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# CULT CURRENT

Vol: 9 Issue: 2 March, 2026

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# RELIGION LOST GEOGRAPHY WON

*The 2026 war and the collapse of the Ummah myth*

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## # POSITIVE\_INDIA

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## INDIA'S GEN Z CHANGEMAKERS



**Manya Harsha**

Today's India is witnessing a powerful transformation led by Gen Z changemakers who are not just waiting for the future but actively building it. Manya Harsha, Manikya Sanghi, and Archit Patil represent the unstoppable spirit of a generation that combines passion with a deep sense of purpose to solve real-world challenges. In Bengaluru, 15-year-old Manya Harsha has emerged as a formidable "Eco-Warrior." Through her initiative, Grandma's Green Weave, she has upcycled over 2,200 discarded sarees into 28,000 eco-bags, preventing 1.2 tons of textile waste. Beyond textile recycling, her innovation of creating handmade paper from vegetable peels and seed-based stationery has inspired over 25,000 individuals to adopt a sustainable lifestyle, proving that environmental consciousness can start at any age. Meanwhile, 17-year-old Manikya Sanghi is redefining the literary and spiritual landscape for youth. A bestselling author of over 21 books, including the acclaimed Chronicles of Tierra series, Manikya began his journey at just five. He credits his daily practice of meditation for the clarity and creativity that fuel his writing. His work goes beyond fiction, aiming to empower readers with life skills and mindful awareness, showing that inner discipline is the foundation of external success.



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02  
| MARCH, 2026 |

# RELIGION LOST GEOGRAPHY WON

*The 2026 war and the collapse of the Ummah myth*



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## Small talk



### BUZZ AROUND DEEPIKA

**B**ollywood corridors are buzzing with fresh gossip about Deepika Padukone after she was recently spotted at a late-night dinner with a well-known international filmmaker in Mumbai. Eyewitnesses say the two appeared deeply engaged in conversation, sparking speculation about a possible global collaboration. While insiders hint at a big international project in the works, neither Deepika nor her team has confirmed anything yet. Social media, however, is already flooded with fan theories about her next big move. Whether it's a film deal or just a friendly meeting, the mystery has certainly set Bollywood gossip mills spinning again.

## The discoveries that will create a stir in 2026

### AI in Medical Diagnosis

Researchers have developed an advanced artificial intelligence system capable of detecting early-stage cancer from routine medical scans with remarkable accuracy. By analyzing subtle patterns invisible to the human eye, the technology can assist doctors in diagnosing diseases sooner. The innovation could significantly improve survival rates while reducing diagnostic delays in hospitals worldwide. ●



### Reusable Rocket Breakthrough

A new generation of reusable rockets successfully completed multiple launch-and-landing cycles, marking a major step toward cheaper space missions. Engineers say the technology drastically lowers launch costs and turnaround time. This advancement is expected to accelerate satellite deployment, deep-space research, and future human exploration missions beyond Earth's orbit. ●

### Quantum Computing Advance

Scientists have demonstrated a more stable quantum processor capable of maintaining qubits longer than previous designs. Improved error correction and cooling systems allow complex calculations to run more reliably. The breakthrough brings quantum computing closer to solving problems in cryptography, climate modeling, and materials science that remain impossible for conventional computers. ●



### SOLAR STORM MONITORING BREAKTHROUGH



Astronomers have developed a new solar observation system capable of detecting powerful solar storms hours earlier than current methods. By tracking subtle magnetic changes on the Sun's surface, scientists can better predict space weather that may disrupt satellites, communication networks, and power grids on Earth. The innovation strengthens global preparedness against solar radiation hazards. ●

### Mahindra Launches XUV.e9 Electric SUV

Mahindra & Mahindra unveiled its new XUV.e9 electric SUV in February 2026, expanding the company's growing electric mobility portfolio. Built on Mahindra's INGLO EV platform, the vehicle offers long driving range, advanced driver-assistance features, and fast-charging capability. The launch signals Mahindra's push to strengthen India's electric vehicle market while promoting cleaner and sustainable transportation. ●



## APPOINTMENT - RESIGNATION



**Dr. Rajeev Singh Raghuvanshi**  
*DGC, India*

Dr. Rajeev Singh Raghuvanshi was reappointed as the Drugs Controller General of India (DCGI) in February 2026, continuing to oversee the regulation, approval, and safety monitoring of pharmaceuticals, vaccines, and medical devices under the CDSCO.

### Michael Debabrata Patra

*Deputy Governor, RBI*

Distinguished economist Michael Debabrata Patra resigned as Deputy Governor of the Reserve Bank of India in February 2026, bringing an end to his tenure overseeing monetary policy, research, and financial stability initiatives at India's central bank.



**Benjamin Netanyahu**  
*Prime Minister, Israel*

Any attack on Israel will be met with a decisive response, and we will act wherever necessary to protect our people.

### THEY SAID IT...



**Xi Jinping**  
*President, China*

China will firmly defend its sovereignty and will not tolerate any external interference in its internal affairs.

## THE TRIBUTE

Dr. Ram Manohar Lohia was a prominent Indian freedom fighter, socialist thinker, and political leader. Born on March 23, 1910, in Akbarpur, Uttar Pradesh, Lohia played a significant role in the Indian independence movement and later became one of the key leaders in post-independence Indian politics. Educated in India and abroad, he earned his doctorate from the University of Berlin, where he developed a deep understanding of socialism and anti-imperialism.

Lohia was a fierce advocate for the rights of the poor and the marginalized and believed in the principles of equality, justice, and non-violent resistance. During the struggle for independence, he worked closely with leaders like Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru, although he later parted ways with the Congress party due to ideological differences. He was instrumental in organizing the Quit India Movement in 1942 and was



**DR. RAM MANOHAR LOHIA**

(23/03/1910-12/10/1967)

arrested multiple times for his involvement in anti-British activities.

Post-independence, Lohia became a vocal critic of the Congress government's policies, advocating for a more decentralized and egalitarian approach to governance. He was one of the founding members of the Socialist Party of India and championed causes such as gender equality, social justice, and the upliftment of backward classes. Lohia's ideas of "sapt kranti" (seven revolutions) aimed at comprehensive societal reform, encompassing areas such as caste, class, gender, and economic disparities.

A visionary leader, Dr. Lohia's contributions to Indian political thought continue to inspire generations. His legacy is remembered for his dedication to social justice and his unwavering commitment to the common people. ●



## World Leaders Push for Stronger Climate Action

A renewed push for global climate cooperation emerged in February 2026 as several major economies pledged stronger commitments to cut carbon emissions and accelerate clean energy adoption. Leaders from Europe, Asia, and the Americas met at a high-level climate forum to discuss coordinated strategies for limiting global warming and strengthening climate resilience. The discussions emphasized expanding renewable energy, protecting forests, and supporting developing nations in their transition to low-carbon economies. Environmental groups welcomed the renewed political momentum but urged governments to translate promises into concrete action. Analysts noted that the climate agenda is increasingly tied to economic policy, energy security, and technological innovation. ●

## Global Energy Markets Face Volatility



Global energy markets experienced major volatility in February 2026 as geopolitical tensions pushed oil and gas prices sharply upward. Analysts reported a surge in crude oil prices and a significant rise in European gas costs, raising concerns about inflation and economic stability. Financial markets reacted cautiously, with investors turning to gold and the U.S. dollar as safer assets amid uncertainty in global energy supply. ●

## Global Focus on Women in Science



February 11, 2026 marked the International Day of Women and Girls in Science, celebrated worldwide to promote gender equality in scientific fields. Universities, research institutions, and international organizations organized events encouraging young women to pursue careers in STEM. Experts highlighted that greater female participation in science and technology is essential for innovation and inclusive development in the modern knowledge economy. ●

## WHO Advances Global Pandemic Agreement

Member states of the World Health Organization continued negotiations in February 2026 on a key annex to the proposed global pandemic agreement. The talks focused on pathogen access and benefit-sharing mechanisms designed to ensure fair distribution of vaccines, data, and medical resources during future outbreaks. Health experts believe the framework could strengthen global preparedness and cooperation against emerging infectious diseases. ●



## Conflicts Continue to Shape Headlines

International tensions continued to dominate headlines in February 2026 as the Russia-Ukraine conflict showed no signs of easing. Military developments along the front lines and diplomatic exchanges between global powers kept the crisis at the center of global attention. Analysts warned that prolonged conflict could affect international security, energy markets, and geopolitical stability across Europe and beyond. ●

## Artemis Mission Lunar Exploration



**N**ASA and its international partners continued preparations for the next phase of the Artemis lunar program in February 2026, aiming to return astronauts to the Moon later this decade. Engineers completed key testing of spacecraft systems designed for long-duration missions. The program represents one of the largest international space collaborations, involving agencies from Europe, Japan, and Canada, and is expected to lay the foundation for future human missions to Mars. ●

## World Powers Step Up Diplomatic Engagements

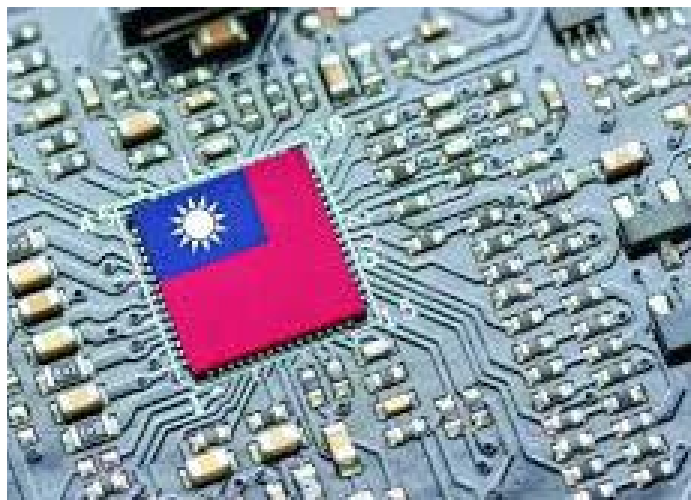


**W**orld leaders intensified diplomatic engagements in February 2026 as geopolitical tensions and economic uncertainties reshaped international relations. Several high-level meetings among major powers focused on managing conflicts, stabilizing global energy markets, and strengthening economic cooperation. Diplomatic efforts were particularly visible in discussions on the Russia-Ukraine conflict, Middle East stability, and evolving alliances in the Indo-Pacific region. Governments emphasized dialogue, multilateral cooperation, and strategic partnerships to prevent further escalation of conflicts. Analysts noted that the current phase of global diplomacy reflects a delicate balance between competition and collaboration among leading nations. At the same time, emerging economies called for greater representation in global decision-making forums. ●

## Major Ocean Conservation Initiative Launched



**S**everal nations and the EU launched a major international initiative in February 2026 to expand marine protected areas across the world's oceans. The program aims to safeguard fragile ecosystems, protect endangered species, and promote sustainable fisheries. Scientists believe that stronger ocean conservation policies are essential to combat climate change, preserve biodiversity, and maintain the health of marine resources that support millions of livelihoods worldwide. ●



## Global Chip Sector Reaches New Heights

**T**he global semiconductor industry entered a significant expansion phase in early 2026, marked by a surge in cross-border investments and strategic partnerships. To safeguard supply chains, governments across Asia, Europe, and North America are aggressively subsidizing domestic manufacturing, moving away from centralized production models. This shift is fueled by the insatiable demand for advanced chips in artificial intelligence, electric vehicles, and high-end consumer electronics. Industry analysts suggest that this geopolitical race for silicon sovereignty is fundamentally reshaping the technological landscape and turning chip manufacturing. ●



## India Hosts Global AI Impact Summit

India stepped into the global technology spotlight in February 2026 by hosting the India AI Impact Summit at Bharat Mandapam in New Delhi. The five-day event brought together world leaders, technology CEOs, researchers, and startup innovators to discuss the future of responsible artificial intelligence. The summit aimed to position India as a key platform for shaping global AI governance and collaboration. Discussions focused on ethical AI development, data governance, public-interest technology, and AI solutions for healthcare, agriculture, and climate challenges. Several international technology companies and research institutions announced partnerships with Indian startups and universities. ●

## Political Parties Intensify Preparations for Elections



India's political landscape became increasingly active in February 2026 as major political parties intensified preparations for upcoming state elections. Leaders launched public outreach campaigns, policy announcements, and grassroots mobilization efforts across several states. Analysts observed that political debates are focusing on economic development, employment generation, and governance reforms, reflecting the growing importance of regional issues in shaping India's evolving democratic process. ●

## Centre Pushes Digital Governance Reforms



The central government accelerated efforts in February 2026 to strengthen digital governance and public service delivery through technology-driven reforms. New initiatives aim to expand digital platforms for citizen services, improve transparency in government processes, and enhance data-driven policymaking. Expanding digital governance will make administrative systems more efficient while improving accessibility and accountability across various government departments. ●

## Government Expands Social Welfare Initiatives

The Government of India in February 2026 announced expanded support for key social welfare programs aimed at improving rural livelihoods, healthcare access, and food security.



Officials highlighted increased funding for nutrition schemes, women's empowerment initiatives, and rural employment programs. The measures are intended to strengthen social protection networks and reduce inequality while ensuring inclusive development across both urban and rural communities. ●

## India's Economic Growth Outlook Strengthens



India's economic outlook remained optimistic in February 2026 as government data and independent forecasts indicated steady growth driven by infrastructure spending, manufacturing expansion, and strong domestic demand. Policymakers emphasized continued investment in digital infrastructure, renewable energy, and logistics networks. India's stable macroeconomic and policy reforms are helping the country maintain its position among the fastest-growing major economies. ●

## Centre Accelerates Infrastructure Development



The Government of India in February 2026 reaffirmed its commitment to large-scale infrastructure development, highlighting progress in highway construction, railway modernization, and logistics connectivity. Officials stated that improved transport networks are essential for boosting trade, reducing logistics costs, and supporting regional economic growth. Analysts noted that sustained infrastructure investment remains a key pillar of India's long-term development strategy and is expected to generate employment while strengthening national productivity. ●

## Mamata Banerjee Calls for Stronger Federal Cooperation



West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee drew national attention in February 2026 after strongly advocating greater federal cooperation between the central and state governments. Speaking at a public event and later addressing the media, Banerjee emphasized the need for stronger financial support and policy coordination to help states implement welfare and development programs more effectively. She argued that cooperative federalism is essential for balanced economic growth and social progress across India. Her remarks sparked political debate at the national level, with several opposition leaders supporting her call for greater state autonomy while ruling party representatives defended existing fiscal policies. Political analysts noted that Banerjee's intervention revived a broader national conversation about centre-state relations, fiscal distribution, and the evolving role of states in India's federal governance system. ●

## India Expands Renewable Energy Capacity



India continued to expand its renewable energy capacity in February 2026 with new solar and wind projects announced across several states. Government officials emphasized that the transition to clean energy is critical for meeting climate commitments and ensuring long-term energy security. Experts observed that India's rapid growth in renewable power generation is positioning the country as a major global player in the green energy transition. ●



## Yogi Adityanath Highlights Uttar Pradesh's Development Push

Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath drew national attention in February 2026 while highlighting the state's rapid infrastructure expansion and investment-driven growth model. Addressing a major investors' and development forum, Adityanath emphasized the government's focus on expressways, industrial corridors, and logistics parks to transform Uttar Pradesh into a leading economic hub. He also pointed to improvements in law and order and administrative reforms aimed at creating a more business-friendly environment. According to state officials, several domestic and international investors expressed interest in expanding operations in the state. ●



**SRIRAJESH**, Editor

## WEST ASIA

### THE IRONY OF DESTINY IN THE IRANIAN WAR

*As the scent of gunpowder engulfs West Asia, the Iranian conflict transcends regional strife, signaling a cataclysmic shift in the global order. It is a grim testament to failed diplomacy, where ancient heritage and future dreams dissolve into smoldering ash between the shadows of dominance and the dawn of strategic reason.*

**W**hen the script of destruction is written across the pages of history, ink is replaced by blood, and words are superseded by echoing screams. Today, the scent of gunpowder and the billowing plumes of smoke rising from the deserts of West Asia are not merely the tremors of a regional skirmish; they are the premonitory signs of a ‘cataclysmic labor’ destined to give birth to a new and terrifying world order. The dark clouds of war hovering over the ancient soil of Iran threaten to devour the cultural and strategic heritage that has, for millennia, tutored humanity in the lessons of civilization.

The horror of this war does not resemble a conventional military campaign. It is the zenith of ‘asymmetric warfare’ and ‘hybrid destruction,’ where borders are no longer defined on maps but are dissolved into mounds of rubble. From Iran’s nuclear installations to the narrow alleys of Tehran, the thunder of missiles is, in reality, the proclamation of the end of that ‘strategic patience’ which had hung by a slender thread for decades. The ‘Axis of Resistance,’ emerging in the analyses of global thinkers, is no longer just a military alliance; it has become a suicidal resolve, dragging the entire region—through Hamas, Hezbollah, and the Houthis—into an ‘ordeal by fire’ where no victor shall emerge.

The most gruesome culmination of war is found not in the clash of steel, but in the incineration of human emotions. In the streets of Iran, there prevails a ‘void’—the kind of silence that precedes a great tempest. When missiles fall, tearing through the chest of the sky, they do not merely level buildings; they bury the dreams and futures of an entire generation under the debris. The surge of millions of refugees toward the borders of Turkey and Europe will not just be a migration of people; it will be a stinging blow to the face of ‘global liberalism.’ This displacement will alter the ‘human geography’ that took centuries to nurture.

The repercussions of this war will not remain confined to Tehran or Tel Aviv. The Strait of Hormuz—the jugular vein of global energy supply—if fully sacrificed to this war, will plunge the world economy into a ‘black hole’ from which

there is no return for decades. The uncontrolled surge in oil prices will not be a mere game of statistics; it will extinguish the hearths of developing nations and turn the luxuries of the developed world into dust. This is 'economic neo-colonialism,' where the scarcity of energy will bring nations to their knees.

Viewed through a philosophical lens, the ultimate end of this war is nothing but 'shunyata' (the void). Will this conflict transform the Iranian regime? Or will it leave it in the state of a 'wounded lion' that, even in its death throes, incinerates the entire region? The 'rules-based order' of the West has been reduced to ashes in the fires of this war. Today, international institutions have become mere 'stages for lamentation,' offering the oblations of resolutions but failing to kindle the lamp of peace.

The horror of the Iranian war is, in truth, the result of a 'cataclysmic dance of arrogance,' where the language of diplomacy has been replaced by sanctions and drones. If the 'Uttarayana' of wisdom—the ascent of consciousness—does not occur in time, the corridors of history will remember us as a civilization that used its technological brilliance only for its own annihilation.

The aftermath of this catastrophe will be a 'fragmented world,' where the walls of distrust grow higher and peace remains but a brief interval between wars. The blood-stained lines etched on the forehead of time warn us: if this 'Bhasmasura' instinct for self-destruction is not halted, future generations will inherit nothing but smoldering ash and the tears of remorse. ●

Ajesh



## TALIBAN–PAKISTAN

**Border on Fire**

***Tensions between nuclear-armed Pakistan and Afghanistan's Taliban regime sharply escalated in late February, further heightening regional instability and raising concerns about the risk of a prolonged conflict. Here's what to know.***



Clara Fong

**O**n February 26, Afghanistan's Taliban government launched an attack on Pakistan's military bases near their disputed shared border. The regime claims this was in retaliation for Pakistan's strikes on Afghan military bases several days before. Within hours, Pakistan responded by bombing several Afghan border provinces and the capital, Kabul—the first time Pakistan has conducted an attack on Afghanistan's urban areas. Pakistan's defense minister later described the situation as one of “open war” with Afghanistan. The cross-border attacks mark the latest and most significant escalation between the two countries since they agreed to a fragile ceasefire in October 2025 after a previous border conflict that lasted over a week.

As of March 2, the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan has recorded at least 146 civilian casualties in Afghanistan, including 42 dead and 104 injured, though these figures are preliminary. The Afghan Taliban has said that it is willing to negotiate with Pakistan, but there are growing concerns that the conflict could continue to escalate, further destabilizing a region already grappling with the rippling fallout from joint U.S.

and Israeli attacks on Iran.

### **What's behind the latest round of fighting?**

At the core of the conflict is Pakistan's continued assertion that the Afghan Taliban is offering a safe haven for the jihadist militant group Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), also known as the Pakistani Taliban. Pakistan says the group is operating from within Afghanistan—a claim that the Afghan Taliban repeatedly denies.

In October 2025, Pakistan carried out an air strike on Afghanistan that Pakistani military officials said was aimed at attacking the “base of operations for terrorism in Pakistan.” This led to the deadliest clash between the two countries since the Taliban took power in Afghanistan in 2021. That same month, Qatar and Turkey helped broker a temporary peace between the Taliban and Pakistani governments, but later negotiations mediated by Saudi Arabia dissolved toward the end of 2025.

There have been outbreaks of violence along the border since. On February 16, a suicide bomber

killed eleven Pakistani security personnel and a child at a border security checkpoint, according to Pakistani military reports. On February 22, Islamabad carried out air strikes in eastern and southeastern Afghanistan, targeting what Pakistani officials said were militant camps. Afghan officials said at least eighteen people, including civilians, were killed and vowed retaliation, leading to the most recent round of cross-border clashes.

### What are the stakes of the conflict?

Several nearby countries—including China, India, and Russia—have complex relationships with Afghanistan and Pakistan, dating back to the Cold War. Experts say these countries have closely watched the conflict unfold to assess what it might mean for regional stability, terrorism, and economic development.

Pakistan is a nuclear power, and both China and Russia are its major defense partners. China is Pakistan’s largest trading partner, too. Afghanistan and Pakistan are part of China’s Belt and Road Initiative, a massive infrastructure and economic development program that involves a \$65 billion flagship highway and energy project known as the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor.

Meanwhile, Pakistan has blamed India for backing TTP terrorist attacks, with Pakistani Defense Minister Khawaja Asif accusing Afghanistan of operating as an Indian “proxy.” Since 2021, India has slowly sought to reset relations with the Afghan Taliban in what experts say

coincides with the deterioration of Afghanistan-Pakistan relations. India reopened its embassy in Kabul in 2022, and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi welcomed an Afghan Taliban diplomatic delegation to New Delhi in October 2025.

Still, “there are a lot of unknowns,” said Farah Pandith, a CFR senior fellow and counterterrorism expert. Further escalation between Afghanistan and Pakistan could lead to the possibility of Chinese or Russian support to Pakistan through arms or intelligence, for instance, but neither China, India, nor Russia are likely willing “to get involved in a war,” she added.

“War between Pakistan and the Taliban would probably increase the threat [the self-declared Islamic State and al-Qaeda] pose to the United States,” argued Alexander Palmer, fellow for warfare, irregular threats, and terrorism at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS).

Although the United States will likely not be drawn into the conflict, Pandith said the escalation is a “ripe moment for unexpected action” that Washington will be watching closely. “Emotions are running high around extremists, Iran, and volatility” in the region, she noted, and if the United States were to adopt a non-neutral stance, it could influence how other nations, namely China and Russia, respond to the



conflict.

What has the Afghanistan-Pakistan relationship been like since the Taliban's return to power?

While bilateral ties have deteriorated in recent years, Afghanistan and Pakistan were once allies in the early 1990s. Pakistan's intelligence services helped to create the Afghan Taliban, and prior to 2001, Pakistan provided the Taliban regime with advisors, experts, and personnel to operate its military equipment and infantry units. After joining U.S. and NATO forces to support the global war on terrorism after 2001, Pakistan's support for the Taliban became more covert. According to reports by the State Department and the Congressional Research Service, as well as a 2012 leaked classified NATO report, Pakistan's intelligence agency directly assisted the Afghan Taliban and offered sanctuary to the group during two decades of U.S. military intervention in Afghanistan.

When U.S. troops withdrew from Afghanistan in 2021 and the Taliban took power, Islamabad initially welcomed the new government in Kabul. Former Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan equated the Taliban's return with Afghans having "broken the shackles of slavery."

Since then, however, violence inspired by radical Islamist ideology has surged across Pakistan. In late 2022, the TTP ended a ceasefire with the Pakistani government and began ramping up its attacks along the 1,622-mile border called the Durand Line, which Afghanistan has long contested. According to CNN, over 1,200 people were killed in Pakistan in 2025, more than double the number recorded in 2021 when the United States ended its twenty-year military presence in Afghanistan.

In 2023, Pakistan began a mass expulsion campaign of Afghan refugees in what its government claimed was a counterterrorism measure. Pakistan deported more than one million Afghans in 2025 alone, later closing its shared border that October. Today, the border remains largely closed, with only deported Afghan



nationals permitted to cross.

### What's the relationship between the two Taliban's?

Since its inception, the TTP has claimed to be an extension of the Afghan Taliban. It is the largest militant organization in Pakistan and is designated by the State Department as a foreign terrorist organization.

The TTP's development was a byproduct of the 2001 U.S. invasion of Afghanistan. Pakistani jihadists who had fought alongside Afghan militant forces turned against the Pakistani state after Islamabad decided to support Washington's counterterrorism efforts. Those militants became the early members of the TTP, and sheltered the Afghan Taliban, al-Qaeda, and other militant groups fleeing Afghanistan. Buckling to U.S. pressure, Pakistan's government eventually cracked down on these safe havens, deepening the allyship among Pakistani jihadists, the Afghan Taliban, and al-Qaeda. The TTP was officially established in 2007.

The TTP is highly decentralized. Its factions have broad objectives to fight Pakistan's security forces, resist Western influence, and implement Sharia law in areas it controls, but this strategy has shifted over time. Beginning in 2013, under Mullah Fazlullah's leadership, the group grew closer to al-Qaeda and carried out increasingly deadly cross-



least at the outset, was to see whether they could collectively exert some degree of diplomatic pressure on this new Taliban government.”

Meanwhile, the United States has expressed support for Pakistan, with one Trump administration official saying Pakistan has a right to defend itself against Taliban attacks. U.S. President Donald Trump suggested in October 2025 that he could end the conflict between the two sides—a claim he made earlier that year regarding India and Pakistan’s dispute over Kashmir—and has a close relationship with Pakistan’s military chief Syed Asim Munir.

### What could happen next?

Experts say ongoing strikes could result in a sustained conflict. CSIS’s Palmer noted that the likely outcome is de-escalation, but Pakistan’s declaration of “open war” suggests more significant military action could be on the table. Pakistan’s military capacity and size exceeds that of the Taliban, which has been in decline due to limited foreign arms deals.

Markey observed that the two sides could struggle to find common ground. The Afghan Taliban seeks autonomy and has little incentive to reign in the TTP, which it sees as a loyal partner. Meanwhile, Pakistan’s Munir has called the TTP a fundamental enemy that cannot be reconciled or negotiated with. This could lead to coercive diplomacy, said Markey, meaning that once negotiations fail, the parties continue fighting until it “becomes less productive,” at which point they “return to diplomacy”—thereby creating a dangerous cycle of prolonged conflict.

Neither option, he concluded, “looks like a particularly good solution to their problem—or a sustainable one.” ●

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border attacks. By 2020, two years after Fazlullah was killed in a U.S. drone strike in Afghanistan, the TTP said it had no other regional or global agenda beyond targeting Pakistani forces.

### What has been the global response so far?

India has strongly condemned Pakistan’s recent military actions, while China has sought to mediate the conflict and offered to play a role in de-escalation efforts. On March 4, the Afghan Taliban’s foreign minister met with China’s ambassador to Afghanistan to discuss the situation.

Several middle powers—such as Qatar, Russia, and Saudi Arabia—have also offered to broker diplomacy efforts between the two countries, which has served to increase the Afghan Taliban’s legitimacy on the world stage. Over the last few years, many countries have reappointed ambassadors to Afghanistan, reopened embassies, or accepted Taliban ambassador credentials. Russia, which has strengthened bonds with Pakistan in the past decade as U.S.-India relations grew closer, was the first government to formally recognize the Taliban regime in July 2025—the only country so far to do so.

“There was no other choice” but to work with these countries after the United States left Afghanistan, said Daniel Markey, senior fellow with the South Asia program at the Stimson Center. These countries’ general strategy, he added, “at

A photograph of Mark Carney, a middle-aged man with grey hair, wearing a dark blue suit, light blue shirt, and patterned tie. He is speaking at a podium, gesturing with his right hand. The background is blurred, showing a large screen with the word "Baitir" and a logo.

# The Middle Power REVOLT

*Mark Carney's tour of the Indo-Pacific is a rousing show of defiance, but it may have unintended effects.*



Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney has embarked on a weeklong diplomatic mission to India, Australia, and Japan. The sight of a North American country working with three of the Indo-Pacific's largest economies to negotiate trade deals and speed diversification away from the United States—unthinkable just a year ago—underscores the new salience of middle powers. But while middle-power diplomacy has suddenly become ubiquitous, there is a widespread misunderstanding of not only the nature of these countries but also the risks of their collective rise.

The idea of middle powers banding together was first put forth by Carney at this year's World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland. It marked a watershed moment in contemporary international relations. A key U.S. ally and neighbor stood up and announced that the liberal international order had ruptured because its primary architect, the United States, was actively endangering it. In response, Carney called on middle powers to work together to navigate this new world.

Whether one agreed or disagreed with Carney's speech, it was undeniably remarkable. Brutally candid and steering clear of the typical diplomatic euphemisms, it was a firm rejoinder to escalating U.S.-Canada trade tensions and American threats to make Canada its 51st state. But Carney's call for middle powers to cooperate in the face of great-power machinations heralds a risky new way of doing business. While Carney framed it as coalition-building and fellowship—or, as he put it, "if you're not at the table, you're on the menu"—in effect, his speech was a call to arms. If answered, it portends the fragmentation of the international order, the possibility of multiple new competing orders, and the emergence of a more dangerous world.

To make sense of what the fulfillment of Carney's words could mean for the future of the international system, we need to understand what middle powers are and why they matter.

In the policy world, middle powers are often self-defined. Australia and Canada are two such countries that have referred to themselves as middle powers for years. This characterization has tended to produce a soothing effect on the rest of the world. Canada and Australia are mid-sized powers with mid-sized military capabilities and economies. They are self-proclaimed do-gooders—nations committed to liberal values and human rights around the world (in rhetoric, if not always in practice). Who could quibble if countries like these band together and attempt to save the liberal international order from the menacing vagaries of the United States and China?

But academics see middle powers differently. While they disagree on a watertight definition, most agree that, as a group of countries, middle powers have little to do with size, somewhat to do with capabilities and



**Manjari Chatterjee Miller**

## STRATEGY

economies, and nothing whatsoever to do with moral values. What academics agree on is that these countries are internationalist. In other words, they take an active role on specific issues in the international order that align with their national interests, but they are either unable or unwilling to step up regionally or globally to define a more general agenda for international order.

Carney's call to middle powers should therefore not be read as a benign request for only liberal Western nations to fill the leadership vacuum in the rules-based order created by the United States. Rather, it is an urgent call to both democratic and nondemocratic middle powers around the world to cooperate in the face of aggressive great power.

This call encompasses internationalist Western countries such as Canada, a territorially large country that sees democracy and human rights as its core national interests and commits itself to promoting them around the world. But it also captures Turkey, a medium-sized economy that has long promoted its influence in global economic governance as well as its role as a broker between the West and other Muslim nations. It further includes Singapore, a small country that punches well above its territorial weight. It even constitutes India, a country that has consistently campaigned to alter the Western-imposed governance structures of the international economic order that it believes are weighted against the global south. Such a diverse coalition would be less concerned with either liberal or any other unifying ideologies for a future order and more so with its own strategic interests. This would weaken, in the absence of U.S. leadership, any liberal norms that remain in the current order even further.

What underscores the enormity of Carney's call is the fact that middle powers are typically not revisionist. They fundamentally buy into the international order. The United States is widely acknowledged to have built the liberal international order, or what is called the rules-based order, after World War II. But even a country as powerful as the United States could not—and

did not—do this alone. The acquiescence and buy-in of middle powers were crucial to that endeavor. Even a middle power such as India, which expresses skepticism about the rules-based order, has never supported alternatives to it. New Delhi withheld support for a Soviet-led order, even though the Soviet Union was its close partner and the United States was not, just as it does so today for a China-led order. If middle powers that have historically supported the current order turn away from it to build coalitions among themselves, the implications are frightening.

The reality is that middle powers helped build the current international order, and if they stop buying into it, that order will erode. Middle powers that set aside bilateral and trilateral differences to cooperate could together constitute a powerful force and lead to order fragmentation. But by setting up small-group coalitions, they are liable to create competing orders. And those orders could fragment along many different lines, from trade to security to the environment.

India's recent "mother of all deals" with the European Union provides an illustrative example of how trade between countries could fundamentally shift, leading to competing norms and fragmentation. India had spent the past two decades developing a close strategic partnership with the United States in response to its bipartisan overtures. To India's severe shock, when U.S. President Donald Trump came into office for a second time in 2025, he slapped 50 percent tariffs on New Delhi for a variety of reported reasons, including India's oil imports from Russia, which had skyrocketed since the Ukraine war began in 2022. Less than a year later, India, historically one of the most protectionist countries in the world, concluded a free trade agreement with the EU on Jan. 27. But EU regulations on practically everything—from products, health, and safety to digital technology regulation—are vastly different from U.S. regulations. If India gears its exports for the EU market and follows the breadth of EU rules and regulations, then the EU will eventually become its primary market. The EU-India trade

deal not only indicates that one of the largest middle powers in the world is diversifying away from the United States, but that it is hedging its future trade relationships to elevate EU rules, and not American ones, as the standard.

It's a similar story with security norms. Trump's threats to annex Greenland dominated conversations at this year's Munich Security Conference. Canada, in response, has opened a consulate in Greenland and signed a defense cooperation agreement with Denmark to work closely on Arctic security. The foundation for those actions was laid before Trump's annexation threats—which would effectively destroy NATO if they came to pass—but now they have taken on added significance. Close security cooperation is rooted in mutual trust. Mutual trust among liberal countries, including the United States, was the bedrock of the liberal international order. Even slight turns away from that to resist U.S. encroachment are cracks in the security order that will be almost impossible to repair, even if a post-Trump administration should try.

To be sure, neither of the two main great powers today—the United States and China—have left this group of countries much choice. Washington and Beijing have not offered these countries the option to buy into and help build a beneficial new order. The United States seems bent on destroying the international order it created. But the only vision of a new international order it has offered thus far is a harkening back to the days of empire—a vision that is completely anathema to most countries but especially those middle powers in the global south who have vivid memories of imperial colonization. And the United States' unilateral strikes on Iran are only adding to the perception of a great power untethered to old norms. China has yet to offer any concrete conception of what a China-led international order will look like other than that it will be girded by authoritarian norms. Moreover, many of these countries have uneasy relationships with China and do not trust it.

The path that middle powers have been forced



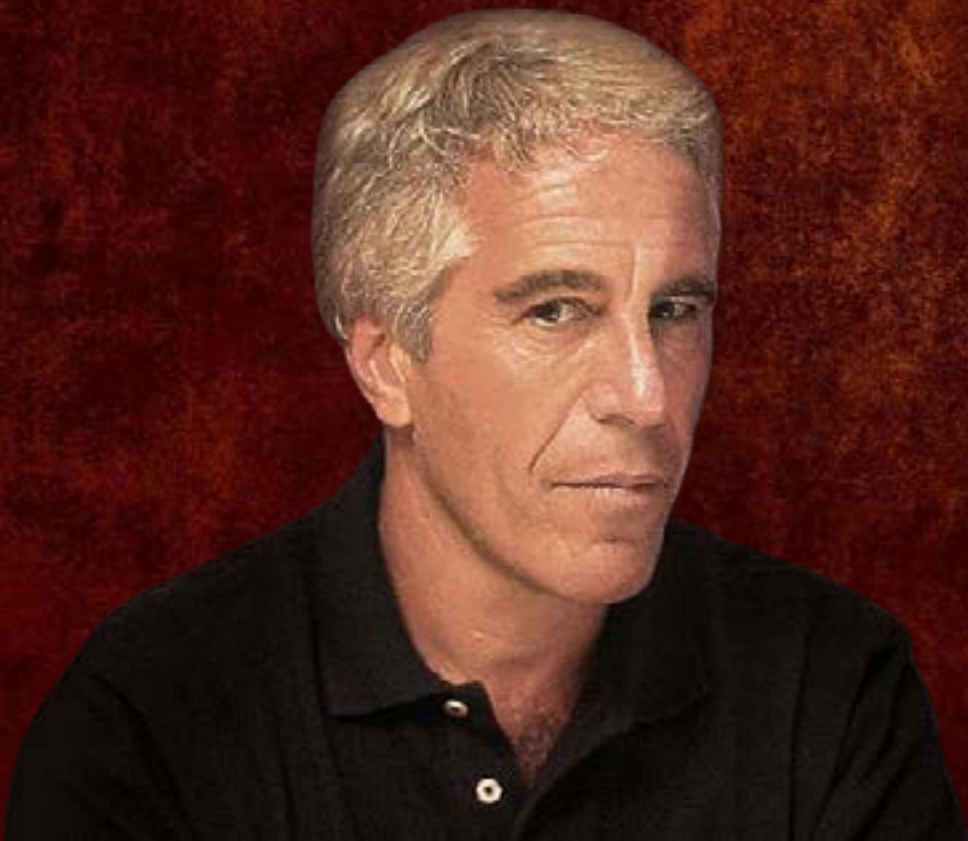
onto by great power-rivalry, and particularly by the United States, is a fraught one. At Davos, Carney had the courage to say out loud what the leaders of other middle powers were already thinking—and even beginning to act on. But the consequences of the Carney doctrine of coalitional strength, should it to come to full fruition, will be far-reaching. Middle powers do not have the capacity to create an international order that encompasses the world. They are not likely to work with China to create a new stable order. They also cannot shore up the current order without the support of the United States—nor may some of them even want to anymore. But they have the capacity to create smaller competing orders. And in doing so, they will write the final epitaph of the liberal international order and the U.S. leadership that underpins it. ●

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The Epstein Files  
and the dark  
anatomy of  
global power

# Elite Without Ethics



*Jeffrey Epstein was not an aberration but a symptom. Behind his crimes stood a powerful ecosystem where wealth, intellect, and influence conspired to suspend morality. Elite Without Ethics exposes how global power protected predation—and called it privilege.*

**T**he email exchange on March 8, 2017, remains a chilling testament to human depravity. On one end was Deepak Chopra, the world-renowned advocate of alternative medicine, and on the other, the American financier and sex offender Jeffrey Epstein. The subject of their dialogue was seemingly profound—the universe, consciousness, and cellular existence. However, beneath the layers of this philosophical discourse lay a nightmare for any civilized

society. When Chopra writes that "pretty girls are conscious when they scream" and Epstein labels it "divine consciousness," it ceases to be a mere private conversation between two individuals. It becomes a documented record of the collective perversion of a global elite who, in the arrogance of power and wealth, redefined the very meaning of morality.

Jeffrey Epstein was no ordinary criminal. He was the symbol of a 'rot' deeply embedded in the corridors of power and modern capitalism. The release of the 'Epstein Files' in 2026 has proven that his crimes were not the work of a lone individual but part of a systematic machinery involving presidents, royalty, scientists, and billionaires.

### **The Rise of a Predator and the Science of 'Manipulation'**

Epstein's journey from a modest Brooklyn neighborhood to becoming a 'Master of the Universe' on Wall Street is a dark version of the American Dream. Despite being a college dropout, his ability to teach mathematics at an elite institution like the Dalton School and subsequently attain a high position at an investment firm like Bear Stearns showcased a talent he himself referred to as 'technical deception.'

Epstein's true strength lay not in his financial acumen, but

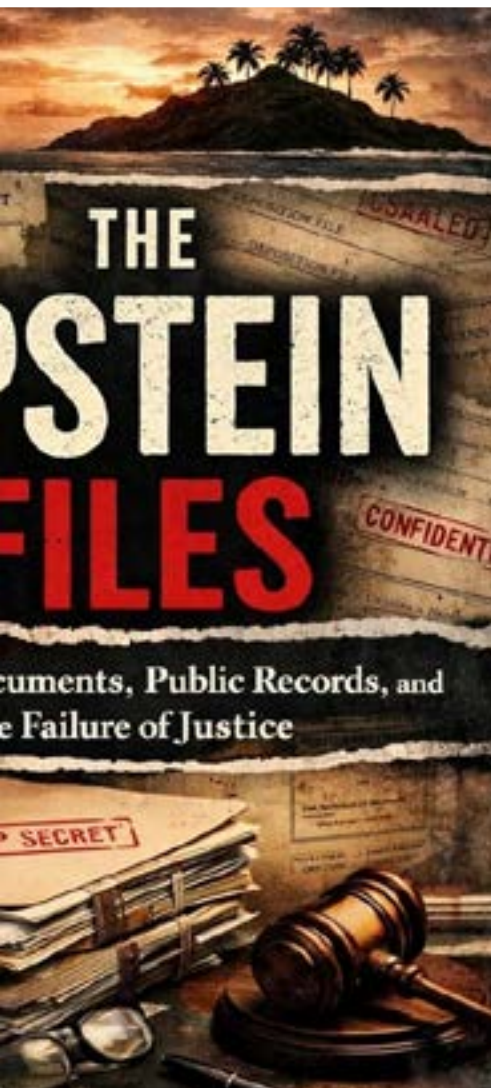
in his art of identifying 'human weakness.' He understood that powerful people and intellectual stars often grow weary of moral constraints and seek a 'secure seclusion' to satisfy their frustrations. Epstein provided exactly that—from his Manhattan mansion to his Caribbean 'Orgy Island.'

In Ghislaine Maxwell, he found the 'partner' who opened the doors of the influential elite for him. Maxwell was not just an associate; she was the ringleader of a 'dragon' that specialized in 'procuring' underage girls and serving them to Epstein.

### **Intellectual Shields and the Trade of Credibility**

Epstein's greatest cunning was hiding his crimes under the cloak of 'academic and scientific research.' He bought his credibility by handing out massive checks to world-renowned scientists, linguists, and thinkers. When scholars like Noam Chomsky advised him on how to avoid media "hysteria," it becomes clear to what extent Epstein had brought the intellectual world under his influence.

By spending billions of dollars, he created an 'ecosystem' where his crimes could be dismissed as mere 'eccentricities' or 'mistakes.' The funding provided to educational institutions was, in reality, a trap for girls who dreamed of higher



education. Girls like Annie Farmer and Maria Farmer were promised academic help, only to be dragged into a hell from which there was no return.

### The 2026 Files and the Game of 'Selective Transparency'

When the Epstein files were made public in 2026, the world expected the truth to finally emerge. However, American politics played its usual game. Donald Trump, who had promised during his campaign to make these files public, adopted a defensive stance after coming to power. While the 'Epstein Files Transparency Act' was passed into law, the Department of Justice made every effort to redact names that could harm Trump's close associates or his own influence.

The presence of names ranging from Bill Clinton, Bill Gates, and Elon Musk to Prince Andrew in these files reveals that Epstein's 'Lolita Express' was not just an aircraft; it was the epicenter of the unethical alignment of global power. It is ironic that the Trump administration showed the most resistance in releasing the very files demanded by his 'MAGA' supporters. This is the ultimate example of 'collective self-defense' by the elite.

### European Action vs. American Silence

A clear divide is visible in the global impact of the Epstein



files. In Europe, the pressure of morality and accountability led to a flurry of resignations, whereas in the United States, attempts were made to protect the influential using arguments like 'partying is not a crime.'

In the UK, Prince Andrew was stripped of his royal titles and evicted from the palace. In France, figures like Jack Lang, and in Slovakia, Miroslav Lajčák, had to step down. However, in America—the very place where Epstein ran his primary network—individuals like Howard Lutnick remained in power despite their lies being exposed. This reflects a 'moral erosion' in modern America, where falsehood has become an integral part of politics.

### The Testimony of a "Molestation Pyramid Scheme"

In this entire saga, the most crucial voices are those of the victims who were held as "sex slaves" for years. In September 2025, Marina Lacerda's

testimony on Capitol Hill laid bare the "monstrosity" that Epstein had masked under the guise of "massages." The stories of Lacerda and Haley Robson reveal a consistent pattern: exploiting poverty and helplessness to lure minors with money, gaining their trust, and finally blackmailing them into a vicious cycle where they were forced to recruit other girls.

Investigators have rightly termed this a "Molestation Pyramid Scheme." This system was not merely the brainchild of a lone criminal; it was the byproduct of a society that had elevated money to the status of God. Epstein was a sociopath, but he was nurtured by the very people who called themselves the "guardians of civilization."

### Late-Capitalism and the Death of Morality

The analysis of Professor Philip Golub from the American University of Paris lies at the heart of this discourse. Epstein's rise occurred amidst a wave of "arrogance and misconduct"

on Wall Street, where financial engineering had entirely overtaken ethics. This is the era of "Late-Capitalism," where investment bankers transformed into "Titans" and "Masters of the Universe." Sex parties fueled by cocaine and the exploitation of minors were integral parts of this distorted social order. Epstein simply packaged this depravity as a "service."

## The Political Earthquake of the 'Epstein Files' in India

The waves of these files, which



shook global power centers, did not leave the corridors of Lutyens' Delhi untouched. When a portion of Epstein's documents became public, a controversial email sparked a political firestorm in India. This email referred to Prime Minister Narendra Modi's historic 2017 visit to Israel, in which Epstein made derogatory remarks involving "pretty girls" and strategic diplomacy.

The Indian opposition, led

by the Congress party, seized the opportunity. Protests erupted outside Parliament, while inside, Leader of the Opposition Rahul Gandhi confronted the government, calling it "an Indian extension of a global moral collapse." Gandhi questioned how references to Indian diplomacy ended up in the communications of an international child sex offender. In another instance, the name of Union Minister Hardeep Singh Puri was also dragged into the discourse. To defend against this

political onslaught, Minister Puri held a press conference, taking a stern stand. He dismissed Epstein as a "convicted criminal" and characterized his claims as "baseless nonsense." While the Ministry of External Affairs reacted sharply against this "dirty campaign," the incident proved that Epstein's network and ambitions were not confined to the West; he harbored clandestine motives to influence the rising powers of

the Global South.

## Accountability or Mere Window Dressing?

Jeffrey Epstein's suspicious death in a New York jail may have saved him from a legal trial, but the court of history has already delivered its verdict. However, the question remains: did the "system" that birthed him die with him? The 2026 files have opened a window, but the complete truth remains sealed.

The struggle of the survivors is no longer just about compensation; it is about the "freedom to speak the truth" and "equality of justice." Psychologist Catherine Stamoulis rightly asks: what kind of justice is it where the names of the victims are public, yet the faces of the perpetrators remain protected?

The Epstein files are not merely a sex scandal; they are a glimpse into the "dark well" of modern power, where the influential can go to any lengths to evade accountability. As long as this unethical triangle of power, capital, and luxury persists, new "Epsteins" will continue to emerge.

The ultimate truth lies in the words of Marina Lacerda: "This fight is not over until we say it's over." This turning point in 2026 is history's greatest test of accountability. Can we become a society where there is no place for those who call a "scream" a form of "divine consciousness"? ●



# BHARAT The AI Frontier

*From the hallowed halls of Bharat Mandapam, a new era dawns. India is no longer just a digital consumer but the 'Neural Center' of global AI, redefining innovation through sovereign missions, radical affordability, and a deeply human-centric vision.*



Srirajesh



Last month, under the golden hue of a mild winter sun, New Delhi's Bharat Mandapam underwent a profound transformation. It was no longer merely a state-of-the-art convention center; it pulsed as the 'Neural Center' of global Artificial Intelligence. The grand confluence of Silicon Valley titans, world-class policymakers, and grassroots innovators witnessed in the heart of India's capital was more than a meeting—it was a proclamation. It signaled a historic tectonic shift: the primary narrative of AI is migrating from the West toward the Global South, with India acting as its new gravitational north.

The presence of industry legends—Sam Altman (OpenAI), Jensen Huang (NVIDIA), Sundar Pichai (Google), and Satya Nadella (Microsoft)—served as living proof of a new reality. India is no longer relegated to being the world's 'back-office' or a mere service provider. It has evolved into the AI Laboratory of the Future, a crucible where 1.4 billion aspirations are being forged into digital solutions. This summit represents the zenith of a national journey where a country is not just adopting technology but redefining it to solve human problems at an unprecedented scale.

### The IndiaAI Mission: A Sovereign Digital Manifesto

Inaugurating the summit with a vision that blended ancient philosophy with futuristic ambition, Prime Minister Narendra Modi unveiled the blueprint for the \$1.4 billion IndiaAI Mission. This is far more than



a budgetary allocation or a government scheme; it is India's 'Digital Manifesto of Strategic Autonomy.' At the core of this mission lies the construction of a colossal computing infrastructure, anchored by over 38,000 Graphics Processing Units (GPUs). The Prime Minister's message was crystalline: India will no longer be satisfied with the legacy of the Business Process Outsourcing (BPO) era—the era that birthed corporate giants like TCS, Infosys, and Wipro. Today, the nation is laying claim to being the 'AI Brain' of the world.

"For India, AI is not merely a tool for corporate efficiency or industrial optimization; it is a profound instrument of social justice," PM Modi remarked. His vision roots AI in the timeless Indian philosophy of 'Sarvajan Hitay, Sarvajan Sukhay' (The welfare and

happiness of all). In his view, AI must transcend the ivory towers of the elite to serve the common citizen, ensuring that technology acts as a leveling force in a traditionally hierarchical world.

### **Democratizing Compute: AI for Less Than a Dollar**

Historically, the greatest barrier to entry in the AI revolution has been the staggering cost of 'Compute Power.' High-end GPUs were the exclusive domain of trillion-dollar corporations. India, however, has shattered this monopoly with a revolutionary strike.

Through the 'IndiaAI Compute Portal,' Indian startups and researchers are being provided access to high-performance GPUs at the staggering rate of just ₹67 (less than \$1) per hour. The Prime Minister



presented this as a global case study in inclusivity.

"When we make the 'fuel' of AI cheaper than a cup of coffee," he noted, "we ensure that the next disruptive AI model isn't born in a high-rise Silicon Valley boardroom, but in the modest cubicle of a tier-2 Indian city."

This is the democratization of computing in its purest form. It is this radical affordability that transforms India into the most resonant and powerful voice for the Global South, proving that cutting-edge technology need not be a luxury.

### The 'New India' Through Global Eyes

The testimonials from the visiting tech elite underscored India's shifting status from a massive

market to a foundational partner:

- Sam Altman (OpenAI): Altman marveled at the fact that India has become OpenAI's second-largest user base. He emphasized that India possesses the Scale, the Talent, and a 'Contagious Enthusiasm' that makes it a 'Full-Stack AI Leader.' His admission that India is now a strategic 'Partner' rather than just a 'Market' reflects a significant rebalancing of global power.
- Sundar Pichai (Google): Describing India's AI trajectory as 'extraordinary,' Pichai issued a vital warning: the world must not allow the 'Digital Divide' to mutate into an 'AI Divide.'



Google reaffirmed its commitment to India by investing heavily in localized infrastructure and linguistic AI tools capable of navigating the nuances of 22 official Indian languages.

- Satya Nadella (Microsoft): Nadella brought with him a staggering \$17.5 billion investment commitment for India's AI and Cloud infrastructure. His ambitious goal to skill 20 million Indians by 2030 highlights the human-capital focus of the revolution. He lauded India's 'e-Shram' platform as a gold standard for Digital Public Infrastructure (DPI) globally.

### Diplomatic Shadows: The Gates Withdrawal and the Epstein Controversy

While the summit was a celebration of progress, it was not immune to the complexities of global ethics and politics. One of the most talked-about moments was the sudden absence of Bill Gates. Despite being a headline speaker, Gates withdrew just hours before his address.

Reports suggested that the resurgence of the 'Epstein Files' controversy and the inclusion of his name in related discussions made his presence untenable on such a high-profile stage. This incident served as a sobering reminder of how moral and ethical controversies within the global elite can impact even the most 'sanctified' tech forums. However, the diplomatic void was quickly filled by the high-profile presence of leaders like French President

Emmanuel Macron and Brazilian President Lula da Silva, lending the summit a profound geopolitical weight.

### From the Lab to the Masses: A Festival of Innovation

The exhibition halls of Bharat Mandapam were a testament to the fact that in India, AI has moved past the 'Hype' and entered the 'Reality' phase. Over 600 startups showcased solutions that were not just concepts, but market-ready tools:

1. Revolutionizing Healthcare: Startups like Qure.ai demonstrated how AI-driven diagnostics have increased the detection rate of Tuberculosis in public health centers by 35%, saving countless lives through early intervention.
2. Empowering Agriculture: AI-powered soil sensors and real-time data analytics showed how marginal farmers could reduce input costs and increase yields, turning AI into a 'Digital Kisan (Farmer) Friend.'
3. The Linguistic Bridge: India's vast linguistic diversity, once considered a logistical hurdle, has become a Data Goldmine. Real-time translation tools across 22 languages have virtually dissolved the internal barriers of communication, creating a truly unified digital market.

### Data Sovereignty and the New Generation

India currently generates nearly 20% of the world's digital data and boasts the highest 'AI Skill Penetration' in the world. The development of 12 indigenous Large Language Models (LLMs) ensures that India will not be a captive consumer of foreign proprietary algorithms.

The spirit of this movement was best captured by Tasneem Khan, a 23-year-old junior engineer who traveled 1,200 kilometers from Jharkhand to Delhi. "This summit is a manifesto," she said. "It proves that we aren't just here to buy; we are here to build. We have the data, we have the brains, and now we have the infrastructure to lead."

### Defining the 'Soul' of Artificial Intelligence

India's AI journey is not merely a technological race; it represents a broader civilizational challenge. By advocating for "Human-Centric AI," the Prime Minister underscored the need for a balance where technology strengthens human dignity and democratic values rather than undermining them.

The IndiaAI Impact Summit 2026 at Bharat Mandapam made it clear that the future of artificial intelligence will not be shaped solely in the closed, air-conditioned corridors of Silicon Valley, but increasingly in the open fields of rural India and in the aspirations of its 1.4 billion people. India's message to the world was simple yet profound: the true purpose of technology is not merely profit, but human upliftment.

However, the summit was briefly overshadowed by a controversy involving Galgotias University,

where a robotic dog displayed at its pavilion was initially presented as a domestic innovation. Technology experts later pointed out that the machine closely resembled a commercial model produced by the Chinese company Unitree Robotics. Following the revelation, the organizers asked the university to withdraw the exhibit, and the institution subsequently issued a clarification and expressed regret. While the episode momentarily raised questions about the credibility of indigenous innovation claims, it remained a minor blemish in an otherwise landmark gathering.

As the lights of Bharat Mandapam gradually dimmed, the broader message to the global community became unmistakably clear: the Indian AI experience

is no longer a distant aspiration but a tangible present-day reality. India is not only emerging as a potential "brain" of global AI development but is also stepping forward to shape its "soul"—the ethical and human dimensions that will guide its future.

This moment reflects India's evolving digital sovereignty, where it seeks to demonstrate how technology can be made democratic, inclusive, and deeply human in its orientation. The essence of this vision was captured in the Prime Minister's

words: "AI must accelerate global growth, but it must remain deeply human-centric." That principle may well become the guiding mantra positioning India as one of the world's next technological superpowers. ●





# RELIGION LOST GEOGRAPHY WON

*The 2026 war and the collapse of the Ummah myth*



Sanjay Shrivastava

***What once shimmered as a promise of unity has revealed itself as a mirage. The explosions over Tehran in 2026 did not merely ignite a war; they exposed a civilizational illusion. As missiles redrew realities, faith receded before borders. This is not the collapse of a religion, but the end of a political myth—where geography, at last, prevailed over belief.***



**T**hat hazy evening after February 28, 2026, when the explosions of American and Israeli missiles created a terrifying light over the Tehran skyline, was not just the beginning of a war.

It was the echo of the formal end to the meta-narrative that had been worshipped as the 'Muslim Ummah' for the past half-century. When bunker-buster bombs reduced the Supreme Leader's

compound on Tehran's Pasteur Street to rubble, more than just a building was buried beneath it; with it died the dream of Islamic renaissance that had lit up Ayatollah Khomeini's eyes in 1979 with visions of a global Pan-Islamic empire.

Future historians will view this day as the final victory of the Westphalian order, re-establishing the sovereignty of borders over religion. When people spoke of the 'Ummah' at the end of the 20th century,



by fire. It has become clear that religion is no longer a substitute for geography. The 'Ummah' is dead, and its killer is not an external enemy, but the harsh reality of the nation-state that the Muslim world had unsuccessfully tried to suppress beneath its religious identity.

### The Myth of the 'Ummah' and Its Historical Burden

The idea of the Muslim Ummah is fundamentally a transcendental concept. It visualizes a global unity where borders, languages, and ethnicities become secondary, and faith is the primary identity. This idea originated at a time when empires were based on religious identity. However, the decline of this principle began with the collapse of the Ottoman Empire in 1924. When Mustafa Kemal Atatürk abolished the Caliphate, he eliminated not just a position, but the ideological center that had claimed to unite Muslims worldwide for centuries.

The end of the Caliphate after World War I left a deep wound in Muslim consciousness. In the latter half of the 20th century, the idea of the 'Ummah' was given a political edge to heal that very wound. The formation of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) in Rabat in 1969 was an attempt to give this idea institutional form. At that time, the 'Ummah' was seen as an economic and political block that could challenge Western dominance.

But the real shift came with the 1979 Iranian Revolution. Ayatollah Khomeini claimed that "Islam has no borders." This idea was a direct challenge to the traditional Sunni structure led by Saudi Arabia. It was here that the cracks within the 'Ummah' began to form, cracks that have today become a deep abyss. Through the export of revolution, Iran created a Shia Crescent that changed the very definition of 'Ummah' for Sunni Arab countries. For them, Ummah was no longer a symbol of unity, but a tool for Iranian imperialist dominance. In this great war of 2026, when Iran's proxy organizations attacked the interests of Arab countries, this mask of Islamic unity slipped away forever.

### Operation Epic Fury and Shattering Identity

The current crisis of March 2026 is not just military action against Iran's nuclear program. It is a decisive war against the axis of resistance that Iran

it was a powerful soft power tool—an ideological cloak worn by rulers from Riyadh to Jakarta to suppress domestic dissent and assert their legitimacy. But the missiles of 2026 have torn this cloak to shreds.

Today's devastation is not the burning neighborhoods of Tehran, but the ideological vacuum spreading through the corridors of Riyadh, Cairo, and Islamabad. The 'Ummah', in whose name rallies were held, UN resolutions were brought, and poems were written for decades, is nowhere to be seen in this trial

had nurtured over the past four decades through organizations like Hezbollah, the Houthis, and Hamas.

The most crucial point of analysis here is the reaction of the Arab world as Israel—once called the eternal enemy of the Ummah—bombs Iran. Statistics from strategic forums are startling. Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Bahrain have not uttered a single word in favor of Iran. Why? Because Iran fired missiles at the US bases and strategic locations in these very countries in retaliation. Consequently, these countries have termed Iran's counter-action as an act spreading regional instability.

This change did not happen suddenly. The 2020 Abraham Accords laid its foundation. Arab countries realized that Israel could be a strategic partner for them, while Iran is an existential threat to their monarchical structures.

In the traditional discourse of the Ummah, Israel was a cancer, but in current geopolitics, Israel has become a security shield. When Iranian missiles fall on the glamorous Fairmont Hotel in Dubai or Kuwait's airports, the message is not for Israel, but for those Muslim countries that prioritized their national interests over religious solidarity. This is not brother attacking brother; it is one nation attacking its neighbor. Here, the principle of religious fraternity has utterly surrendered before national sovereignty.

### The South Asian Front: Civil War in the "Fortress of Islam"

The most grotesque and distorted image of the Ummah's fragmentation is not found in the deserts of West Asia, but in the landscapes of South Asia—a region once hailed as the "invincible fortress of Islam." Pakistan and Afghanistan, two nations whose very foundations were cemented solely by religious identity, are now thirsting for each other's blood.

Pakistan, a nation born out of the 'Two-Nation Theory,' is today battling the very Frankenstein's monster it nurtured for decades in the name of Islamic brotherhood. The resurgence of the Taliban in Afghanistan was supposed to provide Pakistan with "strategic depth," but today it has morphed into a strategic nightmare.

Consider the height of this paradox: Afghanistan



is a "Pure Islamic Emirate" and Pakistan is an "Islamic Republic." Both claim their governance is rooted in Sharia values. Yet, the thunder of artillery along the Durand Line proves that when Pashtun nationalism and border security are at stake, the principle of the Ummah is reduced to a worthless scrap of paper. For the Taliban, Kabul's sovereignty and Pashtun identity carry far more weight than Islamabad's desperate appeals for Muslim solidarity.

The collapse of the Ummah in South Asia is particularly significant because religion here was wielded as a strategic weapon. When organizations like the TTP wage war against the very state that made Islam its constitution, it stands as a testament to the internal failure of political Islam. At this juncture, Pakistan's middle class is exhausted by the slogans of the Ummah. They see that in the name of this global brotherhood, they have received only economic ruin



and global isolation, while their Arab brothers polish their economies through partnerships with Israel.

## Economic Realism: Vision 2030 vs. The Culture of Martyrdom

The most vital pillar of our analysis is economic realism. In the 20th century, oil was an "Islamic weapon." But in 2026, oil is no longer a tool of faith; it is a national resource whose protection is the top priority for Arab nations.

Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's Vision 2030 is not merely an economic plan—it is an exit door for Saudi Arabia from the archaic structures of the Ummah. Modern Saudi Arabia is promoting a "startup culture" over a "martyrdom culture." Megacities like NEOM and the Red Sea tourism projects signal that Riyadh seeks to transcend its image as the mere "Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques" to become a global investment hub.

When Iran closes the Strait of Hormuz in this conflict, the biggest blow is dealt not to America, but to the stomachs of Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Qatar. In the 20th-century discourse of the Ummah, poverty and austerity were worn as badges of religious pride. But the new generation of the Gulf has no interest in a Caliphate; they demand global access, high-speed internet, and a blockchain economy. In this duel between faith and finance, the victory of the economy is the defeat of the Ummah.

As the world transitions toward green energy and electric vehicles, oil-producing Muslim nations realize their time for religious experimentation is running out. This current war serves as an alarm. Standing with Iran in the name of Islamic solidarity would mean gambling away their economic future. Consequently, the idea of the Ummah's collective power is now relegated to history books. Every nation is now seeking its own survival.

## The Last Gasps of Wilayat al-Faqih

The assassination of Ayatollah Khamenei on February 28, 2026, has shattered the very axis of the sacred apparatus within Iran. The Iranian doctrine of Wilayat al-Faqih (Guardianship of the Jurist) rested on the claim that a religious jurist represents the will of God. But when cutting-edge technology and

intelligence penetrate this "sacred circle," the myth of the leadership's divinity disintegrates.

The surging influence of the Revolutionary Guards within Iran indicates that the foundation of power is no longer Koranic mandates, but the barrel of a gun. When the leadership of an ideology becomes militarized rather than moral, it loses the ethical authority to lead the world's Muslims. The slogans echoing through the streets of Tehran—"Na Gaza, na Lubnan, jaanum fida-e-Iran" (Neither Gaza, nor Lebanon, my life only for Iran)—are a proclamation that the common Muslim is no longer willing to sacrifice their children's future for parasitic ideologies.

### Turkey's Neo-Ottoman Dream and Qatar's Diplomatic Dilemma



Another nail in the coffin of the Ummah during this war is the collapse of Turkey's ambition to reclaim the mantle of the Sultanate. Over the last decade, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan attempted to position Turkey as the new messiah of the Muslim world, an alternative to Saudi leadership.

However, the bitter reality remains: Turkey's economy simply could not sustain its religious rhetoric. When the strikes on Iran commenced, Turkey—a NATO member—found itself in a bizarre

predicament. Ankara's attempt to remain neutral in this conflict eventually exposed the hollowness of its claim to Ummah leadership. When the crisis peaked, instead of deploying its military to aid "religious brothers," Ankara sealed its borders to prevent a flood of refugees. This was a definitive victory for nationalism, puncturing the balloon of Pan-Islamism once and for all.

Qatar, which once touted itself as the world's ultimate mediator, finds itself the most vulnerable in this war. On one hand, Qatar hosts the massive U.S. Al-Udeid Air Base; on the other, it serves as the political sanctuary for groups like Hamas and the Taliban. When American aircraft took off from Qatari soil to dismantle Iranian targets, Qatar's policy of dual-alignment reached its dead end. In the new politics of the region, Qatar's "soft power" has transformed from an asset into a strategic liability.

### China's Transactional Approach and Russia's Constraints



Many intellectuals in the Muslim world hoped that a 21st-century Eurasian bloc led by China and Russia would provide a security shield against the West. That strategic illusion has now shattered.

For China, Iran is merely a source of cheap oil and a transit point for the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). While Beijing garnered applause in 2023 for brokering a handshake between Saudi Arabia and Iran, it retreated to mere "appeals for restraint" the moment missiles began to fly. China has proven that it is a partner for profit, not a soldier for ideology. Beijing will never gamble its global trade for someone else's religious identity.

Meanwhile, Russia, bogged down by the war in Ukraine and crippled by sanctions, could offer Iran little more than a limited supply of weaponry. Moscow lacks the military and economic surplus required to dive headfirst into a war to save Tehran. Iran's isolation demonstrates that the alliances built in the name of the Ummah were standing on foundations of sand.

### India's Active Neutrality and the Future of Chabahar



For India, this war serves as a rigorous diplomatic litmus test. India has evolved its old definition of non-alignment into a sophisticated policy of multi-alignment. Analysis from global think tanks suggests that while India respects its historical and cultural ties with Iran, it has prioritized its security and economic interests by standing with Israel and the Arab states.

Chabahar Port, envisioned by India as a gateway to bypass Pakistan, has now turned into a war zone. Yet, India views this primarily as a commercial setback rather than a cause for sympathy toward a religious bloc. India's stance sends a clear message to the world: the political weight of the Ummah has officially dropped to zero.

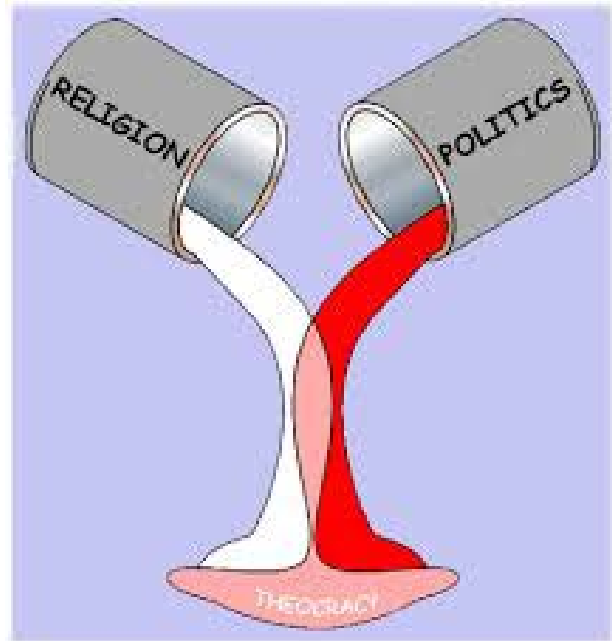
### The Irrelevance of the OIC: A Club of Global Solitude

The Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), representing 57 nations, has today become the world's loneliest club. Originally founded with the primary objective of protecting Palestine and safeguarding the collective interests of Muslim nations, the OIC was found wanting in this hour of catastrophe. When Iran called for an emergency meeting, the vast majority of member states simply looked the other way.

The organization remains active only on issues

that require no real sacrifice—such as passing condemnation resolutions against Islamophobia. However, when member states are firing missiles at one another, the organization appears utterly paralyzed. This war marks the formal dissolution of the OIC's purpose; it has been relegated to a mere "dinner club," possessing zero leverage in the theater of global politics.

### Can Religion Be the Foundation of Politics? An Existential Inquiry



This analysis raises a fundamental and existential question: in the post-modern landscape of the 21st century, can religion serve as the basis for any lasting political unity? The concept of the Muslim Ummah was successful in the medieval era, a time when empires were built upon religious identity.

However, the modern era belongs to the Westphalian nation-state. Nationalism is a primal force that transcends the boundaries of faith. A Saudi citizen now identifies as a Saudi first and a Muslim second. This war serves as definitive proof that when forced to choose between creed and national interest, the modern citizen prioritizes their passport over their religious identity. Attempting to make religion the cornerstone of global diplomacy has proven to be a suicidal endeavor.

### The Map of the Future: A Post-Ummah World

The new order emerging from the ashes of this conflict will be built upon economic corridors rather than religious blocs. Three new power centers are set to replace the old Islamic map:

1. The Israel-Arab Security Axis: This alliance will be the dominant reality of West Asia. It is founded not on faith, but on advanced technology, water management, and shared security concerns. Here, the principle of "the enemy of my enemy is my friend" has permanently superseded the doctrine of the Ummah.
2. The Isolation of Iran: Iran will either retreat into the status of an isolated "garrison state" or be forced to abandon its 1979 revolutionary identity to become a conventional nation-state.
3. The Realistic Restructuring of South Asia: For Pakistan, the Ummah card no longer holds any value on the global stage. It must pivot its identity from an exporter of Jihad to a viable economic entity to survive.

### The Digital Ummah: A Virtual Consolation

As the geographical Ummah withers away, a "Digital Ummah" is rising in its place. Through social media and hashtag campaigns, Muslims across the globe remain connected. However, this digital solidarity is merely an emotional catharsis—a virtual consolation.

Millions of 'likes' on digital platforms cannot defend a national border. This war demonstrated a stark reality: while Tehran was being bombarded, the internet was flooded with trending topics, yet not a single Muslim nation stepped forward on the ground to aid Iran. The gap between virtual noise and geopolitical reality has never been wider.

### A New Ground for Discourse: Silicon over Supplication

In the contemporary era, the metric of power is no longer the frequency of prayers, but the capacity of silicon chips and the velocity of hypersonic missiles. A vast segment within Muslim nations has now accepted this reality. The discourse of the Ummah was a convenient tool for rulers who sought to cloak their governance failures behind the veil of religious



pride. But when missiles pierce through the ceiling, that pride is ground into the dust.

From Riyadh to Jakarta, the youth are now envisioning their identity as global citizens. They are valuing coding and diplomacy alongside the scriptures. This is not the end of a faith, but the demise of an artificial political construct. People have



realized that for a better future, they do not need each other's dogmas as much as they need each other's markets and technology.

### Strategic Opportunity for India

For a nation like India, this represents a pivotal moment. Home to the world's third-largest Muslim

population, India has never allowed the Ummah narrative to hijack its foreign policy. Today, as Muslim nations themselves distance themselves from the Ummah construct, India has a golden opportunity to engage with them on purely economic and strategic grounds. Projects like the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) are the foundations of this nascent world order.

### The Philosophical Demise of the Ummah

Philosophically, the idea of the Ummah was a form of collectivism that attempted to negate individualism and nationalism. However, human nature remains fundamentally rooted in the soil and its ancestral origins. For an Afghan, his Pashtunwali (Pashtun code) is older and deeper than his religion. For an Iranian, Persian pride has always been in friction with a faith of Arabian origin. The war of 2026 has merely brought these latent tensions to the surface.

### Farewell to History, Welcome to Reality

The Muslim Ummah was a grand epic poem that men tried to rewrite into the prose of politics. The result is the tragedy currently being authored by missiles. As we witness the smoke over Tehran and the silence of Dubai's skyscrapers, it is clear that the Muslim world has traded its dreamlike past for a stark, uncompromising future.

The concept of the Ummah will henceforth reside in the museum of history—like an ancient sword that was once a symbol of glory but is utterly ineffective in the age of cyber-warfare and economic corridors. We are witnessing a tectonic shift. We are entering an era where identities are no longer dictated by the "Heavens" (religion) but by the "Earth" (the Nation). The State over the Sect—this is the global mantra of 2026.

When the flames of this March 2026 war finally subside, the world that emerges from the ashes will be governed not by the verses of a religious text, but by diplomatic treaties and scientific breakthroughs. The end of the Ummah is, in truth, the beginning of the political maturity of Muslim societies—a stage where emotions can no longer take the place of national interests. ●

***Farewell, Ummah. Welcome, Realism.***



**T**he hazy sunlight of Jerusalem in February 2026 caught a peculiar flash of color as Prime Minister Narendra Modi's special aircraft taxied to a halt. The optics were not merely diplomatic; they were deeply symbolic, almost visceral. Waiting on the tarmac was Benjamin Netanyahu, accompanied by his wife, Sara. In a world where every stitch of clothing is a message, Sara Netanyahu's saffron suit—matching perfectly with

the pocket square of the Indian Prime Minister—was an unmistakable signal. It was a silent anthem of two civilizations claiming to find their true selves in each other.

Netanyahu's subsequent address at the Knesset, where he referred to Modi not just as a friend but as a "brother," formalized what has been simmering for over a decade: a strategic and ideological embrace



Rakesh Narwal

*When Narendra Modi stepped onto the tarmac in Jerusalem, the moment was more than a diplomatic visit—it was a geopolitical declaration. Amid the ruins of Gaza and the controversy surrounding Benjamin Netanyahu, India signaled a decisive shift: from the moral rhetoric of the Global South to the pragmatic calculus of 21st-century Realpolitik.*

# THE SAFFRON EMBRACE IN JERUSALEM

## Realpolitik, Ideological Convergence, and the Passing of the Watermelon

that is as unapologetic as it is transformative. Yet, as the two leaders shared a podium, a darker shadow loomed over the festivities. Just a few hundred miles away, the landscape of Gaza lay in a state of skeletal ruin, and the International Criminal Court (ICC) arrest warrants against Netanyahu served as a grim reminder of a world deeply polarized. Modi's visit, at this specific juncture, is perhaps the most significant indicator that India has finally exited the "moralist" orbit of the 20th century to enter the cold, hard vacuum of 21st-century Realpolitik.

### Beyond the Bromance — The Ideology of the 'Strongman'

Modi was the first Indian Prime Minister to visit Israel in 2017, breaking a decades-old taboo that viewed

Jerusalem through the prism of Palestinian suffering. In 2026, the return visit is no longer a novelty; it is a consolidation. The shared chemistry between Modi and Netanyahu goes beyond personal liking; it is rooted in a shared distrust of political Islam and a mutual admiration for muscular nationalism.

For the domestic constituencies of both leaders, the imagery is potent. Both project themselves as defenders of ancient civilizations—Hindu and Jewish—against modern threats, primarily radicalism. In the eyes of the Indian Right, Israel is the "North Star" of security—a small nation that takes no prisoners and asks for no permission. By standing visibly beside Netanyahu, Modi is signaling to his base that India, too, has arrived as a "Civilizational State" that prioritizes its security and identity above the collective "moral

noise" of the international community.

### The Ghost of Bandung and the Palestinian Lament

To understand the magnitude of this shift, one must recall the India of 1974—the first non-Arab nation to recognize the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO). For decades, the 'Watermelon' (the colors of the Palestinian flag) was a staple of Indian foreign policy, viewed as a natural extension of India's own anti-colonial struggle. Figures like Jawaharlal Nehru and later Indira Gandhi placed Palestine within a broader moral framework of decolonization.

Today, that legacy feels like an ancient artifact. Palestinian academic Muhammad Makram Balawi correctly notes that "India's legacy is not neutrality in the face of injustice; it is principled leadership." Yet, in 2026, that "principled leadership" has been recalibrated. While India still pays lip service to the "two-state solution," its actions suggest a profound waning of interest. The trickle of Palestinian students in Indian universities has nearly dried up, replaced by a flood of defense MoUs and tech collaborations with Tel Aviv. For the Palestinians, Modi's visit at a time when over 75,000 are dead in Gaza is not just a disappointment; it is a heartbreak. It marks the moment the "Voice of the Global South" chose the "Sword of the Global North."

### The ICC and the Moral Quagmire

The timing of the visit is the most contested element. Modi landed in Israel even as the ICC indicted Netanyahu for war crimes and the UN reported on the "genocide" in Gaza. Much of the Global South, led by South Africa, has viewed Israel's actions as a modern-day apartheid. By choosing this moment to visit, Modi has punctured the narrative of Israeli isolation.

Critics like K.P. Fabian argue that the visit was a "personal favor" to a beleaguered Netanyahu, who is fighting for his political life amidst corruption charges and international ignominy. Domestically, hosting the leader of 1.4 billion people allows Netanyahu to claim that Israel is not alone. For India, however, it is a high-stakes gamble. Does this endorsement tarnish India's claim to be the "Vishwaguru" (Global Teacher)? Or does it simply prove that in the 2026 world order, "might" and "partnership" are the only currencies that matter?



### The "Force Multiplier" — Defense and the Future

Strip away the saffron scarves and the Knesset speeches, and the relationship is built on a foundation of steel and silicon. Realpolitik is the engine here. Israel remains a critical "force multiplier" for India's national security. From cutting-edge drone technology and Pegasus-level cyber capabilities to agricultural innovations that are crucial for India's climate-distressed farmers, the partnership is indispensable.

The 2026 visit saw the signing of 17 agreements, elevating the relationship to a "Special Strategic Partnership." The focus on Critical and Emerging Technologies (iCET) in AI, quantum computing, and critical minerals is designed to insulate India from its dependence on other volatile powers. For a New Delhi that takes pride in its "Atmanirbhar" (self-reliant) defense posture, Israel provides the "black box" technologies that even the Americans are sometimes hesitant to share.

### The I2U2 and the New West Asian Architecture

The visit also highlights a profound shift in regional dynamics. As analyzed in our previous chapters on the



the humanitarian catastrophe in Gaza, India has surrendered its moral leadership.

However, the Modi government seems convinced that the Indian electorate—especially the urban middle class—values the "muscularity" of the Israel partnership far more than the "sentimentality" of the Palestinian cause. To the Indian voter, Israel is a success story of a nation that "hits back," a mirror image of what they want India to be in its own neighborhood.

### The Sunset of Sentiment

Prime Minister Modi's 2026 visit to Israel is the final funeral rite for the old Indian foreign policy of "Moral Grandstanding." It is a cold, calculated pivot toward a world where national interest is the only scripture.

By passing the 'Watermelon' and embracing the 'Saffron-and-Blue' axis, India has declared that it is no longer interested in being the conscience of the world; it is interested in being a power in the world. Whether this transition from "Vishwaguru" to "Vishwapartner" will yield long-term security or lead to a moral isolation in the Global South remains the defining question of this decade.

In the corridors of the Knesset, the laughter was loud and the handshakes were firm. But in the silence of the Gaza ruins, a 75-year-old friendship lay buried. The Ummah has collapsed, and in its place, the cold steel of the Nation-State now reigns supreme. ●

collapse of the 'Ummah,' the Sunni world is no longer a monolithic bloc. The rivalry between Saudi Arabia and the UAE, and the collective fear of a nuclear Iran, have created new, unexpected alignments.

India is now a central pillar of the I2U2 Group (India, Israel, UAE, USA). This trilateral partnership (India-Israel-UAE) represents a "New West Asia" where economic corridors and security pacts take precedence over religious solidarity. As former Ambassador Talmiz Ahmad points out, Modi has affirmed the primacy of this trilateral over India's other regional engagements. With Iran no longer the unifying force it once was, and the US-Israel axis preparing for potential strikes on Tehran, India has made its choice. It is standing with the "Stability Bloc" (Israel-UAE-Saudi) against the "Resistance Axis."

### Domestic Dissent — The Shadow of the Opposition

In India, the Congress party has been quick to seize upon the moral dissonance of the trip. Priyanka Gandhi Vadra's appeal for Modi to mention the "genocide in Gaza" reflects a segment of Indian society that still clings to the Nehruvian ideal of justice for the oppressed. The Opposition argues that by ignoring

# JAMAAT'S RISE BNP'S RULE



Sohini Bose

*In Bangladesh's turbulent political theatre, ballots carry the weight of memory as much as the promise of change. Jamaat-e-Islami's strongest electoral surge signals a shifting tide, yet the shadows of 1971, dynastic loyalties, and pragmatic voter expectations reveal why the road to power remains stubbornly out of reach.*

**T**he 13th general election in Bangladesh, held earlier this month, marked Jamaat-e-Islami's (Jel) strongest electoral performance in the party's forty-seven-year history. Contesting as the lead of an 11-party alliance, it secured 77 of the 299 seats in the Jatiya Sangsad, emerging as the country's largest opposition bloc. Despite Jel's limited electoral experience, having remained banned for several years, pre-poll media reports suggested it was confident of forming a government. This confidence was reflected in its energetic campaigning, active demonstrations, and expanding support base. Yet the Bangladesh Nationalist Party's (BNP) landslide victory underscored enduring fault lines in Bangladesh's



polity that continue to shape voter preferences. As Jel positions itself as the primary opposition in parliament, it is necessary to examine why its electoral gains fell short of a governing mandate.

**Election Promises Without Policy Architecture**



The Jel's 2026 election manifesto outlines a 26-point agenda aimed at building a just, democratic state, prioritising youth empowerment, ensuring proportional representation in elections, and fostering a transparent, investment- and business-friendly economy. Yet these reflect the party's intent rather than a concrete development plan. The manifesto has therefore been criticised for being slogan-heavy and unclear on measurable targets. According to Fahmida Khatun of Dhaka's Centre for Policy Dialogue,

the party's economic agenda contains two structural gaps: uncertain implementation timelines and vague financing mechanisms for enhanced sectoral allocations. For instance, the manifesto pledges to raise public investment to 20 percent of GDP and increase foreign direct investment to US\$ 15 billion. However, it sets no target for private sector investment, the primary driver of growth and employment. Moreover, the Jel does not specify a timeline for achieving its proposed US\$ 2 trillion economy. The manifesto also promises

to create seven crore jobs, but, again, provides neither a timeline nor a corresponding investment plan to ensure delivery.

Consequently, such proposals struggled to convince voters seeking pragmatic measures to rebuild the country's fragile economy, curb rising inflation and address currency devaluation. The absence of clearly delineated provisions to create employment opportunities also likely alienated the country's youth, many of whom had revolted against the former Awami League government in July 2024, for its 'unfair' quota reservations in jobs, which ultimately led to former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's ouster. Therefore, despite the Jel's alliance with the National Citizen Party (the political party created by student leaders who had led the July revolution), the dearth of structured plans appears to have disoriented young voters.

### Gender Discourse and Electoral Costs

The Jel's positions on women's participation in public life have historically reflected its conservative ideological orientation. Before the election, however, the party sought to present a more moderate and reform-oriented image. This repositioning was reflected in its manifesto, which outlines a vision of a technology-driven, modern society and emphasises the creation of a safe, dignified, and participatory environment for women.

However, the Jel's new approach appeared at odds with reportedly conservative remarks made by its party chief, Shafiqur Rahman, on the role of working women, including suggestions that their primary responsibilities lie within the domestic sphere. Observers also pointed to an interview he gave to a news organisation, in which he stated that, due to "biological differences", women could not lead Jamaat-e-Islami, describing female leadership within the party as "impossible" under Islam. These remarks drew criticism from sections of civil society ahead of the elections and may have affected the party's appeal among female voters.

This episode suggests that while the Jel's expanding base reflects growing acceptance in certain constituencies, its position on women's roles may continue to shape the limits of its broader electoral appeal—particularly in a political system and society

shaped by the 1971 Liberation War's egalitarian narrative and decades of women's prominence in national leadership.

### Foreign Interference and Sovereignty Concerns

Anti-Awami League narratives circulated by opposition forces during the July 2024 movement often carried a discernible anti-India undertone. This was linked to perceptions of former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's close ties with New Delhi, which had prompted debate in some quarters regarding India's perceived influence in Bangladesh's political trajectory. Following her ouster, questions of safeguarding national sovereignty featured prominently in public discourse and became an important expectation from the next elected government.

Against this backdrop, Jel's political re-emergence was accompanied by speculation that the party may have benefited from the United States' stated interest in "restoring democracy" in Bangladesh. These perceptions were further reinforced by reports of American diplomats engaging with the party. It was also reported that a US diplomat had downplayed concerns that Jamaat might seek to impose its interpretation of Islamic law. The BNP alleged that Jel had reached a "secret understanding" with the United States and warned that such an arrangement could have implications for Bangladesh's peace, stability, and sovereignty.

Meanwhile, China has also engaged with the Jel. The Chinese Ambassador to Bangladesh, Yao Wen, met Shafiqur Rahman in September 2024, marking the first visit by a foreign diplomat to the party's Dhaka office since 2010. He described the group as a "well-organised political party". Soon after, there were several exchange visits between Beijing and the Jel. Reports of these engagements appear to have contributed to public discussion regarding the party's ability to retain its autonomy in the context of foreign outreach.

### The Enduring Appeal of Political Lineage

In the power vacuum that followed the overthrow of the Hasina government and the ban imposed on the Awami League, the BNP emerged as the only major party remaining in contention. However, in the absence of an active and widely visible leadership

presence beyond the ailing former Prime Minister Khaleda Zia, it faced challenges in consolidating broad-based public support. This created space for the Jel to mobilise with renewed organisational momentum in constituencies where the BNP had yet to re-establish itself. The subsequent return of BNP Chairman Tarique Rahman from his self-imposed exile in London added a new dynamic to the political landscape.

As the son of former Prime Minister Khaleda Zia and former President Ziaur Rahman, Tarique Rahman was widely seen as representing a natural succession of leadership within Bangladesh's political landscape. This perception was reinforced by his mother's demise shortly after his return, which generated significant public empathy for the BNP in the days preceding the election and contributed to a strategic advantage. The appeal of dynastic continuity has continued to shape South Asian politics, including within democratic systems. Bangladesh's own political history reflects this trajectory, with leadership transfers from Sheikh Mujibur Rahman to Sheikh Hasina, and from Ziaur Rahman to Khaleda Zia and now to Tarique Rahman. In this context, many voters appeared to favour their familiarity with the BNP's approach to governance and leadership over the Jamaat's narrative that electoral victory would place political power directly in the hands of the people rather than within established political families.

## The Memory of 1971

Like dynastic continuity, the memory of the 1971 Liberation War remains central to Bangladesh's national identity and continues to influence political attitudes. The Jel's historical legacy is closely linked to this period: its predecessor, Jamaat-e-Islami Pakistan, opposed Bangladesh's independence and was subsequently accused of atrocities against the muktijoddhas—the liberation forces. This association has, over time, contributed to the party being labelled "Razakar" in public discourse, a highly charged term in Bangladesh connoting a "traitor" or "collaborator." It has also underpinned repeated bans on the party and the prosecution of some of its leaders by the International Crimes Tribunal for war crimes related to 1971. The enduring resonance of this history appears to have constrained the party's broader electoral appeal.

In contrast, former President Ziaur Rahman's role in

***In Bangladesh's 13th general election, Jamaat-e-Islami achieved its strongest electoral surge ever, yet failed to secure a governing mandate. Despite the party's organizational momentum, the BNP's landslide victory underscores the enduring power of political lineage, the hallowed memory of 1971, and voter demand for concrete policy over moral rhetoric in a fragile, post-revolution economy.***

the Liberation War conferred a measure of political legitimacy on Tarique Rahman, which, at least for the present, appears to offset his relative political inexperience and contributed to the BNP's historic victory.

These factors suggest that while Jamaat-e-Islami has expanded its organisational footprint and electoral relevance, it remains constrained by structural, ideological, and historical limits. The party had twice partnered with the BNP in coalition politics, functioning as a junior ally within a broader opposition front. Today, however, as it seeks to assert itself as an autonomous political bloc, it must navigate a more complex terrain. Carving out an independent niche will require reconciling its ideological commitments with the demands of a diverse electorate, addressing the legacy of 1971, and presenting a credible alternative in governance beyond moral rhetoric. In a polity shaped by dynastic loyalties, liberation memory, and pragmatic economic expectations, Jel's challenge extends beyond electoral participation to broader political repositioning. Its role as the largest Opposition in Parliament offers both an opportunity to consolidate support and increased exposure to public scrutiny. ●

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# The Day After UKRAINE



Paul B. Stares



President of the United Arab Emirates Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan receives the heads of delegations participating in trilateral talks between the United States, Russia, and Ukraine in Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates.

**E**ven as peace in Ukraine remains uncertain, U.S. and European policymakers should begin preparing for the postwar challenges a settlement will likely bring. Most analysts agree that any agreement will not diminish Russia's threat to the continent—Moscow will continue testing European and transatlantic cohesion through hybrid attacks and possible military incursions, deepening preexisting divisions. To promote greater alliance cohesion and reduce the risk of renewed conflict, NATO, the European Union, and the Group of Seven should launch comprehensive reviews of their long-term strategies toward Russia to bolster deterrence and restore stability to Europe. It is better to plan for most likely postwar challenges now than to hope for the best when the moment arrives.

As the war in Ukraine grinds into its fifth year, the prospects for peace remain bleak. To its credit, the Trump administration's efforts to broker a deal over the past twelve months have yielded considerable progress in some areas, but serious obstacles still need to be overcome in others. Despite the long odds, a sudden breakthrough should not be ruled out entirely. Events that seem implausible today could unfold in ways to bring a ceasefire—if not a comprehensive peace settlement—suddenly within reach. Thinking about what could come next and planning accordingly is therefore prudent and necessary.

*Europe may not hear the thunder of guns forever—but even when the war in Ukraine fades, its echoes will linger. A wounded continent, a wary alliance, and a resurgent Russia may together script a fragile peace—cold, cautious, and shadowed by mistrust.*

When it comes to the proverbial day after in Ukraine, much planning is already underway; the ongoing peace negotiations, after all, largely revolve around what Ukraine can do (alone and with the help of others) to defend itself following a ceasefire, as well as who pays for the massive reconstruction costs and how normal politics return to the country after years of martial law. In contrast, much less thought has been given to what a ceasefire in Ukraine would mean for Europe generally. Though the day after for Europe—much like for Ukraine—depends to a large extent on what happens the day before (in other words, how the war ends), the likely challenges are already coming into focus. Unpacking those challenges should stimulate more debate and, hopefully, preparation. To say the least, much is at stake in how they are managed and, better still, resolved. Better to do this sooner rather than later.

### IMAGINING POST-WAR EUROPE

Excluding the possibility that either Russia or Ukraine prevail and achieve their maximal war aims—outcomes that are not viewed as likely in the short-to-medium term—the general expectation is that the fighting will eventually come to a halt through a negotiated armistice that leaves Ukraine divided with some parts under Russian control. Such an ending will not constitute an amicable settlement by any stretch of the imagination and, much like the present situation on the Korean peninsula, both sides will almost certainly view each other as bitter adversaries for the foreseeable future. This enmity could conceivably soften over time, especially if political change comes to Moscow and Russia makes full restitution for what it has done to Ukraine. However, given the history of post-WWII Europe—not to mention more recent conflicts elsewhere—it is unlikely that this will occur before a substantial passage of time.

Similar thinking shapes current expectations about Europe's future relationship with Russia. NATO and EU officials share the belief that Russia will pose the predominant security threat to Europe for years to come—certainly for as long as Russian President Vladimir Putin remains in power. Having conducted a massive war of aggression and engaged in other hostile actions against European states, Russia simply cannot be viewed as anything other than



a serious long-term security risk. Indeed, to some observers, the threat posed by Russia is anticipated to grow more, not less, menacing in the wake of a peace deal in Ukraine. Putin is widely expected to use the respite from the fighting in Ukraine to rebuild Russia's military strength to not just strike Ukraine again—taking advantage of potential internal unrest and division in the aftermath of a ceasefire—but to test NATO and EU resolve through continued hybrid gray zone attacks and possibly even limited military incursions. The current confrontation with Russia will likely continue to harden in ways that resemble the Cold War.

Europe's continued cohesion in the aftermath of a peace deal could be severely tested and strained due to growing transatlantic tensions, barely suppressed schisms within Europe, and the risks associated with continued confrontation with Russia.

### Potential Transatlantic Friction

Several sources of tension in U.S.-European relations could fester in the aftermath of peace in Ukraine. Some are obvious, such as provisioning



further military and economic support for Ukraine to deter Russian recidivism. Aside from critical intelligence and targeting support, the Trump administration has already ceased most of the United States' direct military assistance to Ukraine. European states provide the bulk of materiel support for Ukraine (albeit in many cases by buying U.S. equipment and supplies). Whether they continue to buy from the United States rather than European firms is likely to become an increasingly contentious issue as Europe seeks to build up its own defense industrial base in order to become less dependent on American suppliers. .

This source of friction, however, could pale in comparison to diverging U.S. and European approaches to sanctions relief and the reestablishment of commercial relations with Russia. Press reports suggest that the Trump administration is already preparing to rapidly normalize economic relations with Russia once the war ends, and has even discussed major investment and trade deals with the Kremlin, all of which will be a source of great consternation to many in Europe. Fears that this will undercut continued European sanctions



and ultimately disadvantage them commercially will only increase. And then there are potential future U.S. troop withdrawals from Europe as the United States' priorities shift to other theaters, notably the Indo-Pacific. How to avoid undermining Europe's defenses or causing some to seek a nuclear deterrent, given continued uncertainties over Russia, will be another major challenge requiring careful attention.

### Emergent Intra-European Disputes

Although European states have demonstrated remarkable solidarity supporting Ukraine's wartime needs and adjusting to the sudden and very costly unwinding of trade relations with Russia (particularly in the energy sector), intra-European friction has emerged. The various agreements and side deals that have maintained a semblance of unity could start to unravel once the fighting ends in Ukraine. Similar grievances are likely to grow more prominent over the disproportionate burden that northern and especially frontline European states have carried in supporting Ukraine. This situation has undoubtedly strained unanimity within NATO and the European Union. Peace will only magnify those rifts, especially if southern states feel that their security priorities continue to be subordinated to the task of deterring Russia. Some NATO frontline states will likely be concerned that efforts by the "Coalition of the Willing" to reassure Ukraine with enhanced military support in the aftermath of a ceasefire could detract from their collective defense commitments elsewhere.

### Risks of Confrontation

The new NATO-Russia line of contact that will stretch from the Barents Sea in the far north to the



Black Sea in the southeast is unlikely to resemble the heavily fortified intra-German border of the Cold War years, in which opposing forces were kept in high states of readiness for war. Nevertheless, the risk that the present confrontation with Russia could suddenly erupt into armed conflict—whether deliberately or unintentionally—will remain significant. Russia has already manifested a willingness to engage in provocative gray zone activities along its border with NATO, which can be expected to continue regardless of the outcome in Ukraine. The goal will be to foment further divisions among European states and between Europe and the United States over how best to respond. The possibility that Russia miscalculates NATO's likely response, or individual NATO forces overreact to exacerbate a crisis, is real. And the frequency of military exercises by both NATO and Russia, as well

as the number of close interactions between their forces, will grow in the coming years. That will only heighten the chances of accidents and potential misunderstandings, possibly triggering dangerous, unintended sequences of events.

It is not too early to think about those concerns before peace comes to Ukraine, as it surely will at some point.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

With those challenges in mind, the following proposals should be considered:

- Group of Seven (G7) members should establish a working group to coordinate policy planning among the leading industrial powers and with the major

international lending institutions over how to manage future political and economic relations with Russia. The G7 has already played an important role in orchestrating the international response to Russia's full-scale invasion, particularly sanctions and other commercial restrictions. It is therefore well positioned to harmonize policies following a potential ceasefire in Ukraine if the Trump administration is prepared to drive such a process as it should, beginning at the next G7 summit this June in France. At the same time, the European Union would be wise to initiate its own review of long-term strategy toward Russia, as some have proposed, that would serve as a unifying roadmap for Europe and a hedge against the Trump administration moving at cross purposes to its own interests. At some point too, Europe needs to establish its own high level political channel to the Kremlin.

- NATO leaders should initiate a new Harmel Report on the future of the alliance. The original report of the Council on the Future Tasks of the Alliance, initiated in 1966 and led by Belgian Foreign Minister Pierre Harmel, became the seminal blueprint for NATO's dual-track strategy of bolstering deterrence while simultaneously seeking détente with the Soviet Union. Although the situation is very different today and the prospects for détente much less promising, a comparably clear commitment by the alliance to counter all forms of future aggression by Russia (and others), while taking steps to reassure Moscow of NATO's peaceful intentions and openness to a relaxation of tensions, would be desirable. This should be initiated at the upcoming NATO summit in Ankara, also in June, and be completed in time for the sixtieth anniversary of the original Harmel Report in 2027.
- The United States and its European allies should propose new Europe-wide risk reduction measures to Russia. As part of the ongoing effort to bring about peace

in Ukraine, the United States and its European allies should signal to Russia a willingness to discuss ways to lessen the risk of conflict in Europe. This effort should include reexamining some of what Russia proposed in their two draft treaties presented to NATO and the United States prior to the invasion of Ukraine in December 2021. At the time, the Biden administration reportedly indicated that it was open to discussing them. Some of the provisions for stabilizing and monitoring the future line of contact in Ukraine, particularly involving the use of new technical devices, could also be applicable to other sensitive areas along the NATO-Russia border.

- The currently moribund Organization of Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) should be upgraded and revitalized to resume some of the useful work it had been doing before 2022. Though there will likely be skepticism about the value of sustaining the OSCE and having it negotiate new agreements with Russia given what happened to most of those agreed upon after the Cold War, there is currently no other pan-European institution that can serve this purpose. Creating a new one would take time and detract from other priorities.

## CONCLUSION

Although an end to the war in Ukraine currently looks unrealistic, it is essential that the United States and Europe prepare for the aftermath. Many issues are likely to come to the fore should an agreement be reached, and it is better to anticipate them today and lay the groundwork for how best to manage them than hope for the best when the moment arrives. ●

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Pratnashree Basu

# Hormuz on Edge

*Iran's threat to close the Strait of Hormuz has destabilized global energy markets. As oil prices surge, this maritime crisis exposes the fragility of global supply chains and the immense geopolitical power of chokepoints.*

**T**he Strait of Hormuz has once again emerged as a fulcrum of geopolitical risk and economic disruption in the early months of 2026. On 2 March 2026, Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps declared the waterway, the narrow throat between the Persian Gulf and the Gulf of Oman, through which roughly 20 percent of the world's crude oil and a substantial share of liquefied natural gas transit daily, effectively closed to commercial shipping and threatened to attack any vessel attempting passage. This marked Iran's most explicit and forceful maritime stance yet, following intensifying

conflict with Israel and the United States, including coordinated strikes on Iranian territory.

The immediate and palpable impact of this escalation has been a near collapse of normal shipping flows. In response to heightened risk, international tanker companies and container operators are halting bookings and cancelling transits across the strait. At the same time, insurers are withdrawing coverage, making trade through the Hormuz commercially unfeasible. With roughly 10 percent of the global container fleet now caught in a bottleneck near Hormuz, the crisis starkly illustrates how swiftly geopolitical risk can translate into logistical paralysis.

These developments have sent shockwaves through international energy markets. Following Iran's warnings of closure, crude oil prices surged, with Brent crude rising by 8.6 percent amid reports of halted tanker traffic and escalating tensions. Both market psychology and the potential for a direct supply shortfall are reflected in this price increase. Traders are also factoring in the potential for long-term disruption at a chokepoint that supports energy flows to Asia, Europe, and beyond. At the same time, officials and investors recognise that even a brief obstruction in Hormuz can raise input costs across the transportation, industrial, and energy sectors. Reports from shipping analytics indicate that freight costs for very large crude carriers bound for Asia have spiked, illustrating how risk repricing along one route reverberates through global transport markets. Higher insurance premiums — rising by as much as 50 percent — further embed elevated costs into the logistics ecosystem, dampening trade and squeezing profit margins for shippers and commodity buyers alike.

The significance of Hormuz as a maritime artery cannot be overstated. At about 33 km at its narrowest point, it is one of the world's most critical chokepoints, with oil, gas, and petrochemical exports from producers in Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait,

Qatar, and Iran traversing this corridor en route to global markets. The strait's closure thus represents not just a regional flashpoint but a systemic risk to global energy security. While the most immediate focal point of disruption has been energy, the interconnectedness of global supply chains means the spillovers extend far more broadly. Maritime freight rates, particularly for oil tankers, have spiked dramatically.

From an operational perspective, shipping companies and ports are scrambling to adapt. Carriers are exploring long reroutes around Africa's Cape of Good Hope or seeking transshipment options that avoid the Gulf entirely, since Hormuz is essentially off-limits. These changes, however, involve clear trade-offs, including longer journey times, higher fuel consumption, and increased congestion at other hubs. These inefficiencies ripple through inventory cycles, delivery schedules, and consumer prices in importing economies, not just the cost of a single voyage.



The crisis exposes fundamental vulnerabilities in the global trade system that extend beyond economic calculations. The geographic concentration of energy exports through a narrow seaway demonstrates how systemic shocks from regional conflicts can be transmitted instantaneously. Maritime chokepoints, far from being passive conduits of commerce, are potential fault lines that governments and corporate organisations must confront. This realisation is likely to shape longer-term planning, from energy diversification strategies to naval deployments aimed at ensuring freedom of navigation.

India's exposure vividly illustrates the geopolitical-economic nexus. Estimates indicate that almost half of the country's monthly oil imports pass through the Strait of Hormuz. As a major importer, India sources a significant portion of its crude and LNG via routes through the strait. With tanker movements stalled and supply chains disrupted, New Delhi has issued advisories for Indian-flagged vessels to exercise



extreme caution, highlighting the risk to national trade interests and the safety of seafarers. Similar risks exist in the Indo-Pacific region for China, the world's largest importer of crude; a protracted closure or ongoing risk premium on Gulf crude supplies would restrict refinery throughput, strain inventories, and potentially lower export competitiveness amid higher input costs. In the European Union (EU), where energy markets remain sensitive to global oil and LNG prices, heightened volatility amplifies cost-of-living pressures and complicates monetary policy for growth and inflation control. Japan and South Korea, heavily reliant on imported energy and lacking substantial domestic resources, are especially vulnerable even to brief disruptions; delays in LNG and oil deliveries can necessitate stockpile draws and refinery slowdowns, raising production costs and increasing inflationary pressure. Together, these patterns show how chokepoint risk translates into actual economic vulnerability for major importers, strengthening the motivation for strategic reserves and diverse sourcing.

Yet even as the world reels from these impacts,

debate continues over the nature and duration of the disruption. The current crisis reaffirms that maritime routes are both strategic and economic assets, linking producers with consumers across hemispheres while remaining vulnerable to geopolitical turbulence. The interplay of conflict, risk pricing, and supply-chain mechanics in the Strait of Hormuz vividly illustrates how rapidly regional hostilities can translate into global economic stress. This emphasises the need for both crisis management and structural resilience, including investment in diversified commerce corridors, alternative energy routes, and cooperative marine security frameworks, alongside strengthened diplomatic channels to lower escalation risks.

The crisis unfolding in the Middle East is arguably the most severe in decades. Beyond the battlefield, it constitutes a systemic stress test for global maritime commerce and energy supply chains, highlighting the fragility of interconnected systems and the need for robust policy responses that address both the immediate impacts and the structural vulnerabilities exposed by such disruptions. ●

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# The Hormuz Tightrope



Anwar Hussain

*As the Persian Gulf teeters on the edge of all-out war, India faces a harrowing balancing act. From protecting nine million citizens to securing energy lifelines, New Delhi must now navigate a geopolitical minefield where strategic autonomy meets cold reality.*

**T**he flames of conflict rising from the Persian Gulf are sending tremors through India's strategic corridors. As the shadow of war between Iran, Israel, and the United States darkens, New Delhi is thrust into an existential dilemma. For the world's most populous nation and fastest-growing major economy, this is not a distant diplomatic skirmish; it is a direct threat to domestic stability, fiscal health, and the lives of millions. India now stands at a pivotal crossroad, attempting to balance its energy thirst with a fragile geopolitical equilibrium.

## The Energy Shield: Buffer vs. Market Reality

India's most immediate concern is the volatility of the global oil market. As a nation that imports over 85% of its crude oil, India is hyper-sensitive to supply chain shocks. While the Ministry of Petroleum and Natural Gas maintains a posture of "constant monitoring," the underlying reality is sobering. Physical scarcity might be managed in the short term, but "price shocks" are inevitable.

Strategic experts note that while India holds a petroleum reserve of approximately 50 days within

its refineries, the psychological impact on pricing is instantaneous. Even without a literal drop in supply, the mere threat of a closed corridor can push oil prices beyond \$95 per barrel. This triggers a domino effect: a widening Current Account Deficit (CAD), a weakening Rupee, and a surge in imported inflation that threatens the common man's pocket.

### The Hormuz Dilemma: A Strategic Achilles' Heel

The geographic heart of this crisis is the Strait of Hormuz. Nearly 20% of global oil trade traverses this narrow chokepoint. For India, there is no viable logistical or financial alternative to this route. Currently, India's Strategic Petroleum Reserves (SPR) in Visakhapatnam, Mangaluru, and Padur hold roughly 100 million barrels—offering a 30 to 40-day cushion.

While India has successfully diversified its suppliers from 27 to 40 nations—a strategy refined during the Russia-Ukraine conflict—no amount of diversification can bypass a shuttered Hormuz. The structural vulnerability remains absolute; if the Strait is blocked, India's economic engine faces a countdown.

### The Russian Factor and Diplomatic Trials

In the post-Ukraine war landscape, Russia has become a primary energy lifeline for New Delhi. Should Gulf supplies falter, India's dependence on Moscow will likely deepen. However, this creates a fresh diplomatic trial by fire. Stabilizing global energy markets may require the West to reconsider sanctions on Russian exports—the world's second-largest oil supplier. India's challenge is to navigate its pragmatic energy needs without alienating its strategic partners in the West, a test that grows more grueling as the Gulf burns.

### Domestic Politics: The Ethics of Realpolitik

The crisis has also ignited a sharp ideological debate within India. The opposition has criticized the government's perceived silence on targeted assassinations and violations of international law. Leaders like Sonia Gandhi and Rahul Gandhi have argued that India's global credibility depends on defending sovereignty and human life. This reflects a deeper internal struggle: should New Delhi's foreign

policy be anchored in its historical "Non-Aligned" morality, or should it be dictated strictly by cold, national self-interest?

### The Tightrope of Multi-Alignment

For over a decade, India has pursued a policy of "multi-alignment," cultivating deep defense ties with Israel while maintaining critical energy and connectivity partnerships with Iran, such as the Chabahar Port project. Simultaneously, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) nations remain vital for trade and remittances. When these regional actors enter a state of direct war, the space for neutrality shrinks. India may soon face the very pressure it has long avoided: the necessity to choose a side.

### The Diaspora: An Impossible Rescue

Perhaps the most harrowing aspect of the crisis is the safety of the nine million Indians residing in the Gulf. This diaspora is not just a cultural link but an economic pillar, sending home billions in remittances. In the event of a full-scale regional war, a mass evacuation would be a logistical impossibility. Past operations in Kuwait or Yemen were massive, but they represent only a fraction of the current scale. The safety of these citizens is the ultimate "red line" in India's diplomatic calculus.

### Economic Ripples: Beyond the Pump

The economic fallout extends far beyond fuel prices. High energy costs inflate the price of manufacturing, transport, and agriculture. For a government prioritizing economic stability, a sustained price hike is an unwelcome intruder. Furthermore, heightened geopolitical risks often lead to capital flight from emerging markets, potentially stalling the foreign investment India needs for its next phase of growth.

### The Shifting Balance of Power

Geopolitical analysts suggest that this conflict is more than a regional spat; it is a realignment of power. With Washington seeking to consolidate a regional order led by Israel, and actors like Turkey and Pakistan potentially being drawn in, the "Strategic Autonomy" India has enjoyed in peacetime is being pushed to its limits. ●



# The Lobito RIVALRY



Veer Puri



***Africa's mineral corridors are fast becoming the frontline of U.S.–China rivalry. As Washington backs the Lobito Corridor to counter Beijing's dominance, a new geopolitical contest for critical supply chains is unfolding.***

**I**n December 2025, the United States (US) signed a strategic partnership agreement with the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). The agreement established a Strategic Asset Reserve (SAR), designating priority mining zones for joint US–DRC development. Under this framework, US companies will receive preferential treatment for SAR projects, creating direct competition with China, which

controls over 72 percent of Congolese copper and cobalt mines.

Africa's infrastructure deficit has made the continent a key theatre of great-power competition, with control of critical mineral supply chains emerging as the main strategic prize. The Lobito Corridor, stretching from Angola's Atlantic coast through the Democratic Republic



of Congo to Zambia’s mineral-rich Copperbelt, has been the most visible manifestation of this rivalry. Under the Trump administration, the United States significantly expanded its financial commitment to the project through the Development Finance Corporation (DFC), signalling that mineral supply chain security is among Washington’s top strategic priorities on the continent.

The rationale is anchored in a broader concern: China’s dominance in processing and exporting minerals essential for clean energy, defence technologies, and electric vehicles gives Beijing substantial control over key global supply chains. Africa holds a large share of these mineral reserves, yet most existing infrastructure channels funnel exports through Chinese-controlled logistics networks. Washington’s investment in the Lobito Corridor is therefore part of a broader strategic vision, which also includes the US–Ukraine Critical Minerals Agreement and the US-mediated DRC–Rwanda peace accord of June 2025, demonstrating that American engagement in the region extends far beyond financing infrastructure projects. The Trump administration has strengthened

US involvement in the Lobito Corridor, using the Development Finance Corporation (DFC) as a tool to counter Chinese control of critical supply chains. In December 2025, DFC CEO Ben Black granted Lobito Atlantic Railway a loan of US\$ 550 million to maintain operations despite expanded foreign assistance reviews. Congressional approval to expand DFC’s financing capacity to over US\$ 140 billion has made Africa the agency’s second-largest portfolio, with an outlay of US\$ 10 billion in the region. The strategic rationale is clear: infrastructure finance helps liberate mineral export trade routes in Chinese-dominated southern and eastern Africa. The DFC strategy prioritises bankable projects involving private-sector participation, in contrast to Chinese state-driven funding systems. This so-called investment-driven approach aims to demonstrate that non-BRI solutions can deliver large-scale infrastructure while remaining transparent and financially viable.

Strategic prioritisation, however, raises questions of credibility. The 90-day foreign assistance review conducted in January 2025 led to a 20 percent reduction in Africa-focused aid, including USAID programmes, even as

DFC infrastructure financing increased. The fact that funding for the Lobito Corridor has risen despite cuts to USAID programmes across the continent indicates that mineral security is the administration's highest priority. This approach is counterintuitive from the perspective of presenting the United States as a credible alternative partner, since China's strategy—encompassing infrastructure, development aid, and consumer investment—is more holistic. The minerals-oriented reorientation risks undermining credibility and creating a disparity between American rhetoric and the actual distribution of resources. Whether an infrastructure-only engagement can position the United States as a partner in sustainable development, rather than a purely extractive competitor, remains uncertain.

### China's Response: Securing Supply Chains Ahead of US Rivalry

The United States presents the Lobito Corridor as an alternative development opportunity to the BRI, whereas China views it as an attempt to exclude Chinese participation in African infrastructure projects. In response, China has accelerated its engagement in African infrastructure and sought to secure its own supply chains ahead of intensified competition with the United States on the continent. China's control over mineral processing remains its key strategic advantage. It currently dominates 95 percent of rare-earth refining, 90 percent of graphite processing for batteries, and 70 percent of lithium processing. This processing capacity provides China with enduring leverage, allowing it to regulate supply flows and pricing across green technology sectors.

Recognising the Lobito Corridor's threat to mineral supply chains, Beijing launched a strategic counter to the United States. Most notably, China formalised US\$ 1.4 billion in agreements with Zambia and Tanzania for the modernisation of the TAZARA railway, a 1,860-kilometre corridor connecting the Copperbelt to the Indian Ocean port of Dar es Salaam. The upgrade, announced during Chinese Premier Li Qiang's first visit to Zambia in 28 years, would increase freight capacity from 100,000 to 2.4 million tonnes per year, directly competing with Lobito's Phase 2 projections. Concurrently, China stepped up its BRI-sponsored green energy investments to US\$ 9.7 billion in the first

half of 2025, signalling a deliberate shift toward the "New Three" industries: electric vehicles, batteries, and renewable energy.

The strategic intent is clear: rather than diverting attention from critical minerals, China is redefining BRI 2.0 to emphasise environmental sustainability while maintaining control over upstream mining and downstream processing. Debt dynamics reinforce this position. As Zambia's largest official creditor, with US\$ 5.7 billion in claims, Beijing uses restructuring agreements to deepen its infrastructure entrenchment.

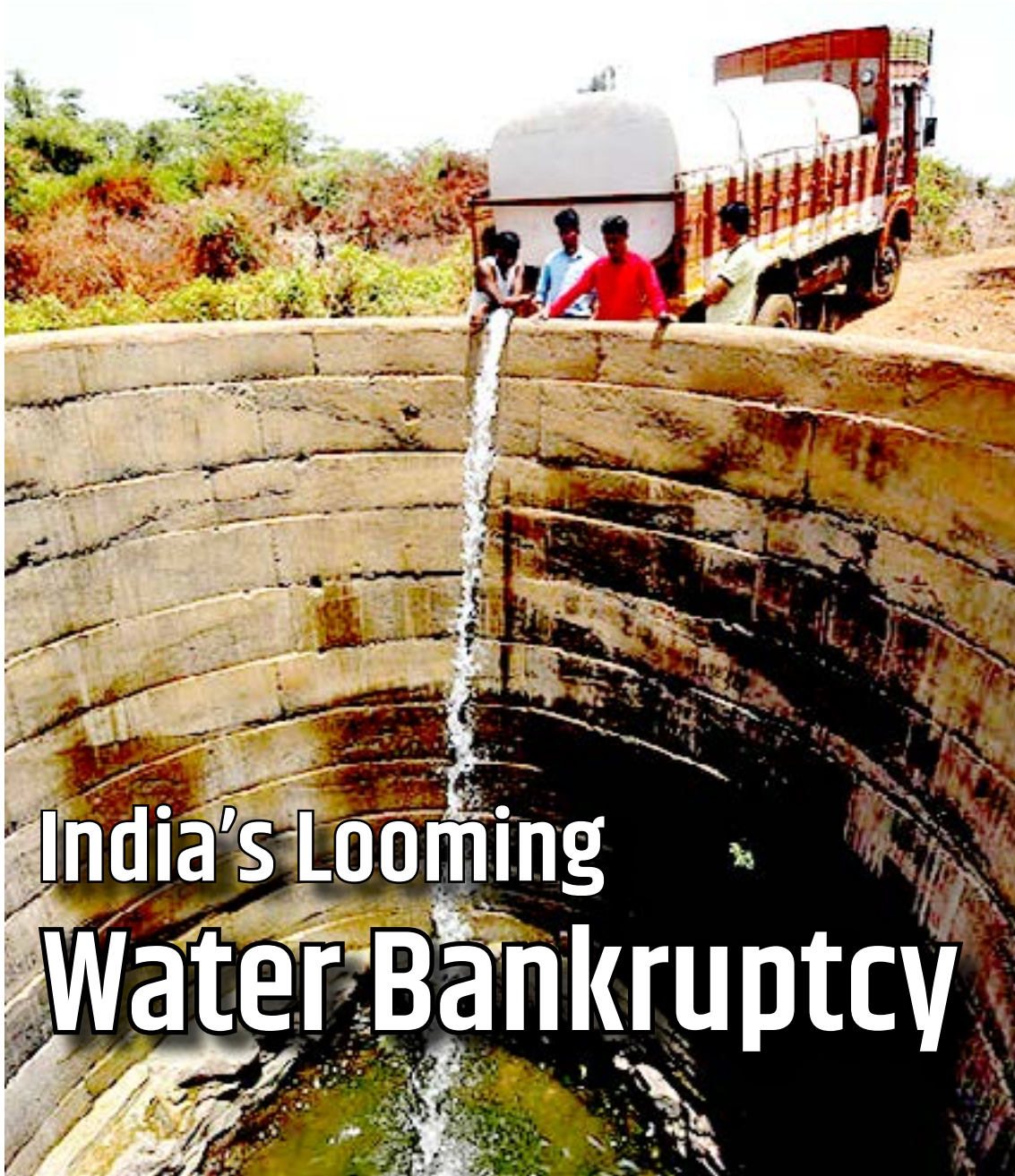
### Implications & Strategic Outlook

The Lobito Corridor under the Trump administration demonstrates progress on supply chain diversification, alongside challenges in establishing credible partnership frameworks. The Kamoakakula mine, with an operational capacity of 437,061 tonnes per year and potential to rise to 2 million tonnes by 2030, combined with the US–DRC SAR agreement of December 2025—including options for preferential access to American firms—shows that alternatives to Chinese-run routes are also commercially viable. The start of Phase 2 construction in 2026 will create direct Atlantic export infrastructure, completely circumventing Chinese logistics networks. This illustrates the first component of the Trump administration's strategic thesis: that the containment of Chinese supply chains can be achieved through long-term investment in infrastructure and bilateral mineral agreements.

However, credible partnerships remain the key indicator of an underlying contradiction in US strategy. A 20 percent decline in Africa-directed aid in January 2025—when USAID programme terminations coincided with an increase in DFC infrastructure financing—points to extractive rather than developmental priorities. This undermines the partnership credibility necessary to distinguish US engagement from transactional resource extraction. The outcome of this competition will depend less on corridor efficiency and more on how effectively the United States can align resource allocation with its rhetoric of partnership and translate logistical successes into long-term strategic influence. ●

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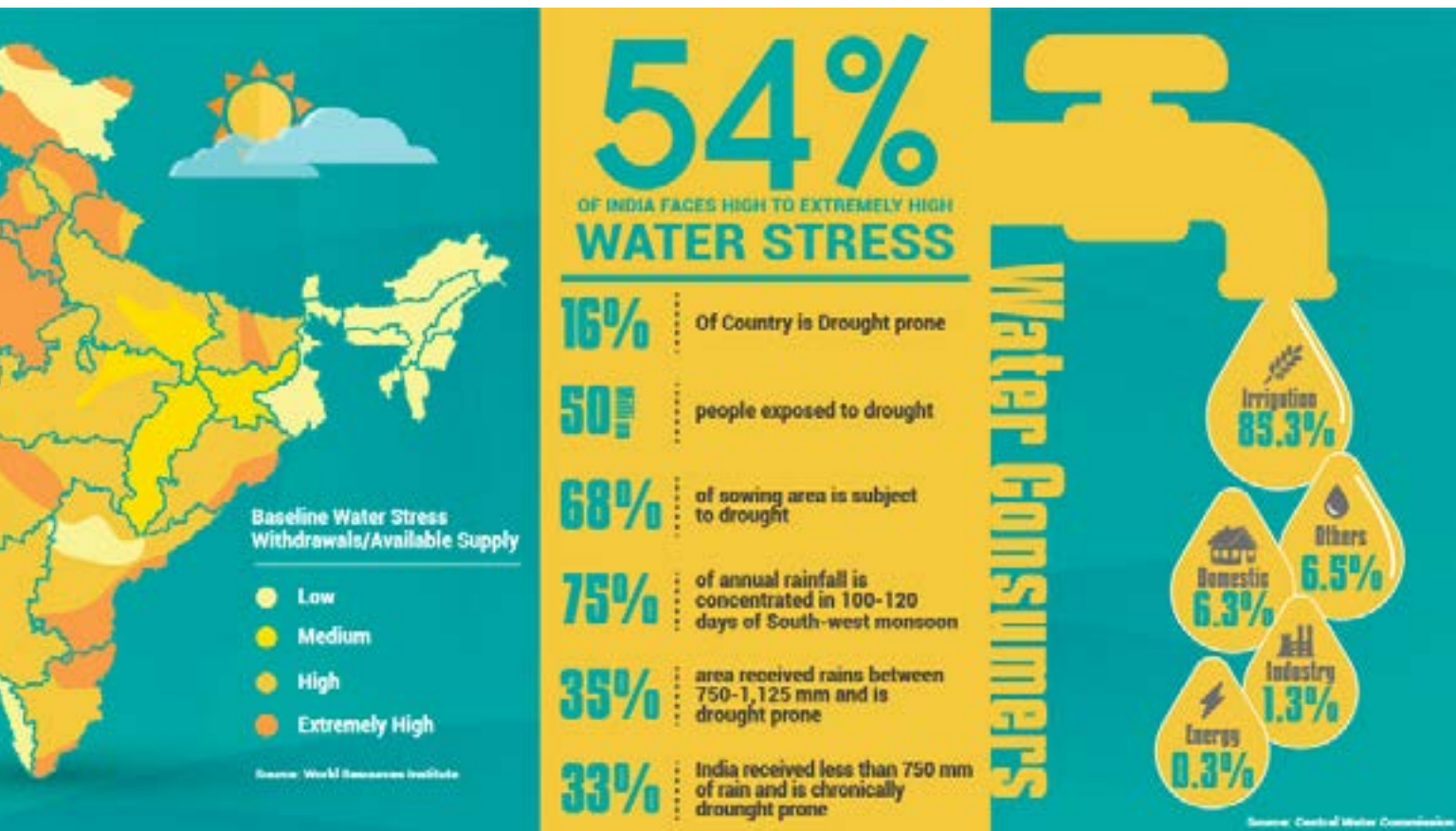


# India's Looming Water Bankruptcy

*Climate change and decades of overexploitation are pushing the world toward a new hydrological reality—“water bankruptcy.” For India, where groundwater sustains livelihoods and cities alike, this looming crisis threatens both economic stability and human security.*



Dhaval Desai



**A**s the world wrestles with the existential threats posed by climate change, water is no longer a matter of managing a natural resource. It is now about urgently addressing the systemic and structural vulnerabilities that have emerged from the misuse of water over the centuries, especially as the definitions of water scarcity, water stress, and water crises, used hitherto to identify and respond to water issues, may no longer adequately reflect the severity of current global hydrological concerns.

The United Nations University Institute for Water, Environment and Health's (UNU-INWEH) latest study has coined the term "water bankruptcy" to describe emerging trends in global water dynamics. The study, 'Global Water Bankruptcy: Living Beyond Our Hydrological Means in the Post-Crisis Era,' defines water bankruptcy as the near-permanent erosion of the natural resilience and recovery of water ecosystems due to the exploitation of water beyond its renewable capacity.

This new analytical framework has far-reaching implications for India, a country already dealing with escalating water deficits and complex water governance challenges.

**Defining Water Bankruptcy: Beyond Scarcity, Stress, and Risks**

The study identifies water stress as conditions in which, although demand overshoots the limits of available and renewable water supply, the impact on overall water availability is mostly reversible. Water crises, on the other hand, are mainly episodic, acute shortages caused by droughts or infrastructure failures, which can be managed through emergency responses. However, it defines water bankruptcy as a persistent post-crisis state in which water use consistently exceeds renewable freshwater inflows and the safe limits of natural storage depletion.

Such water bankruptcy results in the severe depletion of both 'checking accounts' and 'savings accounts' of this natural resource. Checking accounts refer to the natural

replenishment of rivers, wetlands, and reservoirs over time. However, as recharge of natural water sources is inconsistent, replenishment of checking accounts can show extreme fluctuations relative to the long-term average in wet and dry conditions. Conversely, the savings accounts refer primarily to groundwater sources, including soil moisture, shallow groundwater, glaciers, and aquifers, where the replenishment often occurs over several decades to even millennia. The shrinking of such savings accounts leads to disproportionate social, economic, and environmental costs.

Simultaneous evidence of the depletion of both checking and savings accounts signals a worrying worldwide breach of thresholds in basins and aquifers, leading to water bankruptcy. The UNU-INWEH thus defines water bankruptcy as the persistent post-crisis condition, in which:

1. Withdrawal from surface and groundwater sources (the checking and savings accounts, respectively) exceeds the renewable freshwater inflows and the safe limits of extraction of water reserves, and
2. The resulting degradation of natural capital causes irreversible damage to water availability.

The frequent recurrence of droughts, which were earlier episodic, is a clear sign of water bankruptcy, a direct result of the degradation of hydrological conditions to a point where recovery of water levels becomes nearly impossible. The study calls for an urgent, fundamental reset of the global water agenda, from knee-jerk emergency responses to focused, sustained bankruptcy management, by acknowledging the limits, embracing transparent water accounting, setting enforceable depletion thresholds, and prioritising the protection of natural water generation through aquifers and wetlands.

The evidence of water bankruptcy is stark across continents, with multiple indicators highlighting irreversible pressures. For example, with 70 percent of aquifers in steady decline, the current dependence of 50 percent of global domestic supply and 40 percent of irrigation water on groundwater could be severely threatened, pushing the world deeper into an era of

severe water insecurity. Already, an estimated 4 billion people experience severe water scarcity for at least one month each year, and nearly 75 percent of the global population lives in countries that are either water-insecure or critically water-insecure.

With over half of all large freshwater lakes steadily shrinking since the 1990s, more than 25 percent of the global population depending on those lakes could face heightened water insecurity. Several rivers now also fail to reach the sea, indicating altered hydrological connectivity.

A water-bankrupt world has enormous implications for India, given its high dependency on groundwater, burgeoning demand, and an uneven spatial distribution of renewable water sources. India has an extractable quantum of about 407.75 billion cubic metres (bcm) out of its total estimated annual groundwater recharge potential of 448.52 bcm. However, the country currently extracts around 247.22 bcm annually, representing more than 60 percent of the national extractable threshold.

Groundwater supports 62 percent of irrigation and up to 85 percent of domestic water use, making it the backbone of both food and drinking water security. Such overreliance on groundwater is driving Punjab, Haryana, Rajasthan, and parts of the Indo-Gangetic plains toward “irreversible overexploitation.”

Urban water systems, already grappling with an ever-increasing demand-supply gap, experience intensified stress. For example, the “day zero” scenario witnessed in Chennai in 2019 and the increasing reliance on groundwater, especially through the rampant, often unregulated digging of borewells, characterise the overexploitation of groundwater beyond sustainable limits. According to NITI Aayog’s 2019 Composite Water Management Index, the demand-supply gap in urban India is estimated to reach ~50 BCM by 2030. Already, five Indian cities — Delhi, Kolkata, Chennai, Bengaluru,





and Hyderabad — are among the world's 20 most water-stressed cities. This situation could also pose a grave public health risk, with 8 million children under 14 at risk due to poor water quality.

On the other hand, agriculture accounts for nearly 87 percent of all freshwater withdrawals. Water-intensive staples, especially paddy and wheat, promoted through subsidies and minimum support price (MSP) since the implementation of India's Green Revolution in the mid-1960s, have contributed to this enormous

demand. Consequently, emphasis on such water-guzzling crops in Punjab and Haryana, which are crucial to India's food security and exports, has accelerated groundwater depletion.

The UNU-INWEH study calls for comprehensive legal, institutional, and policy changes to address the looming global era of water bankruptcy. Post-crisis water management, it insists, should: i) impose clear limits on withdrawal of groundwater, ii) target investments to restore natural water systems. These changes must also integrate new water realities into climate, food, and biodiversity policies. India must adapt these recommendations and urgently recalibrate its water governance.

First, India must reduce its focus on water-guzzling staples such as rice and wheat, and comprehensively transform its cropping patterns to include millets, the primary traditional staple for most Indians for centuries. Millets, with their high nutritional value, are often touted as a "one-stop solution" amid climate change, water scarcity, and drought. Millets need 70 percent less water than paddy. They grow about 50 percent faster than wheat. They also need 40 percent less energy to process. Channelling subsidies and raising MSP for millets can help India reduce groundwater extraction and strengthen overall resilience.

Second, India must immediately undertake sweeping reforms of its urban water systems and create a robust

circular water economy by combining enhanced storage, wastewater recycling, and leakage reduction under an integrated water strategy. Cities must focus on demand-side management measures rather than solely investing in capital-intensive source-augmentation projects. For example, India generates over 72 billion litres of sewage daily but treats only about 28 percent of sewage. As a result, it discharges more than half (~52 billion) of untreated wastewater into waterbodies or allows seepage, polluting both surface water sources and groundwater aquifers. Supply-side measures to continuously augment the water supply will only worsen groundwater depletion and disbalance the surface water availability. India must use this situation to its advantage and adopt best practices from cities in developing economies, such as São Paulo (Brazil), Buenos Aires (Argentina), Dakar (Senegal), and Arequipa (Peru), to explore circular economy solutions.

Third, India must urgently consider an Atal Bhujal Yojana-Urban to replicate the successes of the existing rural India-focused, participatory Atal Bhujal Yojana (ABY) to leverage community-led groundwater management efforts to address the fast-depleting aquifers in its cities. The absence of a coordinated, mission-mode response to this catastrophic trend has led to fragmented regulations, leaving cities with limited technical capacity. Designing ABY-Urban to address the unique complexities of cities, with robust regulatory frameworks, compulsory aquifer mapping and digital monitoring, participatory governance, performance-linked funding of central schemes and missions, and integrating groundwater management with AMRUT 2.0, can signal a proactive national commitment to sustainable cities.

Addressing water bankruptcy begins with recognising how much the hydrological landscape has changed and what these shifts mean for the choices societies must make. It requires India to re-examine long-standing assumptions about availability, revisit patterns of use, and build policies that reflect the limits of its natural water systems. The window for course correction is narrowing, and India must act decisively to secure its water future. ●

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*Dhaval Desai is a Senior Fellow and Vice President at the Observer Research Foundation.*

# The QR Code TRAP



Santosh Kumar

*A tap, a QR code, a moment of trust—this is all it takes to lose everything. Behind India's digital payment revolution lies a silent epidemic of fraud, where convenience has outpaced caution and technology has raced far ahead of human awareness.*

The ubiquitous QR codes found at every street corner in India and the billions of transactions occurring with a single smartphone tap are often hailed as the greatest 'success story' of the 21st century. These fintech applications, which emerged as a dynamic alternative to paper currency, have provided a new momentum to financial inclusion. However, behind this digital brilliance, a chilling reality is taking shape. It is the surging graph of digital and financial fraud that is not only swallowing people's hard-earned savings but also shaking the very foundation of 'trust' upon which the edifice of Digital India stands.

For the new middle class, the greatest psychological fear is no longer, "Will my transaction be successful?" Instead, it is, "Will the invisible person sitting on the other side of that QR code or link vanish with my entire life savings?"

## The ₹22,842 Crore Heist

As long as statistics remain on paper, they seem like mere numbers; but when they vanish from someone's bank account, they become a tragedy. The recent report from the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) serves as a grave warning. By March 2024, payment fraud linked to digital channels skyrocketed more than fivefold compared to the previous year, reaching approximately

₹14.57 billion. If we look at the broader spectrum of cybercrime, cybercriminals swindled Indians out of a staggering ₹22,842 crore in the year 2024.

This is not merely an economic loss; it is a sign of a 'cyber-pandemic.' Experts estimate that if this trend continues, the annual loss could cross the ₹1.2 trillion mark. Ironically, one out of every five UPI users has experienced some level of fraud. Even more concerning is that more than half of the victims do not even file a report due to embarrassment and the complexities of the legal process.

## 'Social Engineering' — Hacking the Human Mind

The common perception regarding digital crimes is that hackers breach complex codes or firewalls. However, according to Ashwini Kumar, founder of My Legal Expert (MLE), the real threat lies not within the 'system,' but within 'human behavior.' In technical parlance, this is called 'Social Engineering.'

Fraudsters are no longer limited to phishing emails. They are utilizing fake customer-care numbers, false threats regarding 'KYC updates,' remote-access apps (like AnyDesk), fake investment groups, and 'romance scams.' Now, through 'Deepfake' technology, even the voices or videos of trusted individuals are being fabricated. The core mantra of all these schemes is the

same—to create fear or greed within the victim. When a person sees the logo or language of a legitimate institution, they share an OTP or approve a collect request in a moment of 'misplaced trust.' This is where the door opens for the fraudster.

### Seniors and Small Traders: Vulnerable at the Periphery

The success of digital payments has integrated individuals into the system whose technical understanding is extremely limited. The biggest victims of this fraud are elderly parents unaware of the nuances of digital transactions, small traders who joined the race merely to be 'cashless,' and rural families who still view app-based banking as a miracle.

While an easy-to-use 'User Interface' provides convenience, it simultaneously reduces the capacity to perceive danger. As simple as it is to press a button, it is equally simple for an account to be wiped clean through that same button. The lack of digital literacy is creating an 'ideal environment' for scammers.

Although the Government of India and the RBI have mandated security measures like 'Multi-Factor Authentication' and real-time monitoring, the speed of criminals remains a step ahead of the speed of the law. While the Police Cyber Coordination Centres and online reporting portals (such as the 1930 helpline) are active, the rate of recovery remains very low.

According to Ashwini Kumar, victims have the option to approach the Banking Ombudsman and Consumer Commissions, but this path is long and exhausting. The responsibility of banks often hides behind the argument of 'customer

negligence.' The question remains: if the system is so secure, why does the common citizen feel so insecure?

### Keys to Security — Discipline in Behavior

No matter how strong the technical shield, 'caution' is the only absolute protection. In today's digital world, consumers must adopt new 'financial values'.



# Sovereignty in Shreds

The Battle for

**BALUCHISTAN**



Santu Das

*As Rawalpindi's strategic grip falters, Balochistan has transformed from a neglected province into a geopolitical volcano. This systemic collapse marks the ideological defeat of Pakistan's hybrid regime, proving that empires cannot be sustained by bayonets alone when the people's trust is shattered.*

**F**or Pakistan, recent years have not merely presented military challenges; they have raised a fundamental question mark over the very concept of the 'Nation-State'—a concept the generals in Rawalpindi have held together under the shadow of bayonets for seven decades. The Baloch Liberation Army (BLA) taking Pakistani soldiers hostage and issuing a seven-day ultimatum to Islamabad is no ordinary insurgent event. It is the sound of the collapse of that 'Strategic Sovereignty' which Pakistan has long performed for the global stage. Balochistan—Pakistan's richest yet most neglected



province—has transformed into a volcano whose embers are now reaching the military headquarters in Rawalpindi.

This crisis is not the rebellion of a few insurgents; it is the ideological defeat of Pakistan's 'Hybrid Regime,' which made oppression in the name of development and deceit in the name of diplomacy its state policy. The smoke rising today from the deserts and mountains of Balochistan is outlining the contours of a new map of geographical fragmentation.

### The Illusion of 'Red-ul-Fitna'

The Pakistani army launched 'Operation Red-ul-Fitna-1' with the claim that it would establish absolute peace in the province. The military boasted of neutralizing over 200 insurgents, claiming the situation was under control. However, the ground reality is miles apart from these paper claims. The BLA's ability to simultaneously target banks, schools, markets, and military bases in recent months exposes the vulnerability of the Pakistani military establishment's most fortified zones.

The year 2025 has proven to be the bloodiest in Balochistan's history, with violence surging by 25 percent compared to the previous year. The insurgents have shifted their strategy; they are no longer confined to guerrilla skirmishes but are challenging the state machinery through large-scale, organized strikes.

The hijacking of the Jaffer Express and the ensuing prolonged standoff illustrate that the rebels have become more technically and tactically proficient. It is a picture of a state losing its grip in its own backyard.

### The New Face of Resistance

The most startling and concerning aspect of this wave of Baloch resistance is the shift in its social fabric. This is no longer a struggle of a few fighters hidden in the hills. Today, the educated Baloch youth, who once dreamed of joining Pakistan's mainstream, have turned entirely toward radicalization. Systematic neglect, economic marginalization, and political suppression have turned an entire generation into rebels.

Even more significant is the active participation of Baloch women. Coming from the middle class, these women, once confined to their homes, now stand on the front lines of the rebellion. The brutality with which the military apparatus crushed peaceful protests and political dissent has fertilized the ground for militancy. When a state turns a deaf ear to the legitimate demands of its citizens, the path of resistance inevitably leads through the barrel of a gun. This is precisely what is unfolding in Balochistan.

### Mineral Wealth and Asim Munir's Gambit

Pakistan's current de facto ruler, Field Marshal Asim Munir, views Balochistan as a strategic pawn. His



eyes are fixed on the province's rare earth minerals and strategic resources. Munir understands that in a changing global order, these resources can be leveraged as 'Geopolitical Rent.' He seeks to secure strategic and economic concessions from the United States through these minerals.

The promises Munir made to Donald Trump at the White House last year are now becoming a noose around his neck. Trump's patience is limited, and Munir is under immense pressure to deliver results. This is why the Pakistani army is employing every possible tactic to seize control of Balochistan's resources—resources that the local people are unwilling to surrender. It is a colonial mindset, where the state views its own province as spoils of war.

### The Decay of CPEC and Strikes on Chinese Interests

Balochistan stands today as a global hotspot at the crossroads of South Asia, Central Asia, and the Middle East. The Gwadar Port and the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) have heightened the region's importance, but this very 'development' has become a curse for the Baloch people. Increasing Chinese influence and the exploitation of local resources have pitted Baloch insurgents directly against China.

Continuous attacks by the BLA on Chinese nationals and projects signal growing friction between

Islamabad and Beijing. Beijing is no longer willing to bank on Pakistan's security guarantees. The violence in Balochistan is no longer merely an internal security issue; it has become symbolic of a crisis in Pakistan's governance, which, under Asim Munir's leadership, is racing toward autocracy and total militarization.

### The Indian Boogeyman and the Mask of Defeat

Pakistan's allegations of Indian involvement in Baloch attacks are a desperate attempt to cover a shattered glass that the world can see straight through. It is a fictional narrative built on the sands of anti-India hysteria. New Delhi has no need to ignite a powder keg that has been prepared over decades by Pakistan's own blunders. The cause of Balochistan's agony is not external intervention, but years of political neglect, economic exploitation, and brutal military repression.

Islamabad wants the world to ignore its internal failures and chase the 'invisible ghosts' it has conjured to hide its own incompetence. However, the global community is no longer in the mood to accept Pakistan's 'Victim Card.' Invoking Indian interference is nothing more than a failed attempt by Pakistan to evade its own responsibility.

### Two Models of Governance: Coercion vs. Development

While Islamabad has relied almost exclusively



on 'brute force' in Balochistan, India has historically prioritized political reconciliation and a developmentalist approach to resolve insurgencies and governance crises. India's focus on the role of good governance within its counter-insurgency strategy places it in a position of moral and strategic superiority compared to Pakistan. Where Pakistan's policies are rooted in alienation and coercion, the Indian model emphasizes inclusive growth and integration.

Under a military-dominated hybrid regime, Pakistan has become profoundly unstable, both socially and politically. The escalating conflict in Balochistan provides a rare opportunity for India to strengthen its regional presence and showcase its model of governance to the world. In stark contrast to the reactionary and militarized policies of Rawalpindi, India's policy remains anchored in regional cooperation and stability.

### The Afghan Friction

Rather than dousing the fires in Balochistan, the Pakistani military has exacerbated hostilities with Afghanistan. Airstrikes conducted inside Afghan territory under the pretext of targeting TTP militants have turned the Taliban regime into a bitter adversary. Pakistan's failure to formulate a coherent policy of engagement with Afghanistan has only accelerated the cycle of violence. Today, Pakistan fights a war on

two fronts: one against its own citizens and another against its neighbor, pushing the entire region toward a precipice of instability.

### The Pivot of Regional Power Balance

As the shadow of Chinese expansionism grows and the situation on the Afghan-Pakistan border becomes increasingly precarious, India must remain vigilant and flexible in its strategy. Pakistan currently stands on the verge of a systemic collapse; Balochistan could become the fulcrum upon which the regional balance of power shifts permanently.

The dynamics unfolding in Balochistan will not only dictate the future of Pakistan but will reverberate across South and Central Asia. In a world grappling with state failure and authoritarianism, the Indian vision of regional peace, stability, and sustainable development offers the most viable strategic model. Balochistan is no longer merely a domestic Pakistani problem; it is a vital piece of a new world order where geographical sovereignty will no longer be suppressed by the weight of religious rhetoric.

The generals in Rawalpindi must eventually realize that empires do not survive by merely drawing lines on maps, but by winning the hearts and minds of the people. In Balochistan, that trust has not just been eroded—it has been utterly shattered.●

*Smoke rising over the blue hills of Manipur today carries more than the scent of burning homes; it carries the ashes of a fractured memory. As violence redraws the map between communities, cinema emerges as a fragile yet stubborn light—reminding a wounded land that even in the fiercest flames, stories still find a way to breathe.*

# Against the Flames

**T**he smoke rising today over the cerulean hills of Manipur carries a weight far heavier than the scent of charred timber and concrete; it carries the fractured memories of a civilization. Since the tragic onset of ethnic violence in May 2023, the geography of this picturesque state has been cleaved, and its future shadowed by a jagged scar that separates the Meitei and Kuki-Zo communities. In a landscape where gunfire has become the dominant dialect and empathy has retreated into silence, cinema emerges as a stubborn, flickering lamp—a “Cultural Obstinacy” that refuses to let identity be erased by the fires of displacement.

A Mountain Spring Amidst the Gloom In the heart of this darkness, Lakshmipriya Devi’s film *Boong* provided a rare ray of pride when it was honored on the international stage in London. This victory was more than a cinematic achievement; it was a testament to the resilience of a culture that refuses to be consumed by hate. Like a mountain spring carving its way through stone, *Boong* found its momentum through the sheer force of its narrative necessity.

The film tells the poignant story of an innocent child dreaming of gathering the scattered straws of a broken family to rebuild a “nest”. This personal quest mirrors the collective cry of thousands of children

*Amidst the flames of ethnic violence, the film ‘Boong’ emerges as a ‘Cultural Shield’ for Manipur’s wounded identity. It is a poignant, stubborn effort to bridge fractured communities and preserve human empathy amidst displacement and hate.*

in Manipur, for whom “home” has been transformed from a physical sanctuary into a hazy, fragile memory tucked away like a faded photograph in a relief camp.

## The Irony of Harmony

The most haunting aspect of *Boong* lies in its production: during the filmmaking process, Meitei and Kuki artists inhabited each other’s lives and roles. This behind-the-scenes harmony stands as a searing indictment of the current reality, where individuals from these communities can no longer imagine treading the dust of the other’s neighborhood. Cinema, in this instance, serves as a magical window into a past where identity was defined by a shared resolve to live under a single sky rather than by narrow ethnic boundaries.

## Cinema as a Cultural Shield

Manipuri cinema has a long history of serving as an unyielding “Weapon of Cultural Resistance”. In



Jalaj Srivastava

the latter half of the twentieth century, figures like Aribam Syam Sharma and M.K. Binodini Devi used the camera as a philosophical sword to explore motherhood, spirituality, and social equilibrium amidst a violent political landscape.

The state has endured decades under the shadow of the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA), transforming it into a permanent garrison where dawn brought the glint of bayonets instead of hope. Despite the ruin of theaters and the silencing of screens by underground edicts and economic scarcity, “Cultural Sentinels” have kept the torch burning like a sacred fire in a desolate temple.

### A Clarion Call for the Neglected

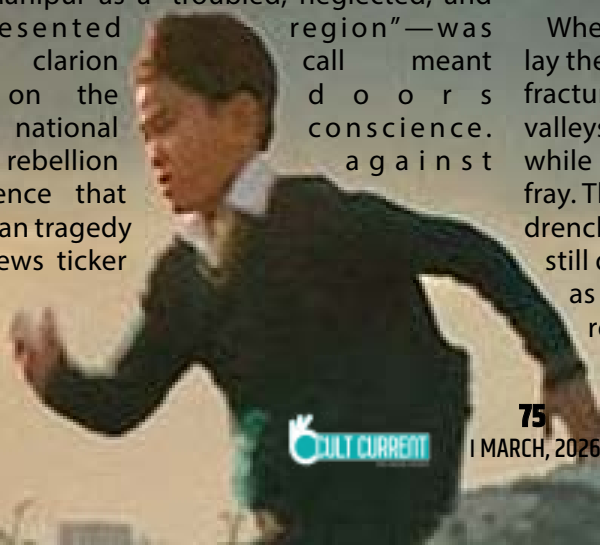
Lakshmi Priya Devi represents the modern vessel of this holy tradition. Her emotional address in London—describing Manipur as a “troubled, neglected, and underrepresented a cultural clarion to knock on the of the national It was a rebellion the indifference that reduces human tragedy to a mere news ticker headline.

While it is a sentimental fantasy to believe a film can douse the fires of hate or stop a war, art performs the vital task of keeping “Memory” alive. Without memory, a society is clinically dead. Memory is the capital of the future, reminding us that before this desert of animosity, there was once a lush forest of love.

### The First Plank of Hope

As Manipur’s artists face the sting of displacement and writers watch their libraries burn, the success of Boong becomes a “Cultural Shield”. It proclaims that the power of creation can never be fully consumed by destruction. Manipuri cinema teaches us that a society survives not on political treaties alone, but on the stories we tell one another. When we stop listening to each other’s pain, we witness the beginning of the end.

When an artist tells a story in a “broken tongue,” they lay the first plank of hope across the bridge between fractured communities. The chasms between the valleys and hills may take generations to bridge, and while politics may have failed, culture remains in the fray. The cinema of Manipur is that stubborn lamp—drenched in blood and surrounded by flames, yet still dreaming of a new dawn. It proves that as long as the storyteller is alive, the possibility of light remains. ●



# Disha–Talwinder’s Lollapalooza Love

## B-Town Buzz

**B**ollywood gossip mills are buzzing again! Actress Disha Patani, known for her striking looks and bold style, is reportedly enjoying a new rhythm in her personal life. Rumor has it that the star has moved on from past relationships and is now spending time with Punjabi music sensation Talwinder. The chatter grew louder when the duo was spotted walking hand in hand at the Lollapalooza India festival in Mumbai, instantly drawing cameras and curious glances. Disha’s stunning black outfit and Talwinder’s mysterious charm set social media abuzz, with fans speculating that this might be more than just friendship. Sources claim the story began at a glamorous wedding in Udaipur, where the two were first seen getting close. Whether it turns into romance or collaboration, the buzz continues. ●



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