DISCIPLINE

Important Issues of the Day

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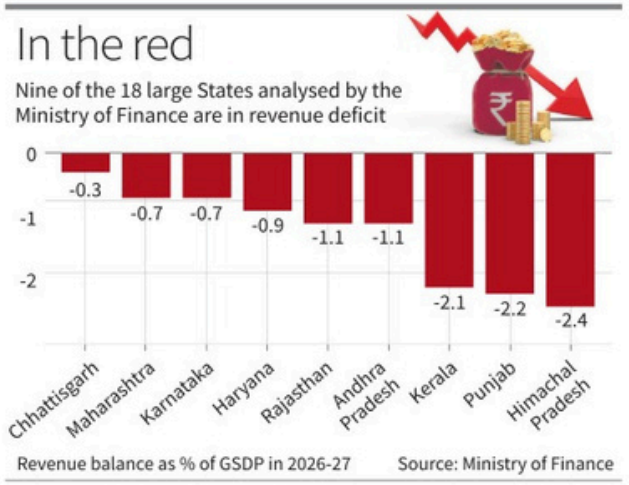
Revenue-deficit States may face fiscal stress, says Centre

T.C.A. Sharad Raghavan
NEW DELHI

The Union Finance Ministry has warned that States with revenue deficits and high debt burdens will find it harder to deal with fiscal shocks, including from the West Asia crisis, forcing them to either reprioritise expenditure away from productive areas, or approach the Centre for more funds at a time when it is trying to consolidate its own finances.

In its Monthly Economic Review for April, the Department of Economic Affairs in the Ministry said nine of the 18 large States analysed were in revenue deficit as per their own projections for 2026-27. Seven are projected to be revenue surplus, while one is in revenue balance.

A revenue deficit is when expenditure on recurring items such as salaries, pensions, subsidies, and interest payments exceeds the revenue earned from sources such as taxes and fees.



The States with projected revenue deficits as a percentage of their gross state domestic products (GSDP) are Himachal Pradesh (-2.4%), Punjab (-2.2%), Kerala (-2.1%), Andhra Pradesh (-1.1%), Rajasthan (-1.1%), Haryana (-0.9%), Karnataka (-0.7%), Maharashtra (-0.7%), and Chhattisgarh (-0.3%).

Tamil Nadu and West Bengal were excluded from the analysis as they have so far presented only interim budgets for 2026-27.

"Revenue-deficit States are constrained by the debt servicing obligations and carry, on average, significantly higher outstanding liabilities than revenue-surplus States, and many of them spend more than 15% of their revenue receipts on interest payments," the report of the Ministry noted.

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- **Revenue Deficit: It refers to the excess of total revenue expenditure of the government over its total revenue receipts.Revenuedeficit= Total Revenue expenditure –TotalRevenuereceipts.ORRevenue deficit = Total Revenue expenditure – (Tax Revenue + Non-Tax Revenue)**

- **Fiscal Deficit: Fiscaldeficitisdefined as excess of total expenditure over total receipts excluding borrowings during a fiscal year.**
  Fiscal deficit = Total budget expenditure – Total budget receipts excluding borrowings OR Fiscal Deficit
- **= (Revenue expenditure + Capital expenditure) – (Revenue Receipts + Capital receipts excluding borrowings) Fiscal deficit shows the borrowing requirements of the govt. during the budget year.**

- **Primary Deficit: Primary deficit is defined as fiscal deficit minus interest payments on previous**
- **borrowings. Primary deficit shows the borrowing requirements of the govt. for meeting expenditure excluding interest payment. Gross Primary deficit = Fiscal deficit – Interest payments**

GS 2

Should the PIL jurisdiction be reconsidered?

Anuj Bhuwania

Professor of law and author of 'Courting the People: Public Interest Litigation in Post-Emergency India'

Talha Abdul Rahman

Advocate based in Delhi

PARLEY

Public Interest Litigation (PIL) emerged in the 1970s as a transformative judicial innovation aimed at widening access to justice for the poor and the marginalised. This was achieved by relaxing the strict rules of standing to permit representative actions, and by broadening the scope of judicial notice to allow courts to take *suo motu* cognisance of public issues and convert them into litigation. Over time, however, concerns have been raised about the misuse of this jurisdiction. More recently, during the ongoing proceedings in the Sabarimala reference case, the Union government has urged the Supreme Court to reconsider the PIL framework altogether, citing the rise of "agenda-driven litigation." Should the PIL jurisdiction be reconsidered? Anuj Bhuwania and Talha Abdul Rahman discuss the question in a conversation moderated by **Aaratrika Bhaumik**.

Where should courts draw the line on who can file PILs?

Anuj Bhuwania: The evolution of PIL can be traced to the Supreme Court decisions of the late 1970s, such as *Hussainara Khatoon & Ors. vs. Home Secretary, State of Bihar* (1979), which marked a departure from the traditional doctrine of *locus standi*, under which only an aggrieved party could approach the court, towards permitting representative standing. This enabled third parties to institute proceedings on behalf of marginalised groups unable to access justice due to systemic barriers. Over time, however, there has been a discernible shift towards a broader model of citizen standing, where individuals approach the court not as representatives of affected groups but in their own capacity as members of the citizenry. This transition has led courts to engage with issues in an open-ended and, at times, indeterminate manner. In my view, the court's jurisdiction ought, as far as possible, to be invoked by those who are directly affected or, at the very least, by those with a clear interest in the matter.

Talha Abdul Rahman: I do not believe that the rules of *locus standi* should be reverted to their earlier, restrictive form. The structural barriers that justified its relaxation decades ago remain largely intact, and courts continue to be inaccessible to the poor and marginalised. For instance, individuals whose homes are demolished by the state as a purported punitive measure may often lack the means or capacity to seek judicial redress. In such circumstances, if third parties step forward to challenge these demolitions on the ground that due process has not been followed, they ought to be accorded standing. This is not merely a representative action, but an assertion of a constitutional guarantee – that the rule of law must be upheld in its full measure, even where the harm is not personally suffered.

The Supreme Court of India.

PILs often involve complex, polycentric disputes. Do they risk judicial overreach and the exclusion of key stakeholders?

TAR: The concern is valid. There have been instances where courts, while hearing such matters, have had to respond to executive inaction. This then raises a recurring question: do they possess the institutional competence to navigate such issues? In my view, they do, particularly when assisted by able counsel and robust adversarial presentation. At the same time, courts have also consciously refrained from encroaching upon the domains reserved for the executive or the legislature. For instance, on April 29, the Supreme Court declined to direct the enactment of specific laws on hate speech, instead leaving any legislative redress to the appropriate authorities. This reflects an important reality – there are limits to what the courts can do.

AB: In the past, there have been several instances where courts, while hearing PILs, have proceeded without hearing those directly affected. This was particularly evident in a series of cases before the Delhi High Court in the mid-2000s concerning slum evictions, where PILs filed by resident welfare associations sought the removal of slums, but the slum dwellers themselves were not impleaded as parties. Similarly, the Supreme Court's handling of pollution-related litigation over the past four decades, much of it arising from PILs filed by environmentalist M.C. Mehta, highlights the limits of judicial intervention in addressing problems of such scale and complexity.

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> TALHA ABDUL RAHMAN

How can courts address the rise of 'ambush PILs' filed to preclude genuine claims?

AB: Increasingly, there have been instances of litigants rushing to court with poorly drafted petitions, often with the intention of securing an early dismissal and thereby precluding genuine litigants from approaching the court. These petitions are frequently driven by partisan motives. This is deeply concerning, as it risks prompting courts to deal with such matters in a cursory manner, without fully engaging with the complexities they warrant. In my view, this is not merely an issue of abuse of jurisdiction, but a problem rooted in the very nature of PIL itself.

TAR: It is often difficult to distinguish an 'ambush PIL' from one that raises genuine grievances. Yet, their proliferation has fostered an environment of suspicion, with courts increasingly questioning the *bona fides* of petitioners. While this may not fully address systemic concerns, there are procedural safeguards. The Supreme Court Rules, 2013, require that a writ petition contain a specific pleading identifying the fundamental rights alleged to have been violated. In the absence of such a disclosure, the Registry may decline to list the petition. Courts have also imposed costs to deter such filings.

Have courts ensured meaningful compliance with the directives issued in PILs?

TAR: Ensuring compliance with the directives in PILs often depends on the Bench. Where a judge is inclined to see a matter through, the case is kept pending, interim directions are issued, and compliance is periodically monitored. However, there has been a growing tendency in the Supreme Court to step back once a final judgment is delivered, leaving enforcement to the High Courts and trial courts. This is where gaps begin to emerge. In my view, the Supreme Court ought to retain some degree of oversight post-judgment, including initiating contempt proceedings for non-compliance.

AB: There are clear violations of several important directives issued by the Supreme Court in PILs, often without any recourse to contempt proceedings. This tends to create a culture of impunity, allowing authorities to disregard court orders with little consequence. That said, the problem is more endemic and not confined to the PIL jurisdiction.

Should guidelines be laid down on the role of the amicus curiae (a lawyer appointed to assist the court)?

AB: The role accorded to an *amicus* in PIL proceedings raises several concerns. In dealing with complex cases, courts have, at times, expanded the role of the *amicus* to an extent that risks diluting basic procedural safeguards, particularly the right of affected parties to be heard. For instance, in *T.N. Godavarman Thirumulpad vs Union of India*, which originated as a PIL to protect forest areas in the Nilgiris and Kerala, the *amicus*, at various stages, was filing applications for directions and had effectively stepped into the role of the petitioner's counsel. The issuance of guidelines in this regard would be a welcome step.

TAR: Typically, courts appoint lawyers of a certain competence and integrity as *amici*, with the expectation that they will assist the court in navigating the pleadings and arguments in a case. However, the role of the *amicus* is not uniform and can vary across jurisdictions. In my view, an *amicus* should refrain from taking sides and instead assist the court by fairly presenting the arguments on all sides. Given how fluid the role is, clearer guidelines are needed.

What reforms are needed to strengthen the PIL jurisdiction?

TAR: One requirement for entertaining a PIL should be that it is well-researched and confined to challenging enacted laws or executive action or inaction, rather than inviting the court to make policy choices. For instance, a petitioner should not approach the court seeking the enactment of a Uniform Civil Code.

AB: We need to return to the fundamental idea that PILs are an extrapolation of the principle underlying *habeas corpus* –that parties who cannot, for unavoidable reasons, appear before the court are represented by someone else. Only then will PILs retain their legitimacy.

To listen to the full interview
Scan the code or go to the link
www.thehindu.com

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- **The seeds of the concept of public interest litigation were initially sown in India by Justice Krishna Iyer, in 1976 in Mumbai Kamagar Sabha vs. Abdul Thai.**
- **The first reported case of PIL was Hussainara Khatoon vs. State of Bihar (1979) that focused on the inhuman conditions of prisons and under trial prisoners that led to the release of more than 40,000 under trial prisoners.**
- **Right to speedy justice emerged as a basic fundamental right which had been denied to these prisoners. The same set pattern was adopted in subsequent cases.**
- **A new era of the PIL movement was heralded by Justice P.N. Bhagawati in the case of S.P. Gupta vs. Union of India.**
- **In this case it was held that "any member of the public or social action group acting bonafide" can invoke the Writ Jurisdiction of the High Courts (under article 226) or the Supreme Court (under Article 32) seeking redressal against violation of legal or constitutional rights of persons who due to social or economic or any other disability cannot approach the Court.**

GS 1

What happened to Komagata Maru passengers in 1914?

Why was the Komagata Maru denied entry into Canada? What happened to the passengers?

Prathmesh Kher

The story so far:

In the spring of 1914, a Japanese steamship called the Komagata Maru sailed from Hong Kong toward Vancouver, British Columbia, carrying 376 passengers: 340 Sikhs, 24 Muslims, and 12 Hindus from Punjab in British India. They were British subjects hoping to build new lives in Canada. What awaited them was a two-month standoff in the harbour, a brutal denouement on the docks of Calcutta, and a place in the history of both India's anti-colonial movement and Canada's long reckoning with its own past. The episode was recently mentioned by singer Diljit Dosanjh on *The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon*.

Why was Punjab central to events leading up to the voyage?

By 1914, Punjab had become the primary recruiting ground for the British Indian Army. The British had cultivated Punjab as a loyal province populated by a "martial race," but the relationship was both lopsided and extractive. Rapid agricultural growth combined with easy credit had created a crisis of rural indebtedness, and epidemics of malaria and plague in the early 1900s pushed families toward emigration as the only way out.

Among those who left were the founders of the Ghadar movement, established in 1913 among expatriate Punjabis on the U.S. West Coast, dedicated to the armed overthrow of British rule in India.

The Komagata Maru voyage was freighted with this politics from the start. Ghadar activists boarded the ship in Yokohama, delivering lectures and distributing anti-colonial literature, and British intelligence was watching closely.

What led to the standoff?

The voyage was organised by Gurdit Singh, a Punjabi entrepreneur based in Singapore, who chartered the ship specifically to challenge Canada's exclusionary laws. Canada had enacted a "continuous journey regulation" in 1908, barring entry to anyone who had not travelled by a single unbroken journey from their country of birth, while also pressuring shipping companies not to sell direct tickets from India.

When the ship arrived at Vancouver's Burrard Inlet on May 23, 1914, immigration officials refused to let it dock. Prime Minister Robert Borden kept the ship anchored offshore, cutting off communication and stalling proceedings. The local South Asian community raised over $20,000 to take over the ship's charter and hired a lawyer to bring a test case, but the British Columbia Court of Appeal unanimously upheld the discriminatory laws. Officials then withheld food and water. On July 19, an armed police force of 150 men attempted to board the ship; the passengers fought them off. Borden dispatched a naval cruiser. Only 22 passengers, mostly those who could prove prior Canadian residence, were ultimately permitted to disembark. The ship departed under escort on July 23. British colonial authorities, suspicious of the passengers' politics, refused to let the ship dock in Hong Kong or Singapore. When it finally anchored near Calcutta in late September, police tried to force the exhausted passengers onto trains bound for Punjab. They refused, marched toward the city, and were fired upon. Twenty passengers were killed; many more were imprisoned. Gurdit Singh evaded capture for years before surrendering in 1920 and serving five years in prison.

What happened when the ship returned to India?

In the aftermath, the Ghadar movement surged in recruitment. Some members returned to Punjab in 1915 to attempt an armed uprising, which failed due to informers and mass arrests. Dozens were sent to the gallows. But the movement's martyrs became folklore.

Canada was slow to acknowledge what it had done. An apology delivered at a community festival by Prime Minister Stephen Harper in 2008 was rejected by many as insufficient. It took until 2016 for Prime Minister Justin Trudeau to deliver a formal apology on the floor of the House of Commons. The Komagata Maru remains a sharp demonstration of what colonial subjects had long understood: that the British Empire's promises of equal subjecthood were never meant for everyone.

THE GIST

- The Komagata Maru carried 376 British subjects from Punjab but was denied entry into Canada under the "continuous journey" regulation, leading to a two-month standoff in Vancouver harbour.
- On returning to India, the passengers faced police firing near Calcutta, killing 20 people.

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Lift abortion time limit for minor rape survivors: SC

SC says state and doctors cannot make decisions for minor rape survivors, it should be left to the parents or survivors; CJI calls for amendment to ensure such cases are completed within a week

Krishnadas Rajagopal
NEW DELHI

The Supreme Court on Thursday asked the Union government to amend the abortion law to remove the time limit on medical termination of unwanted pregnancies in the case of minor rape victims.

A Bench of Chief Justice of India Surya Kant and Joymalya Bagchi made the observation while refusing to entertain a curative petition filed by the government against a recent decision of the top court allowing a 15-year-old rape survivor to terminate a 30-week pregnancy.

Additional Solicitor-General Aishwarya Bhati, accompanied by specialists from AIIMS, said they were against the termination considering the health and well-being of both the teenager and the "unborn child". One of the specialist doctors said the court was wrong to consider this as a foetus-child (rape survivor) issue.

"This is a child-child issue," the doctor submitted in court.

The court said it was not for the doctors or the state to choose what was best for the rape survivor. The decision should be left to the parents of the survivor and the survivor herself.

"Let not medical personnel become the masters of the will of the people. The people would decide," Justice Bagchi said.

The state and the doctors could take them through the medical procedure and provide them expert help in the form of counsellors, the court said.

"You will help parents and children by having an informed discussion on the medical procedure for ending the foetuses' life and consequences... If anyone can come back to us for a review of our decision in this case, it is the parents or the child... The state cannot file a review. It has no locus standi. It is not for AIIMS to choose, it is for citizens to choose and the AIIMS to medically implement their choice," Justice Bagchi told the Centre and the AIIMS doctors.

> We are only protecting the child whose face is staring back at us. If she questions us, what answer would we give? What answer would the society have? The law cannot bow to momentary sentiments. The law has to see the whole life ahead for the victim. If law is required to be ruthless, it has to be that
>
> CJI SURYA KANT

CJI Kant says the child's victimisation cannot remain with her for the rest of her life as a scar

Severe trauma

Chief Justice Kant said the 15-year-old had already undergone the trauma of rape. She cannot be compelled to carry and give birth to a child. Her victimisation cannot remain with her for the rest of her life as a permanent scar.

"We are only protecting the child whose face is staring back at us. If she questions us, what answer would we give? What answer would the society have? The law cannot bow to momentary sentiments. The law has to see the whole life ahead for the victim. If law is required to be ruthless, it has to be that," the Chief Justice addressed the law officer and the doctors.

Ms. Bhati said the Medical Termination of Pregnancy (MTP) Amendment Act of 2021 has increased the time limit for legal abortion from 20 to 24 weeks for survivors of rape, minors, and women with disabilities.

"You should amend the law to remove any time limit on medical termination of unwanted pregnancy caused by the rape of a minor. You should also bring an amendment not only in the MTP Act, but also in the penal law, making it mandatory to complete the trial in such cases in a week. The entire property of the accused should be given to the victim," Chief Justice Kant observed.

- **The Medical Termination of Pregnancy Act, 1971 (“MTP Act”) was passed due to the progress made in the field of medical science with respect to safer abortions.**

- **In a historic move to provide universal access reproductive health services, India amended the MTP Act 1971 to further empower women by providing comprehensive abortion care to all.**

- **The new Medical Termination of Pregnancy (Amendment) Act 2021 expands the access to safe and legal abortion services on therapeutic, eugenic, humanitarian and social grounds to ensure universal access to comprehensive care.**

- **Termination due to Failure of Contraceptive Method or Device:**
- **Under the Act, a pregnancy may be terminated up to 20 weeks by a married woman in the case of failure of contraceptive method or device. It allows unmarried women to also terminate a pregnancy for this reason.**

Opinion Needed for Termination of Pregnancy:

- **Opinion of one Registered Medical Practitioner (RMP) for termination of pregnancy up to 20 weeks of gestation.**

- **Opinion of two RMPs for termination of pregnancy of 20-24 weeks of gestation.**

- **Opinion of the State-level medical board is essential for a pregnancy to be terminated after 24 weeks in case of substantial foetal abnormalities.**

Upper Gestation Limit for Special Categories:

- **Increases the upper gestation limit from 20 to 24 weeks for special categories of women,includingsurvivorsofrape,victimsofincestandothervulnerablewomen (differently abled women, minors, among others).**

The MTP Act 1971 and The MTP Act Amendments 2021

	MTP Act 1971	The MTP Amendment Act 2021
Indications (Contraceptive failure)	Only applies to married women	Unmarried women are also covered
Gestational Age Limit	20 weeks for all indications	24 weeks for rape survivors Beyond 24 weeks for substantial fetal abnormalities
Medical practitioner opinions required before termination	One RMP till 12 weeks Two RMPs till 20 weeks	One RMP till 20 weeks Two RMPs 20-24 weeks Medical Board approval after 24 weeks
Breach of the woman's confidentiality	Fine up to Rs 1000	Fine and/or Imprisonment of 1 year

- The Supreme Court on Thursday asked the Union government to amend the abortion law to remove the time limiton medical termination ofunwantedpregnancies in the case ofminorrapevictims.
- A Bench of Chief Justice of India D.Y. Chandrachud and Justice Pamidighantam Sri Narasimha refusing to entertain a petition filed by the government against the Bombay High Court order allowing a 15-year-old rape survivor to terminate a 30-week pregnancy.
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India's first green methanol plant to turn Kutch's most invasive weed into marine fuel

Jacob Koshy
NEW DELHI

A plant that has been ranked as one of the "top 100 invasive species in the world" and has for decades threatened biodiversity in Kutch's Banni grasslands, may soon be harnessed for the production of green methanol and fuel for ocean-going ships.

The Mexican-origin shrub called *Prosopis juliflora,* known as *Gando Baval* in the region, *Vilayati Keekar* in North India and *Seemai Karuvelam* in Tamil, has crowded out native grasses over thousands of kilometres in Kutch. The plant was first introduced by the British in the 1920s to 'green' Delhi and by the Gujarat Forest Department in 1961 to halt the encroaching salt desert in the Rann. This weed is to become the feedstock for India's first green methanol production plant.

Prosopis juliflora has crowded out native grasses over thousands of kilometres in Kutch. FILE PHOTO

Methanol is used as a fuel in shipping often as a replacement to what is called 'bunker oil'. Conventional methanol is produced from fossil fuels such as gas or coal gasification. Green methanol uses biomass from agricultural residue as source material as in the case with the *juliflora*.

The project, sited at the Deendayal Port Authority (DPA) in Kandla, will produce five tonnes of methanol a day and is being built by Pune-based Thermax Energy with gasification technology from Vadodara's Ankur Scientific, and will be owned by the port authority. Both companies are betting that the Government of India's policy to convert ports along the western coast into "green ports" will create demand for a fuel that the global shipping industry is being obliged to adopt under International Maritime Organization (IMO) rules.

Greenhouse gas cuts

Methanol made from renewable feedstocks can cut a vessel's CO_2 emissions by up to 95% and NOx (nitrogen oxides) by up to 80%, according to the Methanol Institute, while eliminating sulphur oxides and particulate matter.

Ankur Jain, who heads Ankur Scientific, said his company's role lies in the first stage of a two-step process. "The starting point for most fuels and chemicals is going to be syngas because syngas typically has hydrogen, CO and CO_2," he told *The Hindu*. Gasification, he explained, sits between combustion and pyrolysis. "You are heating it in the absence of oxygen, taking it out, improving its quality, burning them a bit and then breaking them down into hydrogen and CO (carbon monoxide) or syngas," he said. Thermax will handle the second step, converting that syngas into methanol.

"It [*juliflora*] is one of the best feedstocks because it is hardwood, dense, has a good energy profile, and low in acids," Mr Jain said, adding Gujarat already wants the species cleared. The plant will be certified to run on other agricultural residues such as bagasse and cotton stalk, which Mr. Jain estimates could, at their maximum potential, displace up to a third of India's oil imports.

- A plant that has been ranked as one of the “top 100 invasive species in the world” and has for decadesthreatened biodiversityin Kutch’s Bannigrasslands,maysoonbeharnessedfor the production of green methanol and fuel for ocean-going ships.

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- **Greenhouse gas cuts**
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- **(nitrogenoxides)byupto80%,accordingtotheMethanolInstitute,whileeliminatingsulphuroxides and particulate matter.**

- Methanol is a low carbon, hydrogen carrier fuel produced from high ash coal, agricultural
- residue, $CO_2$from thermalpower plants andnaturalgas.
- Methanol, also known as methyl alcohol or wood alcohol, is a colorless, flammable liquid.
- It is the simplest alcohol.
  Methanol is commonly used as an industrial solvent, antifreeze, and fuel, but it is perhaps best known for its use as an alcohol fuel in racing cars and as a feedstock for the production of chemicals and plastics.

- Green methanol is methanol that is produced renewably and without polluting emissions,

  one ofitsvariantsbeing generatedfrom greenhydrogen.
-

  This chemical compound can be used as a low-carbon liquid fuel and is a promising
  alternative to fossil fuels in areas where decarbonisation is a major challenge, such as maritime transport.

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Embers in the air

Seasonal fires need long-term management, not just preparedness

The Nilgiris district in Tamil Nadu and the adjoining forest divisions of Mudumalai, Coimbatore and Erode have been dealing with wildfires that escalated to being a crisis requiring the assistance of the Indian Air Force. Even so, the intense fires are not anomalous, but an acute manifestation of a seasonal event. Parsons Valley and Pykara in the Nilgiris have been worst-hit while significant blazes were also reported from the Singara and Masinagudi ranges. One major blaze broke out in Wenlock Downs and spread rapidly. February to May is fire season in this region, and in April, officials said that high heat and strong winds created a "conducive environment"; the wind, in particular, carried embers over pre-existing firelines and partly explains why this season has been a breakout. Some fires also burnt hotter and for longer in Pykara because of the accumulated biomass and invasive undergrowth, and took longer to be doused. The Nilgiris feature steep terrains and limited road access, slowing the movement of crew and equipment to particular spots. This said, most fires also have a human hand. Tribespeople gather wood in the area to make brooms – an activity closely monitored by officials – and herders have also been known to burn dry grassland, forcing grasses to regrow and become fodder. The latter together with discarded smoking paraphernalia are known accidental causes. This year, one blaze entered the Coimbatore division after Kerala forest staff began a controlled burn allegedly without coordinating this with Tamil Nadu. Some officials also expressed suspicion that miscreants deliberately set fires in the Reserve, allegedly over the Forest Department's failure to address tiger-related deaths meaningfully, but local communities are usually the first-responders to these fires.

While none of these causes is new, their confluence this year with the hot summer is likely to have stoked the intense fires. Indeed, climate variability – rather than climate change alone – is also raising the baseline risk. Keeping other causes fixed, a hotter, drier summer automatically leads to fires that threaten the best-laid plans more. Even this year, authorities had begun planning in March, setting up control rooms and firelines, ensuring animals' access to water outside human-settled areas, clearing weeds, and mounting awareness campaigns. However, many activities that add to the fire risk remain tied to peoples' livelihoods and traditional practices, so they cannot be eliminated without suitable alternatives. Taken together, managing the region's seasonal fires is becoming less about what can be planned for in the short term and more about what can be factored in over the long term.

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Gulf within

Differences with Saudi Arabia and Iran's attacks led to the UAE's exit from OPEC

The UAE has withdrawn from the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), a cartel that it joined in 1967, and OPEC+. It was OPEC's fourth-largest producer (3.12 million barrels per day) and its third-largest exporter (2.88 mbd) in 2025, behind Saudi Arabia and Iraq. The Emiratis clearly sought to free themselves of production constraints set largely by the cartel's dominant producer, Saudi Arabia. With significant spare capacity, the Emiratis believe that they are better off with the autonomy to ramp up exports, a capability now constrained by the de facto closure of the Strait of Hormuz, the largest disruption to oil supply in history, following U.S.-Israel attacks on Iran. Brent crude prices barely budged on the announcement, revealing how heavily the Strait crisis weighs on the market. But once the UAE weathers this crisis, whether through the Strait's reopening, or by routing more crude through a pipeline bypassing Hormuz, analysts estimate that it could lift production by roughly a million barrels a day. While Saudi Arabia, OPEC's bellwether, has remained chary of over-supply and sought to keep prices high, the UAE has long pushed for higher production for revenues that it intends to funnel into AI infrastructure and other diversification projects.

Unsaid in the UAE's move is also its frustration with what it sees as a lack of cartel-wide coordination in responding to Iran's missile and drone attacks on Gulf oil and military facilities; Iran is also an OPEC member. The Emiratis have also differed sharply with the Saudis on external interventions: in Yemen and Sudan. The UAE also seeks closer ties with Israel than most Gulf states, which remain uncomfortable with any thaw given Israel's genocidal actions in Gaza and its attacks on Iran and Lebanon. The U.S., a non-OPEC member, and the world's largest oil producer at 13.6 mbd, has long viewed the cartel's price-setting unfavourably, and President Donald Trump has repeatedly pressed it to pump more. The UAE perhaps calculates that aligning with Washington will yield benefits for its production and pipeline ambitions, though Mr. Trump's transactional and mercurial foreign policy offers little guarantee. The UAE's exit also reflects a structural issue: OPEC's share of global crude dropped to 36.7% in 2025, and with Hormuz shut, pricing power has shifted to American producers in the short term. OPEC will continue, but with a reduced ability to set prices. For net oil-importing countries such as India, however, the immediate threat is not the cartel's unravelling but the "double blockade" in the Strait of Hormuz and the fragile Iran-U.S. ceasefire. Unless a new geopolitical détente emerges between Iran and the Gulf states, volatility will persist, threatening energy security regardless of what unfolds within OPEC.

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Page No.10 , GS 2

India's sprint beyond the dairy red line to the Pacific

Ritu Srivastava

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The Free Trade Agreement with New Zealand reflects India's evolving trade diplomacy strategy

India concluded a Free Trade Agreement (FTA) with New Zealand in December 2025, at a time marked by fractured supply chains and rising protectionist tendencies among nations. Guided by the vision of "Viksit Bharat", India has recalibrated its foreign trade policy, transitioning from a cautious, tariff-focused negotiator to a strategic, high-velocity partner. This shift characterises a clear departure from the historical "slow burn" model of trade diplomacy. There are six key wins for India in this FTA, as it aligns with the Viksit Bharat blueprint for trade policy based on strategic autonomy and global integration."

India's rapid FTA execution

First, this pact is one of India's fastest-concluded FTAs, with negotiations officially launched in March 2025 and concluded in December 2025. This gives India a first-mover advantage in Oceania while also signalling its swift institutional integration and ambitious posture to other partners. This fresh display of efficiency and the ability to compress negotiation cycle times is a new deliverable from India to its trade partners.

Second, this FTA embeds talent mobility as a core economic pillar with the "Yoga and Māori" reciprocity between the two nations. There are many provisions for human capital outflow, including professional pathways, youth engagement and bi-directional exchange of traditional medicine. The FTA allows for a separate annual quota of 5,000 professional visas for skilled Indian professionals in high-skill jobs such as IT, engineering, and health care, with a tenure period of up to three years. An annual quota of 1,000 work-and-holiday visas will also be permitted for young Indians, aligning India's workforce with New Zealand's age requirements. Most importantly, it is the first bilateral reciprocity agreement that will allow international recognition of India's Ayurveda, Yoga, Unani, Siddha, and Homoeopathy (AYUSH) system along with the native Māori health practices of New Zealand.

Third, the FTA lays down a commitment of capital inflow of around $20 billion over a period of 15 years in high-priority sectors such as agri-tech and food processing, renewable energy, education and health-care management, wherein New Zealand's technology and capital will be the much-needed catalyst for growth. This influx will also strengthen the "Make in India" programme.

Strategically shielded

Fourth, India has been so far successful in negotiating for an agreement which protects one of the sensitive sectors of India's economy – "dairy". The mechanics of the pact include the exclusion of fluid milk, cheese, and yogurt from duty concessions. India will grant progressive market access, on a duty-free basis, for infant formula and high-value-added dairy products, over a seven-year period, allowing domestic nutritional firms access to quality raw materials. The pact proposes a "Ring Fenced Value Addition Framework" to boost downstream processing of manufacturing. Under this agreement, New Zealand firms are permitted to import dairy products from India duty-free for manufacturing purposes, if 100% of the products are exported out of India. The pact uses an advanced tariff rate quota mechanism, providing for a minimum import price and seasonal constraints on select commodities such as apples, honey, and kiwifruit.

The fifth win is that New Zealand has pledged to change its legislation within 18 months. This change will provide Indian Geographical Indication (GI) products with protection such as that offered by the European Union. As a result, brands such as Darjeeling tea and Basmati rice will receive top-quality legal protection in Oceania.

Securing a South Pacific foothold

Last, this FTA with New Zealand is increasingly significant, as it creates a geopolitical hedge for India and opens new markets, with New Zealand serving as a gateway to Oceania and the Pacific Island countries (PICs). By adopting New Zealand's trade regulations and norms, India secures a logistical centre and "regulatory reference point" in the South Pacific. Through this trade agreement, India demonstrates its ability to meet Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) standards and sets a precedent for further negotiations with other partners. The FTA signals India's ability to open and engage in global supply chains while maintaining a balance between market access and domestic protection.

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On May Day, a workforce in India without a floor

Rejimon Kuttappan

A workers' rights expert

From Noida's streets to furnace rooms in Chhattisgarh, India's new labour regime delivers for employers — and for workers, what it long warned of

This year, May Day arrives not as a commemoration, but as a diagnosis. Within a single fortnight last month, two events clarified the state of Indian labour more sharply than any official review.

On April 10, thousands of garment workers in Noida's Phase 2 Hosiery Complex stepped out of nearly 300 factories and onto the streets, demanding a minimum monthly wage of ₹20,000. On April 14, a high-pressure steam tube ruptured at Vedanta's 1,200 MW Singhitarai thermal plant in Chhattisgarh, killing 20 workers and injuring 15. One protest was about the price of labour; the other, about the price of being alive while performing it. Both answer the same question: what has India's labour reform actually produced?

The Noida strike began with a specific arithmetic grievance. On April 9, the Haryana government notified a 35% hike in minimum wages, raising unskilled monthly wages from ₹11,274 to ₹15,220, with effect from April 1, 2026. Across the border in Noida, unskilled workers were earning roughly ₹435 a day, compared to ₹585 in Haryana for identical work. Protesters at the Hosiery Complex — employees of different companies — assembled in B Block, blocked traffic, and refused to disperse without written assurances.

By April 13, the administration had deployed over 1,200 personnel, including the Provincial Armed Constabulary and Rapid Action Force; lathi charges and stone-pelting followed, and nearly 400 people were detained. Under pressure, the Uttar Pradesh government announced an interim 21% hike, setting wages at ₹13,690 for unskilled workers in Gautam Buddh Nagar and ₹16,868 for skilled workers. The workers rejected it; their demand remained ₹20,000.

Between pay and survival

The gap between ₹16,868 and ₹20,000 is not a bargaining position. It is the difference between what a family pays for rent, gas, and school fees in the NCR and what the state is willing to concede as a dignified minimum.

Four days later, the furnace at Singhitarai did its own counting. A preliminary report from the Chief Boiler Inspector, backed by the Forensic Science Laboratory in Sakti, Chhattisgarh, attributed the explosion to 'excessive fuel buildup inside the furnace', which produced pressure surges that displaced critical piping. The probe flagged "repeated negligence in equipment upkeep" by Vedanta and its contractor NGSL (NTPC GE Power Services Pvt. Ltd.). A first information report has been registered against Vedanta's Chairman Anil Agarwal, the plant manager, and others under Sections 106(1), 289 and 3(5) of the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita.

The dead were not Vedanta's own employees; they worked for a subcontractor. This, too, is a pattern.

Chhattisgarh alone has recorded 296 industrial deaths over three years. Across India, the Directorate General of Factory Advice Service and Labour Institutes recorded 3,331 factory deaths between 2018 and 2020 — three a day — yet only 14 people were imprisoned under the Factories Act during the same period. The global union IndustriALL counted over 400 workplace fatalities in India in 2024, with the chemical sector alone accounting for 220. In July 2025, an explosion at Sigachi Industries in Telangana had killed 44 people, mostly migrant workers, at a plant that the State fire department found lacked basic fire alarms and heat sensors.

A structural shift

These are not disconnected episodes. They are the operating conditions of an economy that, on November 21, 2025, formally adopted the four labour codes. In a single stroke, and without any transition period, the four codes — the Code on Wages, the Industrial Relations Code, the Social Security Code and the Occupational Safety, Health and Working Conditions (OSHWC) Code — replaced 29 central labour laws. The Indian Labour Conference, the country's apex tripartite forum, had not been convened since 2015.

The new regime raises the threshold for prior government permission for layoffs, retrenchment, and closure from 100 workers to 300 under the Industrial Relations Code, 2020, enabling firms below that size — an estimated majority of India's factory units — to retrench workers without administrative scrutiny. A peer-reviewed analysis in the National Library of Medicine archive notes that this merely restores the pre-1982 threshold, reversing an Emergency-era protection enacted after a wave of mass layoffs affected over half a million workers.

The OSHWC Code, 2020, simultaneously raises the statutory definition of a 'factory' from 10 workers in a factory with power to 20, and from 20 workers in a factory without power to 40, lifting an entire tier of smaller workplaces — where India's textile, garment, metal, hosiery, and food-processing clusters are concentrated — out of mandatory safety oversight. Labour economists warn that this technical reclassification has a profound impact on worker coverage, since a majority of India's small manufacturing units employ fewer than 20 workers.

The inspection architecture has been similarly diluted. The OSHWC Code replaces unannounced inspections with an 'Inspector-cum-Facilitator' model, combined with randomised, web-based allocation through the Shram Suvidha portal and employer self-certification — a shift that, as the International Labour Organization's India Labour Inspection Profile notes, may contravene the requirement for independent, unannounced inspections under ILO Convention No. 81.

Procedural hurdles for collective action have also stiffened. Under the IR Code, no worker may strike without 60 days' prior notice, flash strikes are prohibited outright, and strikes are barred during and for weeks after any conciliation or tribunal proceeding. "Mass casual leave" by more than 50% of a workforce is now deemed a strike. Trade unions argue that, in combination, these provisions make lawful industrial action virtually impossible to organise, completing the regime's pro-employer tilt.

A reform that raises statutory thresholds in almost every operative clause, is not rationalising protection. It is removing it. The enforcement chapters read more like a facilitation framework than a compliance regime.

Ten central trade unions, excluding the Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh (BMS), observed a "Black Day" on November 26, 2025, calling the codes a "deceptive fraud on the working class". Their objection was not sentimental. When the legal definition of a factory excludes the smallest and most dangerous workplaces; when inspectors announce their visits through a portal; when retrenchment requires no permission below 300 workers; and when strikes are bound by procedural tightropes, the predictable result is the Noida street and the Singhitarai shop floor.

The wage stagnation that drove workers from Motherson Sumi and Richa Global into a baton charge, and the deferred maintenance that caused a boiler tube to rupture, are not separate problems. They are two ends of the same system.

Old laws, new realities

There is an honest public case for labour reform. The Factories Act of 1948 is older than most Indian States; the Workmen's Compensation Act of 1923 predates the Constitution. A regulatory architecture built for the industrial economy of late-colonial India — of jute mills, textile mills, and railway workshops — cannot plausibly govern a workforce that today includes gig workers, platform workers, and digital-media workers. No serious observer, and no Indian trade union, disputes that consolidation was overdue. The question is not whether the law should have changed; it is what it changed into.

Consolidation is not dilution, and simplification is not exemption.

On May Day, the test for any labour framework is modest: does it allow a worker to earn enough to live, and to live through the shift? In April 2026, the answer from Noida and Singhitarai is the same. In Noida, police fired tear gas at factory workers protesting for a living wage as fuel-driven inflation outpaced wages. In Singhitarai, a boiler tube burst at a Vedanta power plant on April 14, releasing 600°C steam onto workers eating lunch; 20 were killed, all contract workers employed through a business partner rather than as direct employees. Neither a wage that sustains life, nor a workplace that preserves it. A regime that cannot deliver the second while pricing out the first has not been rationalised. It has been rewritten against the very people it was meant to protect.

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