EDITORIAL

No infant should be left behind

The true measure of a developed society is not merely its economic growth, modern infrastructure or technological achievements but the way it protects its most vulnerable citizens. Infants, who depend entirely on adults for survival and care, deserve the highest degree of protection. Infant Protection Day, observed on November 7, offers an important occasion to reflect on our collective responsibility towards ensuring that every child receives a healthy, safe and dignified beginning.Jammu and Kashmir has made notable progress in improving healthcare indicators. The decline in infant mortality and improvement in institutional deliveries and immunisation coverage are positive developments. However, the benefits of progress must reach every section of society, particularly families living in remote villages, border areas, mountainous regions and economically weaker settlements.Geographical inequalities remain an important concern. In some areas, difficult roads, harsh winter conditions, inadequate transportation and long distances from specialised hospitals can create challenges for pregnant women and newborns. A medical emergency involving an infant requires immediate attention, and even a short delay can make a difference.The administration must therefore strengthen rural healthcare networks, improve emergency ambulance services and establish effective referral arrangements between primary health centres, district hospitals and tertiary care institutions. Special attention should be given to areas where weather conditions frequently disrupt transportation and access to medical services.Another concern is the lack of awareness among certain families about newborn care, breastfeeding, vaccination and early identification of health problems. Awareness campaigns must move beyond hospitals and reach villages, schools, community organisations and households.ASHA workers, Anganwadi workers and local healthcare personnel can play a transformative role by regularly interacting with families, monitoring newborn health and encouraging timely medical consultations. Their training, resources and working conditions must receive adequate attention.Infant protection must also include safeguarding children from neglect, unsafe surroundings, inadequate nutrition and discrimination. Every girl and boy deserves equal care, medical attention and opportunities for healthy development. The survival and well-being of an infant should never depend upon the family's income, social background or place of residence.The government, civil society organisations, healthcare professionals and families must work together to create a comprehensive child-protection environment. Existing maternal and child welfare programmes should be implemented effectively, with transparent monitoring and accountability.Jammu and Kashmir's development journey must be judged by how successfully it improves the lives of ordinary families. Protecting infants is not simply a healthcare responsibility; it is a social, administrative and moral obligation.On Infant Protection Day, the message for the Union Territory should be clear: no child should be deprived of essential healthcare because of poverty, distance or lack of awareness.Every newborn deserves a fair beginning. Ensuring that promise is fulfilled must remain a shared commitment of the entire society.

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Viksit Bharat or Broken Governance?

BY PRASHANT TEWARI

India's journey towards becoming a developed nation demands more than economic growth, ambitious infrastructure and global influence. It requires a fundamental transformation of governance at the grassroots. The persistent failures of the judiciary, police, municipal administration, healthcare and education have eroded public trust and burdened ordinary citizens. Unless political leadership confronts these institutional weaknesses, Viksit Bharat will remain an unfinished promise

India's ambition to become a developed nation cannot be measured by GDP growth, highways or influence alone. The real test of Viksit Bharat is the quality of governance ordinary citizens' experiences. For many, the State is the court where a case remains pending, the police station that refuses a complaint, the municipality that demands a bribe, the hospital unable to provide treatment and the school that fails to educate. These five institutional failures demand a National Reform Agenda.

The judiciary is a grave governance challenge. More than five crore cases remain pending, trapping citizens in years of litigation, costs and uncertainty. Vacancies, adjournments, procedural delays and inadequate infrastructure have eroded public confidence. Courts need better case management, limits on unnecessary adjournments, fixed timelines to fill vacancies, and digital filing and tracking. Specialised courts for commercial, land and property disputes, alongside mediation and arbitration, can ease the burden. Appointments and performance systems must be transparent without compromising judicial independence. Courts should be treated as essential services, providing round-the-clock access for urgent hearings. Extended hours would widen opportunities for lawyers and legal interns. Merely replacing the Indian Penal Code with the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, without transforming investigation and justice delivery, is a laughable response to a monumental problem. The Justice Yashwant Varma episode has exposed the disturbing depths of institutional rot within the Indian judiciary. The discovery of burnt and scattered cash at a judge's residence, followed by institutional explanations and apparent damage control, has raised serious questions about judicial accountability. Those who uphold the law must be equally answerable to it.

The police are the citizen's first contact with the law, yet political interference, corruption, refusal to register complaints, compromised investigations and custodial excesses remain concerns. The Supreme Court's seven directives in the 2006 Prakash Singh judgment must be implemented. Online complaint registration and tracking should be universal. Investigation must be separated from law-and-order duties, supported by forensic capacity and cybercrime expertise. Corruption in the khaki must invite zero tolerance, exemplary punishment and uncompromising accountability. The nexus of systemic and syndicated corruption must be dismantled; there can be no political patronage or impunity. It is a nightmare for a common man to get any help from the police station across India. Municipal governance in India is grossly neglected. The 74th Constitutional Amendment promised empowered urban local bodies, but municipalities remain financially weak and politically dependent. Citizens face broken roads, clogged drains, irregular water, poor sanitation, opaque building approvals and bribery for everything. Decentralisation must provide revenue through rational property taxes, transparent user charges and a fair share of state revenues. The roles of mayors and commissioners must be clear. Building permissions, property records, procurement and contracts should be digitised and open to scrutiny. Municipal ombudsmen, social audits, service deadlines and public dashboards can make officials accountable. The ground realities at the provincial-level third-tier government have been horrible in India since independence.

Healthcare and education expose a brutal contradiction in India's development narrative. While the country celebrates medical tourism and pharmaceutical achievements, families struggle with unaffordable treatment, overcrowded hospitals, shortages of doctors, nurses and medicines, and inadequate rural healthcare. Children leave school without foundational literacy and numeracy, while teacher vacancies, absenteeism, poor infrastructure and outdated teaching undermine the future workforce.

Healthcare and education must remain the government's primary responsibility. Universal access and quality public provision are non-negotiable. Functional primary health centres, staffed district hospitals, affordable diagnostics, essential medicines, trained teachers, equipped schools and measurable learning outcomes must anchor public policy. Universities need academic autonomy, research funding, industry partnerships and vocational programmes.

Promoting private schools and hospitals at the expense of public institutions is eroding public confidence in healthcare and education. In a country of 1.5 billion people, where government figures indicate nearly 80 crore citizens depend on subsidised food, why profit driven private enterprise will shoulder welfare for the poorest? Primary health centres, elementary schools and basic hospitals should operate on a non-profit basis. Specialised hospitals and universities may attract private investment under affordability and quality regulation. Weakening public institutions while promoting private alternatives is not reform; it is a recipe for social exclusion, inequality and disaster. These failures help explain why farmers, students, women and caste-based groups take to the streets. Not every agitation is justified, and political mobilisation can exploit grievances. But governments cannot dismiss every protest as conspiracy or opposition-sponsored disruption. Public anger often reflects accumulated frustration with institutions that do not listen, deliver or provide remedies. Democratic dissent must be heard and grievances addressed through credible administrative action, not slogans or confrontation.

The responsibility does not belong to one Government alone. Successive administrations at the Centre and in the states have failed to deliver sustained structural reform. Yet the first two terms of the Modi government offered a historic opportunity to reset India's governance architecture. Digital platforms, direct benefit transfers, infrastructure and financial inclusion delivered important gains, but these were not matched by equally ambitious reforms to institutions shaping everyday life. This remains one of the biggest missed opportunities of the Modi era.

Viksit Bharat will not be built by economic indicators alone. It will be built when citizens receive justice without waiting decades, protection without political connections, civic services without bribes, treatment without financial ruin and education without inherited privilege. Courts must deliver justice, police protect, municipalities serve, hospitals heal and schools create opportunity. Until these institutions work for ordinary citizens, India's development story will remain incomplete, and its promise of becoming a developed nation will rest on fragile foundations.

India does not suffer from a shortage of useless never-ending debates, committees or conferences on governance reforms; it suffers from a chronic shortage of action. Decades of discussions on judicial, police, municipal, education and healthcare reforms have produced recommendations but little meaningful change. The real problem is not a lack of solutions but a lack of political will. While governance remains trapped in conference rooms, the common man on the street continues to pay the price with his dignity, livelihood and, increasingly, his life. The message to the ruling elites is loud and clear: Act now, or abandon the dream of Viksit Bharat. A developed India cannot be built on broken institutions, rampant corruption and unfulfilled promises.

The author is a public policy expert and columnist; Views presented are personal.

Wars, food and energy: The Global South cannot afford to be held hostage

BY WAIEL AWWAD

The war in West Asia has exposed a dangerous reality of the modern global economy: a conflict fought in one region can threaten the food security, energy supplies and economic stability of countries thousands of kilometres away. The closure of the Strait of Hormuz, now extending into its ninth month, has disrupted the movement of oil, gas and fertilisers, while the continuing war in Ukraine keeps the Black Sea's commercial routes under threat. The consequences are being felt from South Asia to Africa and Latin America.

For the Global South, this is no longer a distant geopolitical crisis. It is an economic emergency.

India's food security under pressure

India's exposure is particularly significant. The country imports close to 90 per cent of its crude oil requirements, making the security of maritime supply routes a vital national interest. With Hormuz effectively closed to normal commercial traffic since the conflict began in February, India's energy calculations have become considerably more complicated.

The crisis also demonstrates why food security cannot be separated from energy security. Fertiliser production and transportation depend heavily on natural gas, while the Gulf is a major source and transit region for nitrogen fertilisers. The WTO has documented severe disruption to urea and phosphate fertiliser trade through Hormuz. Urea prices rose from approximately $400 to more than $850 per ton in April before easing. The consequences reach farmers, agricultural yields and food prices well beyond the Gulf. India must therefore strengthen its strategic reserves, diversify suppliers, expand renewable energy and domestic production, and secure alternative transport arrangements. But it must also pay greater attention to fertiliser availability, agricultural inputs and the affordability of food for vulnerable households.

The Black Sea: a corridor requires reciprocity

India's proposal to restore grain shipments through the Black Sea is equally important. Russia and Ukraine are major agricultural exporters, and the interruption of their trade has contributed to uncertainty in global food markets.

However, reviving the corridor requires more than asking Moscow and Kyiv to stop attacking commercial vessels. The experience of the 2022 Black Sea Grain Initiative provides an important lesson. The agreement, brokered by Turkey and the United Nations, enabled nearly 33 million tons of Ukrainian agricultural products to reach world markets. Russia withdrew in July 2023, arguing that its own food and fertiliser exports continued to face financial, insurance and logistical obstacles.

Any renewed arrangement must address that grievance rather than ignore it. Russia's demand for practical access to agricultural markets, payment systems, shipping services and fertiliser exports must be considered alongside Ukraine's right to export grain safely. Turkey's diplomatic and geographical role remains indispensable, while the United Nations can help establish monitoring and verification mechanisms. The objective should be a reciprocal arrangement: secure passage for Ukrainian grain and meaningful facilitation of Russian food and fertiliser exports.

Clearly designated shipping lanes, advance notification, mine-clearance arrangements, emergency communication channels and independent incident monitoring would help restore confidence. Without reciprocity and verification, a new agreement risks repeating the failures of its predecessor.

The Global South is already adapting.

The consequences are visible across developing economies. Sri Lanka has introduced a QR-code-based fuel rationing system, while Egypt has imposed restrictions on business operating hours and reduced public lighting to conserve energy. These are not theoretical scenarios; they are emergency responses to the pressure on fuel supplies and public finances.

Nigeria illustrates the link between energy and agricultural security. Although its domestic fertiliser industry has expanded considerably, it remains dependent on imported raw materials, including phosphate and potash. Research by the International Food Policy Research Institute has documented a sharp rise in urea prices, increasing pressure on farmers already facing tight financial margins.

This response points towards a wider lesson. The Global South needs regional food reserves, advance procurement arrangements, diversified fertiliser sources, affordable trade finance and stronger cooperation between producing and importing countries. It cannot remain dependent on a handful of vulnerable maritime routes or suppliers.

The nuclear red line must not be crossed.

Amid this crisis, the nuclear dimension is especially disturbing. US commentator Tucker Carlson has alleged that Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is pressing President Donald Trump to consider a nuclear strike against Iran's underground nuclear facility at Pickaxe Mountain. Carlson has offered no publicly verifiable evidence for this allegation, and it must not be presented as an established US or Israeli policy. Threatening nuclear weapons as a means of intimidating a country or forcing political concessions is profoundly irresponsible. Their use would not be a conventional military escalation; it would be a humanitarian and environmental catastrophe. Radiation, civilian casualties and long-term contamination would not respect borders. A nuclear strike could also provoke retaliation, destabilise the Gulf and destroy what remains of the international restraint against nuclear use.

A common responsibility

The Global South must not become the silent casualty of conflicts it did not initiate. India has the diplomatic reach to bring together countries across Asia, Africa, the Gulf and Latin America, and to turn G20 discussions into practical cooperation on maritime security, food supplies, energy resilience and the protection of civilian infrastructure.

The priority must be clear: secure shipping, affordable energy, reliable fertiliser supplies and uninterrupted food trade. The international community must also establish firm limits against attacks on civilian economic infrastructure and reject the use or threat of nuclear weapons as instruments of political pressure. The credibility of global diplomacy will ultimately be measured not by the number of declarations issued at summits, but by whether those declarations protect ordinary people from the consequences of war.

The Global South needs cooperation, not coercion; secure trade routes, not economic blockades; and diplomacy, not nuclear intimidation. The world's food and energy security must never be sacrificed to the ambitions of military powers.

Dr Waiel Awwad, is a veteran journalist specialising in West Asian affairs; Views presented are personal.