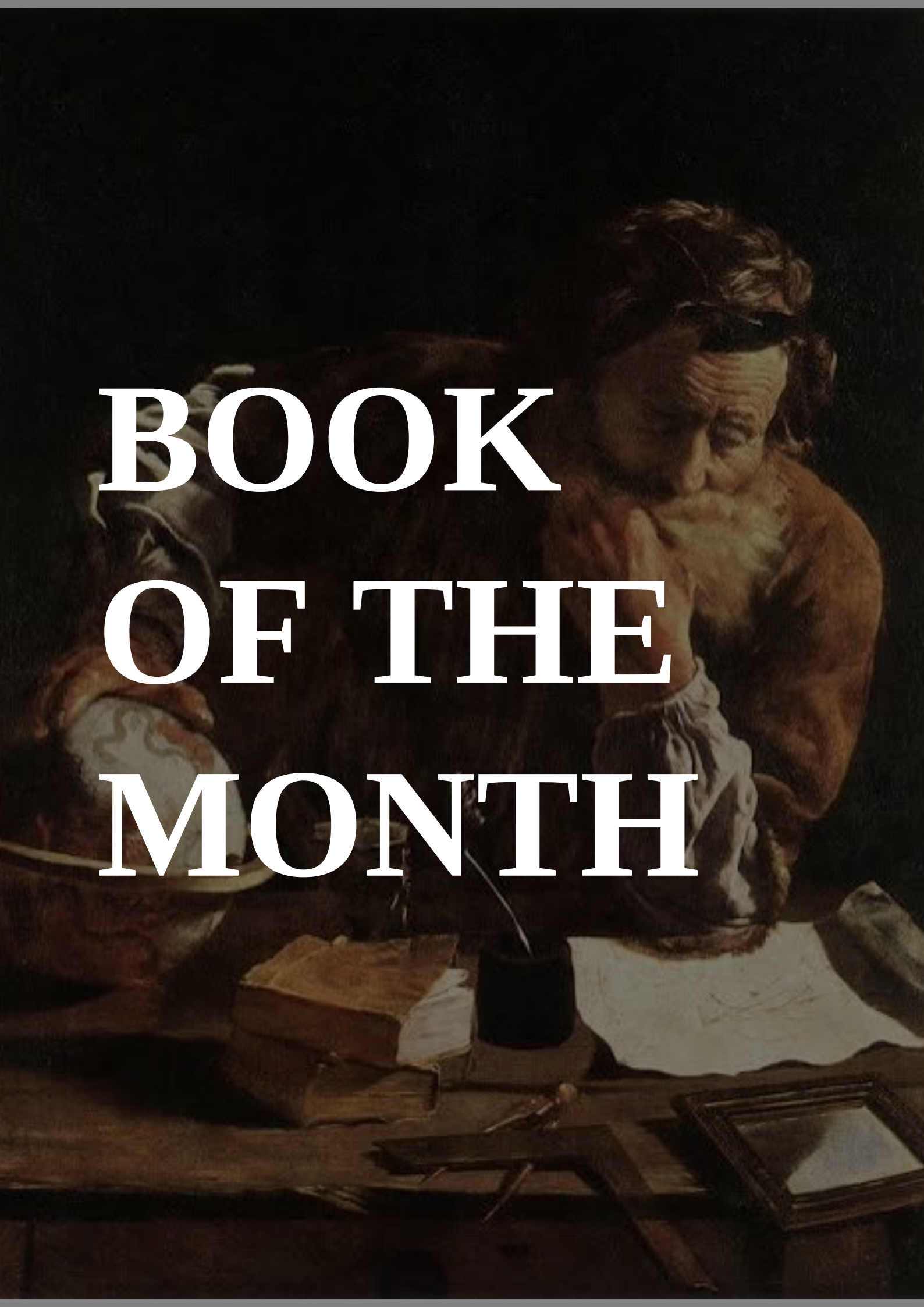
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# The Iron Cage of International Anarchy: *A Critical Assessment of John J. Mearsheimer's Argument*

In "The Iron Cage of International Anarchy," John J. Mearsheimer examines great-power competition from 1800 to 2026 and considers how it may develop over the next fifty years. His central argument is that international anarchy the absence of a central authority capable of guaranteeing states' security, pushes great powers to compete for power and protect themselves against potential rivals. As he puts it, "States in anarchy have no choice but to compete"

The paper traces changes in the international system from multipolarity to bipolarity, unipolarity and renewed multipolarity.

Mearsheimer's historical account offers a clear explanation of why rivalry persists even when states maintain diplomatic relations and economic ties. Yet structural pressures alone cannot explain every foreign-policy decision or the precise circumstances in which conflicts occur. Domestic politics, economic interests, ideology and leadership also shape how states understand threats and respond to them. This review argues that Mearsheimer's paper is a valuable account of the constraints imposed by international anarchy, but its explanatory reach is more limited when applied to particular conflicts and the varied behavior of states.

**Theoretical foundations: Anarchy, Power and Security Competition**

Mearsheimer's argument begins with the uncertainty states face in an anarchic international system. Governments cannot be certain that other states will remain peaceful, even when their present intentions

appear benign. They must therefore maintain the capabilities needed to protect themselves. Since one state's growing power may threaten another, efforts to improve national security can generate suspicion, arms competition and alliance formation.

States can strengthen their position through internal balancing, including military development and technological investment, or external balancing through partnerships with other countries. Economic resources matter because they support military strength and long-term strategic influence. The result is a system in which states pay close attention not simply to their own capabilities but

also to the relative power of their rivals.

This framework helps explain why economic interdependence does not necessarily remove strategic competition. However, it leaves an important question: if states face similar structural pressures, why do their responses differ? Threat perceptions, domestic institutions and political leadership influence whether governments choose confrontation, accommodation or restraint. Anarchy establishes the conditions under which competition occurs; it does not, by itself, determine every policy choice.

**Historical Analysis and Changing Polarity**

Mearsheimer organizes his account around four periods. The first, old multipolarity (1800-1945), covers the rise and rivalry of European powers, alongside the growing importance of the United States and Japan. The Napoleonic Wars, Germany's rise and the two world wars illustrate how attempts to alter the balance of power encouraged opposition from other states. These cases support his emphasis on competition, although nationalism, domestic political change and leaders' decisions also shaped the causes and course of individual wars.

The second period, bipolarity (1945-1991), was defined by the rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union. The two superpowers competed militarily, technologically and ideologically, while avoiding direct war against each other. Nuclear deterrence raised the potential cost of such a confrontation. Nevertheless, the wars in Korea, Vietnam and Afghanistan showed that rivalry could produce severe violence through regional and proxy conflicts. The relative stability of the central balance therefore cannot be separated from diplomacy, deterrence and the choices made by political leaders.

The third period, unipolarity (1992-2016), followed the Soviet Union's collapse and the emergence of American predominance. Mearsheimer identifies two major US policy failures. First, engagement with China helped it become wealthier and more powerful without producing the political liberalization Washington had expected. China could use its expanding economic resources to strengthen its military capabilities. Second, NATO expansion antagonized Russia and intensified its concerns about the European security order.

NATO enlargement, particularly the prospect of Ukrainian membership, contributed to the deterioration of relations with Russia before the 2022 invasion of Ukraine.

Mearsheimer argues that NATO enlargement, particularly the prospect of Ukrainian membership, contributed to the deterioration of relations with Russia before the 2022 invasion of Ukraine. This is a

contested interpretation and must be distinguished from a justification of Russian conduct. Russian insecurity may help explain the Kremlin's perceptions, but it does not make the invasion inevitable or legitimate. Russian leaders made political choices, and alternative responses were available.

The fourth period, new multipolarity (approximately 2017-2026), reflects China's emergence as a great power and the intensifying confrontation between Russia and the West. Mearsheimer sees the United States as determined to prevent China from establishing regional hegemony in East Asia. Military modernization, alliances and technological competition are central to this rivalry. But the number of major powers alone cannot establish how unstable the system will be. Nuclear deterrence, alliance commitments and crisis management also influence the likelihood of conflict.

**The Explanatory Limits of Structural Realism**

The paper's chief strength is its ability to identify patterns across a long historical period. Its focus on uncertainty and relative power offers a useful starting point for understanding why great-power rivalry survives changes in leadership and international institutions. Its weakness is the risk of explaining too much through the same structural logic. If accommodation and confrontation can both be understood as responses to insecurity, the theory needs further evidence to explain why a government chooses one course rather than another.

The same problem arises in explanations of war. Competitive international conditions may create incentives for military preparedness, but they do not establish why a particular government launches an invasion at a particular time. Domestic political pressures, ideological commitments, leadership calculations and assessments of military success can influence that decision. These factors do not invalidate structural realism; they help explain the process through which systemic pressures become concrete foreign policies.

The paper also gives less sustained attention to states that do not qualify as great powers. Mearsheimer does discuss India as a possible future great power, while questioning whether its economic development will be sufficient to sustain that position. The relevant criticism, therefore, is not that India is absent, but that the behavior and agency of states below the great-power threshold receive less attention than the actions of the leading powers.

**Applying Structural Realism to India: Strategic Autonomy and Great-Power Competition**

India illustrates both the value and the limitations of Mearsheimer's framework. Its growing cooperation with the United States, including through the Quad, reflects shared

concerns about maritime security and the regional balance of power. At the same time, India has maintained significant defence and diplomatic relations with Russia. These relationships reflect an effort to preserve room for independent decision-making rather than commit fully to one strategic bloc.

India's strategic autonomy is not evidence that power politics is irrelevant. Instead, it shows how a state can respond to great-power competition while pursuing its own priorities. Its decisions are shaped by military requirements, energy security, regional concerns and the political costs of excessive dependence on any single partner. The Quad's stated areas of cooperation and India's continuing engagement with Russia illustrate this approach (Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 2025; Press Information Bureau, Government of India, 2025).

Wealth and technological development matter principally because they provide the material foundations of military strength.

Structural realism helps explain why India seeks partnerships and avoids strategic vulnerability. It is less equipped, on its own, to explain the specific balance India maintains between competing relationships. That requires attention to its political traditions, economic interests and assessments of its regional position. India's experience suggests that the international system constrains foreign policy without fully determining it.

**Security Competition and the Political Economy of Power**

The relationship between security and economic power offers another point of comparison. For Mearsheimer, wealth and technological development matter principally because they provide the material foundations of military strength. Lenin's Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism offers a different perspective by examining the relationship between capitalist expansion, concentrated economic power and imperial policy.

The US-China rivalry demonstrates why both approaches are useful. Competition over semiconductors, advanced computing, supply chains and industrial capacity has clear security implications. Structural realism explains why governments seek to prevent rivals from gaining strategic advantages in these sectors. Political-economic analysis adds questions about the influence of domestic industries, commercial interests and patterns of production on government decisions.

Neither perspective fully explains the relationship on its own. Economic interests do not account for every strategic decision, while security competition cannot explain, without further evidence, why particular industries receive priority. A fuller account of great-power rivalry would examine how external pressures

interact with domestic economic interests to shape policy.

**Future Great-Power Competition**

Mearsheimer expects the United States to remain the world's most powerful state through 2076, with China in second place and Russia the weakest of the three. He argues that China is unlikely to overtake the United States, in part because of demographic constraints. He also expects at least one major crisis between Washington and Beijing, with Taiwan and the South and East China Seas among the likely flashpoints. His conclusion is stark: "it does seem likely maybe even highly likely that there will be at least one major crisis between those rivals over the next fifty years" (Mearsheimer, 2026, p. 79).

These forecasts follow from his account of power competition, but they remain predictions rather than settled outcomes. Demography matters, yet national power also depends on productivity, technological innovation, political institutions, fiscal capacity and the ability to convert economic resources into military capabilities. Changes in these areas could alter the balance in ways that are difficult to predict over five decades.

A crisis would not automatically lead to war, either. Nuclear weapons raise the cost of direct confrontation, but miscalculation and escalation remain possible. The outcome of a Taiwan crisis, for example, would depend on military calculations, alliance commitments, communication and political decisions. Mearsheimer's warning deserves attention, but the likelihood and consequences of future conflict cannot be inferred from polarity alone.

All in all, Mearsheimer's "The Iron Cage of International Anarchy" is a significant contribution to the study of international relations. Its historical scope and sustained focus on relative power explain why great-power competition remains a defining feature of world politics. Its account of China's rise, NATO expansion and the return of multipolarity provides a useful framework for examining contemporary strategic tensions.

The paper is more persuasive as an explanation of structural pressures than as a complete account of individual conflicts or foreign-policy choices. Domestic politics, economic interests, leadership and the agency of states such as India remain important to understanding how those pressures translate into action. The paper is recommended reading for students and researchers of international relations, strategic studies and great-power politics, as well as policymakers.

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**A NOTE ON THE PIECES**

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