

# To delete voters, EC cites 'logical discrepancy'. Why this defies logic

Former commissioners say new criterion unprecedented, without basis, seeks to exclude voters



**SUBARNA MONDAL, 39;**  
LOGICAL DISCREPANCY CITED:  
UNKNOWN



**SUKLA HAZRA, 55**  
LOGICAL DISCREPANCY CITED: AGE  
GAP WITH PARENT OVER 50 YEARS



**AMIRAN BEGUM ALI, 56, HER DAUGHTERS-IN-LAW ARIFA BEGUM SHEIKH, 35, SHAHIDA KHATUN, 29;** LOGICAL DISCREPANCY CITED:  
NAME MISMATCH FOR ALL THREE



**HIDAYTULLA SK, 39**  
LOGICAL DISCREPANCY CITED:  
PARENT 'MAPPED' TO 6 OTHERS

**Damini Nath, Ravik Bhattacharya & Atri Mitra**  
Kolkata, Howrah, April 20

● **SUKLA HAZRA, 55**, has her name in the electoral roll of 2002, when an Intensive Revision was held by the Election Commission in West Bengal, and holds a passport valid till December 2028.

● **Amiran Begum Ali, 56**, and "daughters-in-law Arifa Begum Sheikh, 35, and Shahida Khatun, 29, all established links to the 2002 roll, including through her grandfather in the case of Shahida.

● **Subarna Mondal, 39**, submitted the 2002 electoral roll that had names of both her parents as well as grandparents, and later her birth certificate, and her Class 10 admit card.

Yet, Sukla, Amiran, Arifa, Shahida and Subarna have



**SK FARIDUL, 48; HIS BROTHERS SK ALIF, 41, SK SARIFUL, 34; AND FARIDUL'S SON AND WIFE SK ALAM, 24, ALMARA BEGUM, 40**  
LOGICAL DISCREPANCY CITED: UNKNOWN

been deleted from West Bengal's electoral roll because the Election Commission of India (ECI) has categorised them as entries that have a "logical discrepancy" — a criterion never used at this scale in the past.

This despite the fact that all five of them can be mapped to

the 2002 roll, a key pre-condition set by the ECI itself. As the clock ticks down to the polling days of April 23 and April 29, these three are illustrative cases among the lakhs who have been excluded from the state voter list.

In its latest order on Bengal's  
➤CONTINUED ON PAGE 9

## Told Tribunals are 'not functioning', SC seeks report from Chief Justice

**Express News Service**  
New Delhi, April 20

WITH THE first phase of elections in West Bengal scheduled to be held on April 23, the Supreme Court said on Monday that it will seek a report from the Calcutta High Court Chief Justice on the Appellate Tribunals set up to hear appeals of those excluded from the electoral rolls during the Special Intensive Revision (SIR).

The directive came from a bench of Chief Justice of India Surya Kant and Justice Joymalaya Bagchi after Senior Advo-

cate Devdutta Kamat contended in court that the Tribunals were "not functioning", and that they were only "accepting internet and computer-based applications" while not permitting lawyers of applicants at the hearings.

"There is a practical difficulty. The matter is now listed on April 24. Appellate Tribunals are not functioning. Citizens from thousands of kilometres are not allowed representation. This court's order is not being followed," Kamat said.

Initially, CJI Kant expressed  
➤CONTINUED ON PAGE 2

# To delete voters,

[ FROM PAGE 1 ]

drawn-out Special Intensive Revision (SIR) process, the Supreme Court directed that these 27.10 lakh be given one last chance, with the ECI directed to issue supplementary lists with those whose names are cleared by tribunals by April 21 (for the seats polling on April 23) and April 27 (for the April 29 phase).

The ECI had identified these deletions on the basis of a centrally-controlled algorithm that picked out what it called “logical discrepancies”, after the draft roll under the SIR was published in December. The algorithm narrowed down 1.36 crore names in total, of which 60.06 lakh were placed under adjudication, with the rest disposed of in the notice period. Of these 60.06 lakh, 27.10 lakh were deleted after adjudication.

Key to this is what the EC calls “logical discrepancy”. Some former chief election commissioners (CECs) and ex-ECs said this is “unprecedented”. Indeed, the ECI itself has been silent on it. When it issued its first order in June 2024 on an SIR for the whole country, starting with Bihar, and when it gave its directive three months later in October 2025 announcing that it would be held in 12 states/Union Territories, including Bengal, it made no mention of “logical discrepancies” as a criterion.

It was only in its written

was held and there was time to appeal. There was a timely redressal mechanism for the affected person.”

But in the case of Bengal, Lavasa said, “the electors deleted have not been accorded an opportunity to appeal in time before the elections”. “It amounts to taking away their rights unfairly, because of bureaucratic inefficiency.”

Ex-CEC OP Rawat said even if one person gets left out due to wrongly identified “logical discrepancies”, it was “very serious”. “It punctures the whole idea of the SIR. We must remember that the ECI’s motto has been ‘no voter to be left behind,’” he said.

Incidentally, in Bihar too, some names appeared to have been flagged by the ECI’s centrally-controlled software, resulting in deletion of 9,968 voters without explanations given in the case of the others — largely deaths, being absent or having shifted to other places. The ECI itself did not release any information or data regarding these 9,968 deleted names.

The poll panel remains similarly tight-lipped on its “logical discrepancies” algorithm in operation in Bengal.

*The Indian Express* tracked down voters who have valid government documents, are mapped to the 2002 roll, and yet find themselves deleted.

While Bengal Chief Electoral



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It was only in its written reply in January this year to the Supreme Court that the ECI said its Electoral Registration Officers had “generated notices for verification” of different types of “identified discrepancies”. It named these as: mismatch of an elector’s name in the current rolls with rolls prepared after the last intensive revision (2002, in the case of Bengal); an age gap less than 15 years or more than 15 years between an elector and their parent; an age gap less than 40 years between an elector and their grandparent; and, finally, six or more electors mapped as progeny of one person.

An ex-CEC expressed surprise at these criteria, saying there was “no basis” for them. “The SIR process does not provide for this. It is illogical. All along, the idea has been to be as inclusive as possible,” said the ex-CEC, who did not wish to be named.

Former EC Ashok Lavasa said: “The ECI has in the past used a de-duplication software (to check voter lists), but the suspected duplicate names identified through that were flagged to the ERO concerned, the elector was given a notice, a hearing

While Bengal Chief Electoral Officer Manoj Agarwal was unavailable for comment, asked about these cases, a senior official of the ECI said: “All adjudication cases were seen by judicial officers. We have no say regarding their judgment. In some cases, those who took documents during hearings, whether they properly handled the documents or not, will be subject to investigation.”

All these 10 cases are of applicants and their family members in constituencies which vote in the second phase of Bengal polls, on April 29. This means they have time till April 27 to be included in voter lists:

- **SUKLA HAZRA, 55; Behala Paschim constituency**  
**Logical discrepancy cited in notice:** Age difference between elector and parent is more than 50 years

**Documents:** Hazra says that during the SIR, she submitted the 2002 electoral roll which had her name, and at the hearing, gave a copy of her passport that is valid till December 2028.

**What may have happened:** Hazra says she had ap-

# SC to seek report on functioning of tribunals for SIR

**The Hindu Bureau**  
NEW DELHI

The Supreme Court on Monday expressed initial reluctance to entertain a plea quoting media reports that the Election Commission has infused nearly seven lakh new voters through the Form 6 route into the West Bengal electoral roll long after it has been frozen, saying it did not want to embark on a “fishing inquiry”.

The reaction from a Bench headed by Chief Justice of India Surya Kant was in response to an oral mentioning made by senior advocate Menaka Guruswamy. In a separate oral mentioning, senior advocate Devadatt Kamat



People submitting applications to tribunals set up to hear appeals related to the SIR, in Birbhum district of West Bengal. FILE PHOTO

submitted that the 19 Appellate Tribunals, constituted to hear appeals against both exclusions and inclusions from the State’s electoral roll following the special intensive revision (SIR) exercise, have not been “functioning” as

yet. He also mentioned that only online applications were allowed.

**Formed after court order**  
The tribunals, composed of retired High Court Chief Justices and judges, were ordered to be constituted

by the Supreme Court on March 10.

An April 13 order of the court noted that an interactive meeting was convened in the presence of the Chief Justice of the Calcutta High Court, in which the members of the Appellate Tribunals had participated. The order stated that an “in-depth discussion was held regarding the operation of the appellate portal as well as the modus operandi to be followed”. “The Appellate Tribunals were thereafter scheduled to commence functioning from April 13, 2026,” the order added.

The court declared that electors purged from the voter list but cleared by the Appellate Tribunals by

April 21 or April 27 should be allowed to vote in the Assembly election.

The court, issuing directions in exercise of its extraordinary Constitutional powers under Article 142, had directed the EC to publish a “supplementary revised electoral roll” containing the names of those who won their appeals by April 21, ahead of the first phase of polling in West Bengal on April 23, or by April 27, prior to the second phase on April 29.

On Monday, the court said it would get a report from the Calcutta High Court Chief Justice about the functioning of the tribunals. It is scheduled to hear the West Bengal SIR case on April 24.

# Delhi HC judge refuses to recuse from excise case

**The Hindu Bureau**

NEW DELHI

Delhi High Court judge Justice Swarana Kanta Sharma on Monday rejected pleas by former Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal and others seeking her recusal from hearing the excise policy case. The court observed that “a judge cannot recuse to satisfy a litigant’s unfounded suspicion of bias and based on manufactured allegations”.

Justice Sharma said she will decide the main matter - in which the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) has challenged the verdict of a trial court discharging all the accused, including Mr. Kejriwal, in the excise policy case - without being affected by the recusal applications.

Mr. Kejriwal and the oth-



AAP national convener Arvind Kejriwal raised objections to the judge hearing the CBI plea against his discharge in the excise policy case. FILE PHOTO

er accused had moved an application seeking Justice Sharma’s recusal from the case. They argued that there was a “direct conflict of interest” as the judge’s children are empanelled Central government lawyers who receive substantial work through the Solicitor General, who appeared for the CBI.

Justice Sharma, howev-

er, rejected this argument, saying, “Even if relatives [of the judge] are empanelled on government panels, the litigant has to show relevance and impact on this case. No such nexus has been shown. Their empanelment or relationship has no connection with this dispute.”

“The litigant cannot dictate how the children of the judge have to live their lives in the absence of any proof that the office of the judge was misused,” Justice Sharma said.

The judge said Mr. Kejriwal’s recusal application had created a ‘catch-22 situation’, wherein whether she withdrew herself from hearing the case or not, “questions will arise”.

**CONTINUED ON**

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# Delhi HC judge refuses to recuse from excise case

Justice Sharma said Mr. Kejriwal created a “win-win situation for himself”. “If this court is asked to undergo ‘*agni pariksha* (trial by fire)’ by an accused who stands discharged, which means he has not been acquitted, but he is only been let off by the first court of jurisdiction on the ground of insufficiency of evidence, this court must counter question as to why this judge must undergo ‘*agni pariksha*’ at the mere asking of an accused, who harbours apprehension or misbelief about the judge being biased,” she said.

“Judicial integrity cannot be put to trial by a litigant,” the judge added.

Reacting to the court’s decision, Aam Aadmi Party Delhi president Saurabh Bharadwaj said if the High Court was actually concerned about the judiciary’s image, then Chief Minister Rekha Gupta should have been held for contempt for her alleged comments against the trial court for discharging Mr. Kejriwal and others in the case.

Welcoming the decision, Delhi Water Minister Parvesh Sahib Singh said Mr. Kejriwal knows he indulged in corruption and is scared of the law.

# SC declines to review Jan. 5 verdict denying bail to Umar Khalid

Do not find any good ground and reason to review judgment, says court; junks plea by ex-student leader held in Delhi riots 'larger conspiracy' case

**The Hindu Bureau**

NEW DELHI

**T**he Supreme Court has rejected a plea filed by former Jawaharlal Nehru University student leader Umar Khalid to review its January 5 decision refusing to grant him bail in the Delhi riots 'larger conspiracy' case.

A Bench of Justices Aravind Kumar and N.V. Anjaria did not find "any good ground and reason" to review the January 5 judgment in its order dated April 16, which was published on Monday.

The January 5 judgment had concluded that the constitutional guarantees of personal liberty and life are not "absolute" or "unregulated", but subject to restrictions on bail under special statutes like the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act (UAPA).

"Prayer for oral hearing in the review petition is rejected. Delay condoned.



Umar Khalid has been in jail for nearly six years without trial.

Having gone through the review petition and also the documents enclosed, we do not find any good ground and reason to review the judgment dated 05.01.2026. Accordingly, the review petition is dismissed. Pending application(s), if any, shall stand disposed of," the Bench stated.

In its order on January 5, the Justice Kumar-led Bench had highlighted that prolonged pre-trial detention is a "serious constitutional concern", but noted

that personal liberty must bow to Parliament's wish, which limits the court's power to grant bail only upon the satisfaction of "defined statutory thresholds". Courts cannot treat such restraints as "avoidable", held the court. It also upheld statutory restrictions imposed on bail under Section 43D(5) of the UAPA, which requires an accused to prove his innocence to get bail, even before the trial begins.

Justice Kumar had said that a "principled approach", not diluted by ideology or pre-judgment of the case at hand, must be adopted by courts to strike a balance between the personal liberty of the accused and the collective security of the public in UAPA bail cases.

Besides Mr. Khalid, the apex court had, on January 5, refused bail to Sharjeel Imam. Both have been in jail for nearly six years without trial.

# India's forests could nearly double carbon storage by 2100, study finds

The findings, published in *Environmental Research: Climate*, involved researchers from Indian institutes; biggest increases in vegetation carbon are projected in desert and semi-arid zones across Rajasthan, Gujarat and Madhya Pradesh, study says

Jacob Koshy

NEW DELHI

India's forests could store nearly twice as much carbon by the end of this century as they do now if current greenhouse gas emission trends continue, according to a new modelling study published this week in the journal *Environmental Research: Climate*.

The findings, involving researchers from multiple Indian institutes, present a granular forecast of how climate change will reshape the country's forest carbon stocks. Significantly, they diverge in important ways from official estimates compiled by the Forest Survey of India (FSI) – the official source of tree and forest cover data in India.

For this study, the authors used modelling to peer into the future and found that vegetation carbon biomass rises by 35% under a low-emissions future, 62%



**Wake-up call:** Climate change is silently rewriting every sector, including our forests, say scientists. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

under a medium-emissions pathway, and as much as 97% under a high-emissions, fossil-fuel-intensive scenario by 2100. Till about 2030, all of the scenarios project roughly the same quantities of vegetation after which they diverge sharply – the steepest acceleration occurring after 2050.

The projected increases are driven primarily by two interacting forces: ris-

sions, extending to about four years under the high-emissions scenario to account for the fact that forests do not respond instantly to a single wet year, and that woody biomass accumulates slowly over time.

“Climate change is not just about rising temperatures – it is silently rewriting every sector, including our forests,” said lead author Fathima Fitha. “Even where gains appear, they may mask deeper stresses, raising concerns about the stability of today's dense forests and the risk of releasing large stores of carbon. Human pressures, land-use change, and extreme events such as wildfires, droughts, and heatwaves are intensifying these risks. If we undermine our forests today, we risk amplifying emissions tomorrow.”

The largest relative increases are projected not in India's established forest heartlands but in its driest

margins. Desert and semi-arid zones across Rajasthan, Gujarat, western Madhya Pradesh, and adjoining dry interiors are expected to see vegetation carbon rise by more than 60% compared to historical levels under high emissions. The Trans-Himalayas, the Gangetic forest belt, and the Deccan Peninsula follow. The Western Ghats and the Himalayas – India's most biodiverse and ecologically significant forest zones – are projected to see comparatively smaller relative increases, constrained by ecological saturation and specific climatic pressures those regions face, the study shows.

The increase in vegetation doesn't mean that climate change is acting as a net good, the researchers warned, as the models do not capture disruptive forces such as deforestation, land conversion, fire, and pest outbreaks intensified by warming.

# Finalising enhanced security cooperation with India: Zelenskyy

Shubhajit Roy

New Delhi, April 20

DAYS AFTER Ukraine's Secretary of the National Security and Defense Council Rustem Umerov visited India and met NSA Ajit Doval, President Volodymyr Zelenskyy announced on Monday that the two sides are finalising an enhanced security cooperation. This assumes significance at a time when India and Russia have robust security and defence cooperation.

"We are preparing important announcements regarding our security cooperation with partners next week. We do not forget that air defense for Ukraine and support for our army remain constant priorities," Zelenskyy posted on X.

"More security arrangements are forthcoming. We already have an arrangement on security cooperation with India, and we are finalizing it so that the documents are in place," the post said.

"We are also preparing for further work with our European partners to unblock the already-approved support package for Ukraine, delivery of which still



Ukraine President Volodymyr Zelenskyy

hasn't begun," Zelenskyy said.

At the meeting with Ukraine's NSA Rustem Umerov on Friday, Doval conveyed India's "principled position and focus on peaceful resolution through dialogue and diplomacy". This has been Delhi's position for the last four years of the war between Russia and Ukraine, and was articulated by Prime Minister Narendra Modi during his visits to Russia and Ukraine in the past.

Umerov, who is Secretary of the National Security and Defense Council of Ukraine, said, "We discussed the development of bilateral relations and the assessment of the security situation. The Indian side reaffirmed its consistent position on the need for a



EXPLAINED

## Upgrading the ties

Kyiv's outreach to Delhi on security issues is an important takeaway after the dialogue between the two National Security Advisers. Umerov, who was meeting Doval for the first time, is expected to power the security ties between India and Ukraine. This comes a month before Russian Foreign minister Sergey Lavrov is expected to visit India in mid-May.

peaceful settlement based on dialogue and diplomacy."

"I am grateful for the shared understanding of the need to find solutions that will ensure a lasting peace," the Ukrainian NSA said. Jaishankar also met him and posted on X, "Glad to meet @rustem\_umerov, Secretary of the National Security & Defence Council of Ukraine today. Discussed our bilateral cooperation and exchanged views on the Ukraine conflict."

# Doval's Riyadh visit on PM's instructions, part of govt. outreach to Gulf, says MEA

**Suhasini Haidar**

NEW DELHI

National Security Adviser Ajit Doval's surprise one-day visit to Riyadh was part of an outreach by the government amid a tense phase in the West Asian conflict, and took place, according to the Ministry of External Affairs, on Prime Minister Narendra Modi's instructions.

The NSA's visit was announced late on Sunday night by the MEA, at the end of his meetings with a number of senior Ministers. In Riyadh, Mr. Doval held talks with his counterpart, National Security Adviser Musaed Al-Aiban. He also met Foreign Minister Faisal bin Farhan Al Saud, Energy Minister Abdulaziz bin Salman Al Saud, both princes in the Saudi royal family.

"On the directions of the Prime Minister, our outreach to countries in the Gulf continues," said MEA spokesperson Randhir Jaiswal, describing the visit at



National Security Adviser Ajit Doval with Saudi Arabia's Foreign Minister Prince Faisal bin Farhan in Riyadh. ANI

a multi-ministerial briefing on Monday. "[Mr. Doval's] meetings were helpful to exchange views and review bilateral ties, and also exchange views on the regional situation and other issues of mutual interest," he added.

Mr. Doval's travel to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia came a week after External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar's two-day visit to the United Arab Emirates (April 11-12), and Energy Minister Hardeep Puri's earlier visit to Qatar (April 9-10), and is understood to have been part of the go-

vernment's desire to shore up ties with India's major oil and gas suppliers amidst a possible energy crisis, as well as emphasise a more balanced approach towards the region during the war.

In a statement, the Saudi Ministry of Foreign Affairs said that the talks between the Saudi Foreign Minister and Mr. Doval had reviewed areas of India-Saudi cooperation, "alongside a discussion of the latest developments in the regional situation and an exchange of viewpoints regarding it".

# Iran undecided on talks; Trump to keep blockade

Tehran condemns U.S. attack on an Iran-flagged vessel in the Gulf of Oman, says it will make 'necessary decisions about the future path with careful consideration of its national interests'

**Stanly Johny**

**T**ehran said on Monday it had yet to decide on joining a new round of peace talks with the United States in Pakistan, citing "bad faith" and "historical mistrust", while U.S. President Donald Trump said the naval blockade imposed on Iran would remain in place "until a deal is reached".

"So far we have not made any decision regarding the next round of talks... Iran will make the necessary decisions about the future path with careful consideration of its national interests," Foreign Ministry spokesperson Esmail Baqaei said in Tehran, according to Tasnim News Agency.

"From the early days of the ceasefire, we were



**Trouble at sea:** The Iranian container ship *Tousek* was reportedly attacked by the U.S. Navy on Sunday night. REUTERS

**faced with the U.S.'s bad faith, contradictory statements, followed by a naval blockade," Mr. Baqaei said.**

Even after an understanding was reached, Iran encountered "maritime actions" in the Strait of Hormuz, he added, referring to a U.S. attack on an Iran-flagged vessel in the

Gulf of Oman on Sunday.

In an interview with *The New York Post*, Mr. Trump downplayed Iran's comments, saying he was willing to meet Iranian leaders if a breakthrough is reached. "We are supposed to have talks. So I would assume at this point nobody is playing games,"

he said, adding that Vice-President J.D. Vance, Special Envoy Steve Witkoff, and Jared Kushner, the President's son-in-law, would take part in talks.

Later in the day, Mr. Trump left a series of social media posts claiming that he was winning the war and that the deal his administration was seeking was "better" than the 2015 nuclear agreement reached between Tehran, Obama administration, and other world powers.

"I'm winning [the] war by a lot... The enemy is confused... The blockade, which we will not take off until there is a deal, is absolutely destroying Iran. They are losing \$500 million a day," he wrote.

**CONTINUED ON**  
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# Iran undecided on talks; U.S. to keep blockade

“The deal that we are making with Iran will be far better than the JCPOA,” he wrote in another post, referring to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action. “If a deal happens under Trump, it will guarantee peace, security, and safety, not only for Israel and the Middle East, but for Europe, America, and everywhere else.”

Iran’s President Masoud Pezeshkian said the U.S. was seeking the country’s surrender and that Iran would never submit to force. “Deep historical mistrust in Iran toward U.S. gov conduct remains, while unconstructive and contradictory signals from American officials carry a bitter message; they seek Iran’s surrender. Iranians do not submit to force,” the President said in a statement.

Last week, Iran said it would reopen the Strait of Hormuz for commercial vessels, after Mr. Trump announced a 10-day ceasefire in Lebanon. Mr. Trump “thanked” Iran for the move, but added that a U.S. blockade of Iranian ports would stay in place until both sides reach a deal. Iran then took a U-turn from its previous announcement and reasserted its control over the critical waterway. On Saturday, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps fired at two tankers, preventing them from crossing the Strait of Hormuz, following which Mr. Trump renewed his threat of hitting Iran’s civilian infrastructure.

“The U.S. Navy attacked the Iranian container ship *Touska* on Sunday night, subsequently taking control of the vessel,” Tasnim reported.

## THE PORTS & PIPELINES PUSH

# In bid to bypass Hormuz chokepoint, Gulf countries scramble to ramp up infra

West Asian states with strained ties find common cause to de-risk economies, global supply chains

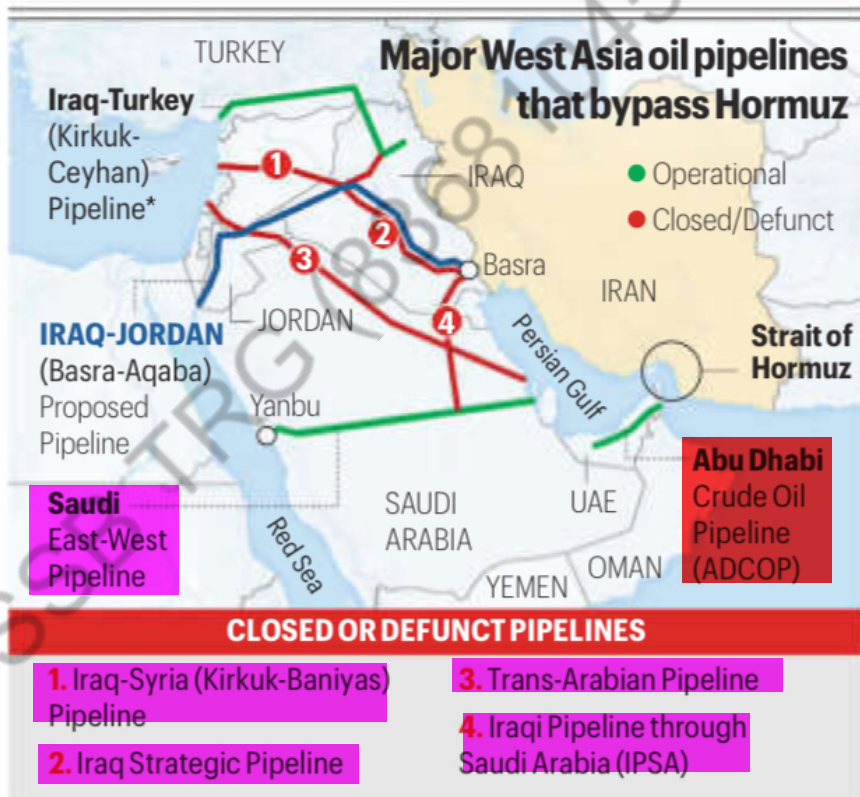
Sukalp Sharma

New Delhi, April 20

WITH TEHRAN weaponising the Strait of Hormuz and jeopardising global oil and gas flows, countries in the Gulf region led by the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia are scrambling to reduce their dependence and vulnerability on this chokepoint. From ports to pipelines, countries are hoping to ramp up infrastructure in the coming years.

The Iran-Israel/ US conflict has seen an unprecedented halt in maritime traffic through the Strait—a narrow waterway between Iran and Oman—through which about one-fifth of global oil and liquefied natural gas (LNG) flows.

The West Asia war gives rea-



## THE WORLD PAGE 16

### UNCERTAINTY LOOMS OVER FATE OF U.S.-IRAN TALKS

son enough for the Gulf states to collaborate and coordinate for revitalising old pipelines

and building new ones. According to reports from the region, early efforts may already be underway to do just that.

“I have spent the past month in discussions with hundreds of business leaders and senior Gulf government officials on the crisis and what comes after it. The conversation has already shifted—from managing the

»CONTINUED ON PAGE 2

# Hormuz

immediate crisis to redesigning the systems that created this vulnerability in the first place," UAE based businessman and the country's Special Envoy for Business & Philanthropy Badr Jafar wrote recently in *Financial Times*.

"The crisis is doing what years of summitry could not—creating the conditions for genuine intraregional economic integration. States whose ties were strained only weeks ago are now finding common cause. Rerouting essential commerce away from a single chokepoint de-risks not only the economies of the region but global supply chains," Jafar wrote.

For decades, Iran threatened to close the Strait, but didn't actually do it. The US-Israel war against Iran that started on February 28 changed that. Tehran—and the world—now know that it can effectively halt vessel movements through the maritime chokepoint almost at will, and impose a massive cost on the global economy.

"Looking ahead, several pipeline options could be expanded, reactivated, or newly constructed to further reduce reliance on the Strait of Hormuz. However, all of these would require a significant financial investment and several years to be realised," Victoria Grabenwöger, senior oil analyst at commodity market analytics firm Kpler, told *The Indian Express*.

Even as numerous oil tankers, among scores of merchant vessels, have been stranded in the Persian Gulf, Saudi Arabia and the UAE managed to export some of their oil using pipelines that bypass the Strait of Hormuz. These are Saudi Arabia's 1,200-km long East-West pipeline from oil fields near the Persian Gulf to

the Red Sea port of Yanbu, and UAE's Abu Dhabi Crude Oil Pipeline (ADCOP) that connects the Habshan oil field to the port of Fujairah in the Gulf of Oman.

While the volumes that can be moved through these pipelines are much lower than what Saudi Arabia and UAE usually export through the Hormuz, they have exhibited the potential of pipelines as a tool to reduce dependence on the Strait.

This realisation could lead to a tectonic shift in how energy flows from West Asia. According to experts and analysts, the war has jolted other West Asian powers into recognising the importance of building massive infrastructure like pipelines to bypass the Strait of Hormuz. Such infrastructure build-up—which could include building new pipelines, expanding capacities of existing pipeline systems, and reviving discarded or mothballed pipelines—would take years, huge investments, and a great degree of cooperation between the Gulf states. But with Iran having tasted blood by disrupting the Strait of Hormuz, it is likely that more pipeline and port infrastructure will be come up in West Asia to divert exports through alternative routes like Gulf of Oman, Red Sea, and Mediterranean Sea.

It's not like West Asia didn't have oil export pipelines in the past. Yet, hardly any has stood the test of time and regional tensions. "When looking at the historical performance of the oil export pipelines in the Gulf, one could easily note that every line in the region has been shut down at least once, and that most of them remain closed until the present time. The main reasons remain the political conflicts within producing countries or transit states, and interstate disputes. In fact, most of the pipelines crossing state boundaries have fallen victim to the region's political rivalries and conflicts at one point or

another," Naji Abi-Aad, senior advisor on energy studies at Gulf Research Center wrote in an analysis.

## The pipeline options

"The most feasible measures would likely include capacity expansions of Saudi Arabia's East-West pipeline/Yanbu, as well as enhancements or parallel lines to the UAE's ADCOP pipeline to Fujairah," said Kpler oil analyst Grabenwöger. "Increasing throughput on the Iraq-Turkey pipeline (Kirkuk to Ceyhan) could also enable greater volumes of Iraqi crude to bypass the Gulf. In addition, several projects currently on hold could be revived in the coming years, including the Basra-Aqaba (Iraq-Jordan) pipeline and the IPSA (Iraqi Pipeline through Saudi Arabia) pipeline.

The latter—linking Iraq to Saudi Arabia and onward to Yanbu on the Red Sea—has been out of service since the early 1990s and would require significant technical refurbishment and political coordination to restart. If reactivated, however, it could provide a substantial alternative export route that avoids the Strait entirely."

Abu Dhabi-based energy analyst Natalia Katona said connecting the oil production in Iraq's Basra to Kirkuk and then onward to Ceyhan in Turkey makes a "lot of sense on paper".

"The infrastructure partly exists, but expanding and stabilising it would take time, money, and a much more predictable security environment. That said, Iraq probably has the most pressure to act—limited storage, limited refining, and a heavy reliance on continuous exports..." Katona said.

Apart from the Trans-Arabian Pipeline and IPSA, other major defunct or inactive West Asian oil pipeline systems include a pipeline that connected Kirkuk in Iraq with the Syrian port of Baniyas and the Iraq-

Syria-Lebanon pipeline. Most of such pipelines have effectively been shut due to wars and political tensions, although talks of reviving them do surface from time to time. "For countries like Kuwait, Qatar, and Bahrain, geography really works against them. They don't have many viable pipeline alternatives, so in the short to medium term it's more about building up storage and managing risk rather than rerouting flows entirely. In terms of timing, UAE probably has the most flexibility to move relatively quickly on incremental projects. But the real structural pressure is on Iraq and the smaller Gulf countries—they are the most exposed and have the fewest fallback options," Katona said.

But the current limitations faced by the likes of Kuwait, Qatar, and Bahrain doesn't stop them from collaborating with their Gulf neighbours to build pipeline infrastructure for the future. "Saudi Arabia and the UAE managed to circumvent the chokepoint to a limited degree via their bypass pipelines. Riyadh and Abu Dhabi are almost certain to double down, expanding those emergency conduits further. Kuwait would doubtless join forces with the Saudis to build its own bypass pipeline. Iraq would struggle with the expense, but it has every incentive to rebuild its old strategic pipeline that let it move oil from the south to the Mediterranean via Turkey," Javier Blas, energy and commodity columnist at Bloomberg wrote in a recent column.

"Five years from now, the Persian Gulf will have far better bypass options than it does today. No matter what the US and Iran agree over the future of Hormuz, the strait's status will change. But the waterway will never be as critical to the global economy as it was when the fighting started six weeks ago," Blas wrote.

FATE OF IRAN PEACE TALKS UNCERTAIN AS CEASEFIRE DEADLINE APPROACHES; US MARINES SEIZE IRANIAN CARGO SHIP

# Trump: We'll have nuke deal with Tehran; Iran does not submit to force: Pezeshkian

Vance trip to Pak undecided; Munitz speaks to Trump

Reuters  
Beijing, London, April 20

PRESIDENT DONALD Trump said on Monday that he believed a nuclear deal the US is negotiating with Iran will be better than the international agreement agreed to in 2015 to curb Tehran's nuclear program.

"The DEAL that we are making with Iran will be FAR BETTER than the JCPOA, commonly referred to as The Iran Nuclear Deal," Trump wrote in a social media post.

Iran, on its part, was considering attending peace talks with the US in Pakistan, a senior Iranian official told Reuters on Monday, following moves by Islamabad to end a US blockade of Iran's ports. However, the official stressed that no decision had been made.

Iran's President Masoud Pezeshkian said that "unconstructive & contradictory signals from American officials carry a bitter message; they seek Iran's surrender." He added on X: "Iranians do not submit to force."

Adding to the uncertainty, a source told Reuters that Vice President JD Vance was still in the US, denying reports that he



A view of Iranian-flagged cargo ship M/V Touska as the US Navy Arleigh Burke-class Aegis guided missile destroyer USS Spruance conducts its interception in north Arabian Sea on Monday. CENTCOM/REUTERS

was already on his way to Islamabad for talks.

With a two-week ceasefire set to expire this week, the senior Iranian official said Tehran was "positively reviewing" its participation but no final decision had been made. The Iranian official said mediator or Pakistan was making positive efforts to end the US blockade and ensure Iran's participation.

## US Marines Board Iranian Vessel

The US military said it had fired on an Iranian-flagged cargo ship headed towards Iran's Bandar Abbas port on Sunday after a six-hour standoff, disabling its

engines. US Central Command released video showing Marines descending by ropes from helicopters onto the vessel.

The vessel is likely to have been carrying what Washington deems dual-use items that could be used by the military, maritime security sources said on Monday.

Iran's military said the ship had been travelling from China and accused the US of "armed piracy", according to state media. They said they were ready to confront US forces over the "blatant aggression", but were constrained by the presence of crew members' families on board.

A source said Pakistan's army chief Asim Munir had

told Trump the blockade was an obstacle to talks, and that the US President had promised to consider ending it.

The US was hoping to start negotiations in Pakistan shortly before the ceasefire expires, with sweeping security preparations under way in Islamabad.

## Ceasefire to Expire

Trump announced the two-week ceasefire with Iran on April 7, and has not specified when precisely it ends. A Pakistani source involved in the talks said it would expire midnight GMT or 3.30 am on Thursday in Iran. The US has maintained its blockade of Iranian ports.

## Hormuz must stay open: Xi in call with Saudi Crown Prince

Beijing: Chinese President Xi Jinping called for normal passage of ships through the Strait of Hormuz to be maintained, in a phone call on Monday with Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman.

China is concerned over renewed instability around the strategic waterway, as a US-Iran ceasefire came under fresh strain after the US seized an Iranian cargo ship and Tehran signalled it would not join new peace talks for now.

China is the main buyer of Iranian crude. Iran has largely closed the strait to ships other than its own since the US and Israel launched the war in February, while Washington has

imposed a blockade of Iranian ships since last week.

China advocates an immediate and comprehensive ceasefire, and insists on resolving conflicts in West Asia through political and diplomatic channels, state news agency Xinhua cited Xi as saying. "The Strait of Hormuz should remain open to normal passage, as this serves the common interests of regional countries and the international community," he told the Saudi leader.

The Chinese Foreign Ministry expressed concerns over the "forced interception" by the US of the Iranian ship, while urging relevant sides to abide by the ceasefire agreement. **REUTERS**

## Israel-Lebanon talks in US may resume on April 23

Washington: Israeli and Lebanese representatives will hold talks in Washington on Thursday, a US State Department spokesperson and an Israeli source speaking on condition of anonymity told Reuters on Monday.

The US will host the second round of ambassador-level talks between the two countries at the Department of State, the State Department spokesperson said.

US Secretary of State Marco Rubio hosted the first round of talks between Israeli ambassador to the US Yechiel Leter and Lebanon's ambassador to Washington Nada Moawad - the first direct talks between Israel and Lebanon in decades - on April 14.

"We will continue to facilitate direct, good-faith discussions between two governments," the spokesperson said. **REUTERS**



President Droupadi Murmu and PM Narendra Modi with South Korea President Lee Jae Myung and First Lady Kim Hea Kyung. ANIL SHARMA

# **‘Chips to ships’: India and South Korea target \$50 bn trade by 2030**

**Shubhajit Roy**

*New Delhi, April 20*

AS PRIME Minister Narendra Modi met visiting South Korean President Lee Jae Myung on Monday, the two sides decided to restart negotiations on upgrading their Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA). Modi said the tar-

get was to increase bilateral trade from the current \$27 billion to \$50 billion by 2030.

The two sides signed pacts to strengthen cooperation across various areas — Artificial Intelligence, small and medium enterprises (SMEs), sports and culture. They also agreed on a joint strategic

»CONTINUED ON PAGE 2

# India and South Korea

vision for the India-South Korea special strategic partnership, and a comprehensive framework for partnership in shipbuilding, shipping & maritime logistics.

“Today, with President Lee's visit, we are going to transform this trusted partnership into a futuristic partnership. We will realise new opportunities for cooperation in every field, from chips to ships, talent to technology, environment to energy, and together we will ensure the progress and prosperity of both countries,” Modi said after the bilateral meeting.

Referring to the wars in West Asia and Europe, he said: “In this era of global tension, India and Korea together send a message of peace and stability. We are very pleased that today Korea is joining the International Solar Alliance and the Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative. Through our joint efforts, we will continue to contribute to a peaceful, progressive and inclusive Indo-Pacific.”

Lee said: “Considering the current situation in the Middle East, we will sustain cooperation for supply stability of energy resources and key commodities... we agreed to speed up the negotiations to upgrade our CEPA to create more favourable trade and investment conditions.”

“We agreed to maintain close collaboration in addressing regional peace and international issues. Prime Minister Modi and I exchanged our views on the recent events unfolding in the Middle East, and agreed that restoring stability and peace... is crucial to global security and the economy,” he said.

“Bilateral trade between India and Korea has reached \$27 billion today. We have taken several important decisions today to increase this to \$50 billion by 2030,” Modi said, referring to the

joint declaration on resumption of talks to upgrade the CEPA.

India and South Korea's CEPA, in force since 2010, has increased bilateral trade from US\$ 14.2 billion at the time of its implementation to US\$ 26.89 billion in 2024-25. Of this, India's imports from South Korea account for about US\$ 21 billion, while exports stand at about US\$ 5.8 billion. “To facilitate financial flows between the two countries, we have launched the India-Korea Financial Forum. To strengthen business cooperation, we have established an Industrial Cooperation Committee. To enhance cooperation in critical technologies and supply chains, we are initiating an Economic Security Dialogue,” Modi said. “To facilitate the entry of Korean companies, especially SMEs, into India, we will also establish a Korean Industrial Township. And within the next year, we will upgrade the India-Korea Trade Agreement.”

“We are launching the India-Korea Digital Bridge to deepen partnerships in AI, semiconductors, and information technology. We are signing MoUs in areas such as shipbuilding, sustainability, steel and ports,” Modi said.

Lee said they would start a Mumbai Korea Centre as a permanent K-pop performance hall and international hub of K-culture. Modi said: “Through collaboration in the culture and creative industries, we will also break new ground in film, animation and gaming... Today, K-pop and K-dramas are becoming increasingly popular in India. Similarly, recognition of Indian cinema and culture is growing in Korea. We are delighted that President Lee himself is a fan of Indian cinema. To strengthen this cultural connection, we will organise the India-Korea Friendship Festival in 2028,” Modi said.

OUTPUT OF INDIA'S EIGHT CORE INDUSTRIES ROSE 2.6% IN FY26, LOWEST IN FIVE YEARS

# War impact: Core industries' output dropped 0.4% in March

The 24.6% fall in fertiliser output in March is the largest on record, as the conflict drove up energy prices and disrupted supplies of key inputs

Siddharth Upasani  
New Delhi, April 20

IN ONE of the first signs of the adverse impact of the West Asia war on Indian industries, the output of the eight core industries contracted by 0.4% year-on-year in March, the Ministry of Commerce & Industry said on Monday. Production of fertiliser suffered the most, dropping 24.6% compared to the same month last year.

This is the first time since October 2025 that the output of the eight core industries — coal, crude oil, natural gas, refinery products, fertilisers, steel, cement, and electricity — has fallen on a year-on-year (y-o-y) basis, with the decline being the most since August 2024, when it had shrunk by 1.5%. In February, output of the eight core industries had risen by 2.8%. In FY26 as a whole, the output of India's eight core industries rose a mere

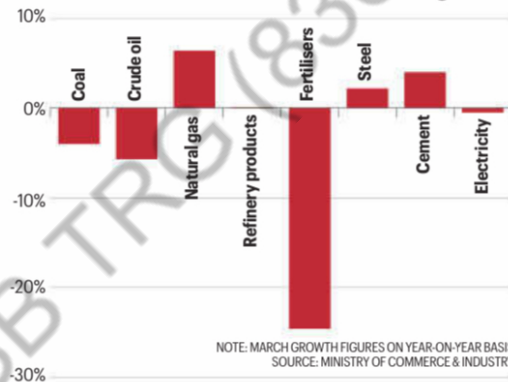
2.6%, marking the worst annual performance since the Covid pandemic-hit year of 2020-21

when production had fallen 6.4%. The 24.6% fall in fertiliser output in March is the largest on record, with the US and Israel's war with Iran and the latter's subsequent retaliation — including the closure of the Strait of Hormuz and attacks on Gulf nations — having led to sharply higher energy prices and disruptions in the supply of key inputs for the petrochemicals sector. Data released last week showed the wholesale price of ammonia gas in India jumped 22% in March from February — the highest month-on-month increase as per data going back till 2012. Ammonia is used to make fertilisers.

The rise in the price of fertiliser due to the war has forced the government to increase its outlay to subsidise it.

Earlier this month, the

## • Worst month for core industries since Aug 2024



Union Cabinet approved a 12% increase in this season's nutrient-based subsidy for kharif crops to Rs 41,534 crore, with the government looking to shield farmers from global rise in prices such that they can continue to get a 50-kg bag of diammonium phosphate, or DAP, for Rs 1,350.

Earlier, in March, the finance ministry had sought Parliament approval to spend an additional Rs 19,230 crore for fertiliser subsidies in 2025-26. The Union Budget for FY27 revised upwards the fertiliser subsidy allo-

cation to Rs 1.86 lakh crore from Rs 1.68 lakh crore in 2025-26.

Of the eight core industries, half saw their production fall in March compared to a year ago. While production of fertilisers fell almost 25%, crude oil output was down 5.7% — the seventh month in a row it was lower on a y-o-y basis.

Coal production fell 4%, making it the first monthly fall on a y-o-y basis in five months.

Moreover, this is the first time that India's coal output has fallen on a y-o-y basis in March,

according to data going back till April 2012. An explanation for this would be the higher than usual rains during the month, which would impact mining activity. According to data from the India Meteorological Department, March saw the country as a whole experience 14% more rainfall than normal.

The higher-than-normal rains also cooled temperatures and reduced power demand, leading to lower production of electricity in March, with its output down 0.5% compared to a year ago. Of the four industries that posted a rise in output in March, petroleum refinery products posted a minor year-on-year increase of 0.1%. Steel and cement output rose 2.2% and 4%, respectively. However, the production of natural gas surged 6.4%, the most in 22 months. This is the first time since June 2024 that India's natural gas production has increased.

The weak performance of the eight core industries will likely hit India's overall industrial growth in March, data for which will be released by the statistics ministry on April 28. The eight core industries make up around 40% of the Index of Industrial Production, which had increased 5.2% in February.