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# ***Daily News Feed***

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***D.N.F***

***06.05.2025***

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# George Simion, the nationalist who topped Romania's presidential redo

The 38-year-old leader of the hard-right Alliance for the Unity will face a pro-Western reformist in a May 18 run-off that could reshape the European Union and NATO member country's geopolitical direction; a supporter of Trump, he says his party is 'perfectly aligned with the MAGA movement'

Associated Press  
BUCHAREST

**G**eorge Simion, a nationalist and vocal supporter of the U.S. President Donald Trump, won Romania's first-round presidential election redo by a landslide after capitalising on widespread anti-establishment sentiment.

The 38-year-old leader of the hard-right Alliance for the Unity of Romanians, or AUR, will face a pro-Western reformist in a May 18 run-off that could reshape the European Union and NATO member country's geopolitical direction.

Romania's political landscape was upended last year when a top court voided the previous election in which the far-right outsider Calin Georgescu topped first round. The decision followed allegations of electoral violations and Russian interference, which Moscow has denied.

"For 35 years, the Romanian people lived the lie that we are a democratic country," Mr. Simion, who came fourth in last year's race and later backed Mr. Georgescu, said last week. "And now the people are awakening."

Born in 1986 in Romania's eastern city of Focsani, Mr. Simion took a Bachelor's degree in Business and Administration in Bu-



The leader of Alliance for Uniting Romanians party, George Simion, in Bucharest, Romania. FILE PHOTO

charest, and later a master's degree at a university in the northeastern city of Iasi, researching communist-era crimes.

He took part in civic activism, including joining a protest movement against a controversial gold mining project by a Canadian company in a mountainous western region of Romania that contains some of Europe's largest gold deposits. He also campaigned for reunification with neighbouring Moldova.

## Founding of AUR

In 2019, Mr. Simion founded the AUR party, which rose to prominence in a 2020 parliamentary election by proclaiming to stand for "family, nation,

faith, and freedom," and has since doubled its support to become Romania's second-largest party in the legislature. It opposes same-sex marriage and has close ties to the Romanian Orthodox Church.

Mr. Simion supports Mr. Trump and said that the AUR party is "perfectly aligned with the MAGA movement," referring to the U.S. President's Make America Great Again movement.

Mr. Simion's political platform has been built on a fiercely anti-establishment agenda and populist rhetoric. During the COVID-19 pandemic, his party staged multiple protests against vaccination and lockdowns, capitalising on

a widespread distrust of the authorities. He labelled the cancelled election last year a "coup d'etat," and adopted stronger populist rhetoric and religious messaging to tap into Mr. Georgescu's electorate. He has branded Romania's current political system as a "hybrid regime" that failed to deliver democracy after the 1989 revolution toppled communism.

"They voted for the change, and they were not allowed to make this change," he said. "This is why I'm running again as a duty towards democracy, towards the constitutional order, to restore the rule of law, to restore the will of the Romanian people."

A Simion presidency

would pose unique foreign policy conundrums. His activities in Moldova led to an expulsion and multiple entry bans on allegations of trying to destabilise the country. He is also banned from entering neighbouring Ukraine for "systemic anti-Ukrainian" activities. "It is in their interest to have good relations with us," he said.

In March, Mr. Simion sparked controversy after remarking during a protest that those responsible for barring Mr. Georgescu's second bid for presidency should be "skinned in a public square," prompting prosecutors to launch a criminal probe for inciting violence. He denied the accusation saying it was a political metaphor.

## 'Russia a threat'

Observers have long viewed him of being pro-Russian and warn that his presidency would undermine both Brussels and NATO as the war rages on in Ukraine. He refuted the accusations as a "smear campaign" by leftists and said Russia has been the "main threat" to Romania in the last 200 years and remains so today.

"This is why we need a strong NATO and we need troops on the ground in Romania, in Poland and in the Baltic states," he said, although he was against sending further military

aid to Ukraine.

"The danger is not who will be the next President of Romania but ... those who want to create a distance and to form two different opposing geopolitical blocs" between the European Union and the U.S., he said.

On the EU, Mr. Simion said, "We want more power to the 27 states, not toward the European institutions," and that he is "totally aligned" with the position of Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni, who was the only EU head of government to attend Mr. Trump's inauguration in January.

Siegfried Muresan, a Romanian member of the European Parliament, said on Monday that a Simion presidency would be "bad news" for Romania and Europe, and accused the AUR leader of having "disdain for democratic processes."

"George Simion is not a conservative politician. He is an anti-European extremist. His election would endanger Romania, threaten European stability, and serve as a strategic victory for Russia," he said. "He offers no viable solutions to Romania's challenges."

For Claudiu Tufis, an associate professor of political science at the University of Bucharest, accusations that Simion is extremist or pro-Russian are overblown.



# OPEC+'s 'healthy' crude oil market looks like it's catching a cold: Russell

## OPINION

Clyde Russell  
LAUNCESTON, AUSTRALIA

If there is one thing that is almost certain in the global crude oil market, it's that the stated reasons for the OPEC+ group of exporters increasing supply are not the real reasons.

The eight OPEC+ countries that are party to voluntary output cuts said in a statement on the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) website that the decision to lift output came amid the "current healthy market fundamentals as reflected in the low oil inventories."

There is little evidence to support the assertion of healthy market fundamen-

als, and visible crude inventories are far from low enough to spark any concerns.

The OPEC monthly report for April showed that commercial crude inventories in developed economies in the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development were 2.746 billion barrels at the end of February, down 16.1 million barrels from the prior month.

In other words, OECD stocks were a mere 2.5% below the five-year average, which seems reasonable given the rising crude oil prices that prevailed between September and January and the rising risk of a global economic slowdown since the return of Donald Trump to the U.S. presidency.



Breathing easy: The OPEC+ countries decided to ease their curbs again for June. REUTERS

Calculations based on official data for imports, domestic output and refinery throughput showed a surplus of 1.74 million bpd in March as China imported considerably more

crude than it processed into refined fuels.

### Asia imports

The situation in Asia, the world's biggest importing region and buyer of about

60% of global seaborne crude volumes, is instructive. Asia's seaborne imports recovered in March and April after a weak February, with commodity analysts Kpler showing ar-

rivals of 25.27 million bpd and 25.28 million bpd respectively.

However, for the first four months of 2025 Asia's seaborne imports are still down 280,000 bpd from the same period in 2024, hardly suggestive of healthy demand. It's also the case that much of the increase in March and April was down to elevated imports by China, and those reflected temporary factors.

The outlook for crude demand is also somewhat mixed in coming months.

While May to July is traditionally a higher demand season amid summer construction and agriculture activity, there is an increasing likelihood that the trade war launched by Trump will start curbing

oil demand. The massive 145% tariff on imports from China will likely affect air freight in coming weeks.

Even if trade tensions do ease, the slowdown in shipping is already locked in for the next few months and perhaps longer as it will take time for supply chains to recover or be re-worked.

So what is OPEC+ actually trying to achieve by lifting output?

The group's de facto leader Saudi Arabia may well be trying to encourage greater quote compliance from other members by forcing them to accept lower prices.

The Saudis may also be trying to go some way to meeting Trump's demand for lower prices, which would help the U.S. leader

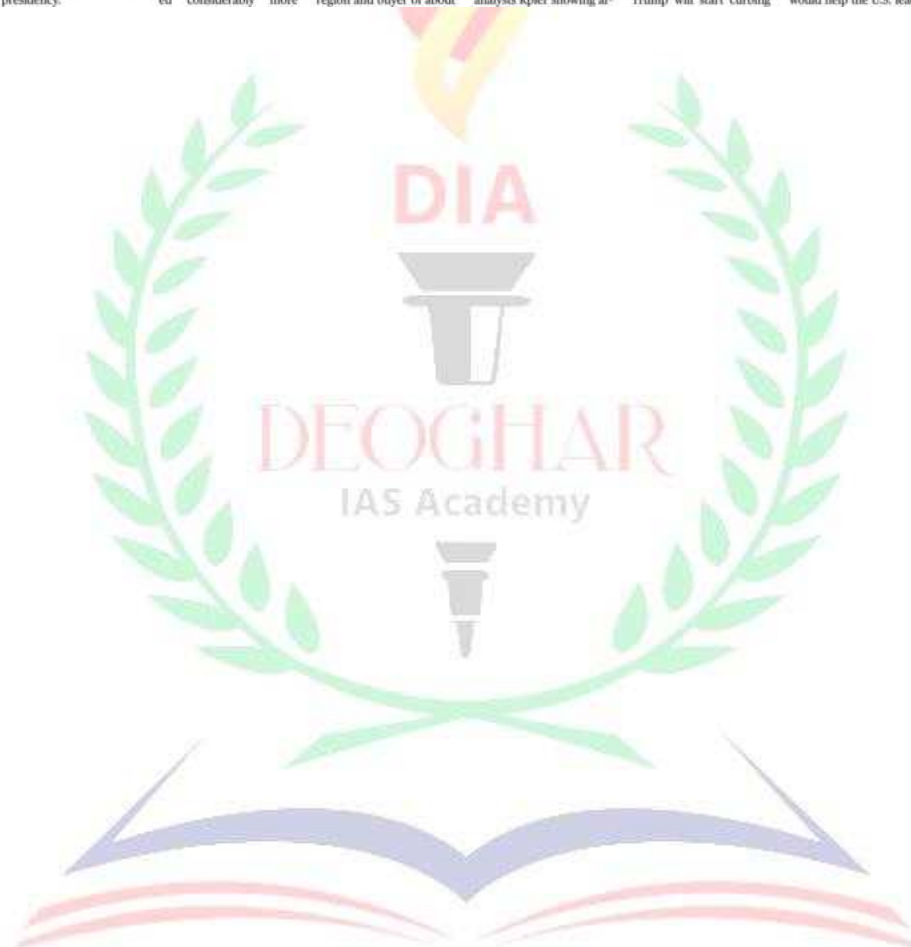
fulfill a campaign promise of lower energy costs.

OPEC+ may also be trying to use low prices to limit oil output in other major producers, such as the United States, given their higher cost of production.

The end result is that it's hard to make anything other than a bearish case for oil prices, at least for the coming months, as more supply runs headlong into the rising likelihood of lower demand.

The early market assessment of the OPEC+ move bears this out, with Brent futures dropping as much as 3.7% in early Asian trade to a low of \$58.50 a barrel, down from the close of \$61.29 on May 2.

(The views expressed here are those of the author, a columnist for Reuters)





# At WTO, U.S. queries India's PLI scheme for speciality steel

Scheme aims to reduce imports of high grade steel, attain self sufficiency, says India, which was a net importer in FY25 for the second year in row

**Amiti Sen**  
NEW DELHI

**T**he U.S. has questioned India's Production Linked Incentive (PLI) scheme for specialty steel at the WTO suggesting the subsidies may not be appropriate given the global overcapacity in steel, sources said.

India, however, maintains the scheme will reduce its dependence on imports of higher grades of steel and is a much-needed step towards attaining self-sufficiency and securing the nation's interests.

"We specifically note there was a part of this (PLI) scheme for specialty steel designed to raise steel production. Why is India subsidising increased production when there is global overcapacity in steel?" as per a submission made by the U.S. to the WTO Committee on Subsidies and Countervailing Duties.

## Boost local output

Speciality steel is one of the 14 sectors included by the Centre in its flagship PLI scheme unveiled in 2021 with an outlay of ₹1.97 lakh crore. The purpose of the PLI scheme is to boost domestic manufacturing, attract global investments and create employment in the identified sectors with high potential for growth.



**Self-reliance:** Compared with nations like China with estimated steel subsidies of \$50 bn, India's subsidies are small. REUTERS

The U.S.' linking of the PLI scheme for specialty steel with global overcapacity does not hold much merit as India was a net importer of steel in FY25 for the second consecutive year, a source tracking the matter told *businessline*.

## Self-sufficiency

Despite being the world's second largest producer of steel, India lags in production of specialty and high-end steel and is dependent on imports.

"The objective of the PLI scheme for specialty steel is to promote manufacturing of value-added steel grades within the country and help the Indian steel industry mature in terms of technology as well as move up the value chain. This will also result in reduction in imports of

these grades and will be a step towards Atmanirbhar Bharat," according to a government statement.

"India's PLI scheme is designed to be compliant with WTO norms. It does not include export obligations or link subsidies to export performance, which are not allowed under WTO rules. It only incentivises investment and sales growth within India," the source said.

Moreover, compared with countries like China with estimated steel subsidies of \$50 billion, India's subsidies are miniscule. The first round of India's PLI scheme for specialty steel was notified on July 29, 2021 by the Ministry of Steel with a budgetary outlay of ₹ 6,322 crore.

(The writer is with *The Hindu businessline*)



# The implications of caste enumeration

While there is a vast political leadership who came through the lanes of OBC politics, there has also been a concentration of certain OBC communities in these spaces. The upcoming Census, with caste enumeration, could create a window of opportunity for the inclusion of those communities who have been left behind

## FULL CONTEXT

Rama Shanker Singh  
Sarthak Bagchi

**N**umbers are the basis of governance; without them, the state loses confidence. In government offices, one may see that every item – electrical panels, fans, chairs – is meticulously numbered and logged, forming the foundation of administrative records. Thus, governments categorise and quantify all things. As Arjun Appadurai said, every commodity has its own social and political life – this principle also applies to the census of humankind.

Since the emergence of the modern state in India, populations have been enumerated. The first colonial Census conducted in 1872 generated statistical data, allowing the British to control India and regulate every aspect of Indian life. While the Census was seen as an administrative enumeration, a statistical activity more than a political act of a reorganisation of groups, the introduction of the caste Census by H.H. Risley made the Census into a political instrument in a way it had never been used before. Risley had a dramatic influence on the rise of caste organisations and the exploding production of literature about the caste system from all over the subcontinent.

### Caste count pre-Independence

In the late 19th century, upper-caste Indian elites sought political reforms and representation from the British. The Census figures enabled the colonial government to reshape India's complex social and cultural fabric through revenue taxation, education, and new opportunities generated in universities, public services and of course legislative bodies. This eventually led to the creation of a supporter base among upper-caste Indian elites for the British.

However, with time, subaltern communities also began seeking access to education and political representation. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's emergence after the 1930s, challenged upper-caste hegemony, creating space for Dalits or the Backward Classes, as they were known then.

While the Government of India Act, 1935 and the Indian Constitution brought dignity and equality to Dalits and Adivasis, thousands of Other Backward Classes (OBCs) were overlooked by the Constituent Assembly during this pivotal moment.

### Defining the OBC category

In 1953, the Kaka Kalelkar Commission was established to identify OBC communities and propose welfare measures. In its 1955 report, the commission identified as many as 2,300 communities as OBCs. However, the report was not implemented due to vague criteria and lack of political consensus. In fact, the report received negative feedback from the then Congress Home Minister G.B. Pant, who thought that the emphasis on caste demonstrated "the dangers of separatism" and was "the greatest hindrance in the way of our progress toward an egalitarian society."

During this period, Dr. Ram Manohar Lohia articulated a contrarian but transformative vision – "We should follow a new principle that merit comes from opportunity. Sixty per cent of the high opportunities of the country should go to 90% of India's population – Shudras, Harijans, backward castes of religious minorities, women, and tribals. This principle should be applied to the most



Upcoming exercise: Congress workers celebrate the Centre's decision to include caste enumeration in the upcoming national Census, in Noida, on May 2, PTI

competitive exams and I reject the Prime Minister's (Jawaharlal Nehru) arguments, which rest on the deceptive foundation of merit and qualifications," as articulated in the *Rammanohar Lohia Rachanawali*, a compilation of the works of Ram Manohar Lohia.

After Lohia's intervention, the Mandal Commission in its 1980 report recommended a 27% reservation for OBCs in central government jobs and educational institutions, noting that OBCs constitute approximately 52% of India's population, on the basis of the 1931 caste Census data. In 1990, the V.P. Singh government allowed the partial implementation of Mandal Commission reports, generating much political heat across the country. However, the ensuing debate around reservations for the backward classes also raised the issue of a lack of new and more relevant data for more accurate policymaking, giving momentum to the demand for a caste census from this period on.

Incidentally, between the Kaka Kalelkar Commission and Mandal Commission, the Mungeri Lal Commission was set up by former Bihar Chief Minister Karpoori Thakur in Bihar, which also recommended reservations for the backward classes.

### The impact of the Mandal report

The implementation of the Mandal Commission report has significantly changed the contours of OBC politics in the country, hastening the dominance of the backward castes, especially the intermediary castes. There is now not a single party in India which can oppose OBC reservations. Even in the 2024 parliamentary elections, reservation (or the perceived threat of its removal) was a key issue.

Since 2014, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, has been

garnering strong support from OBC and Scheduled Castes within the broader Hindutva framework. To reclaim this support, regional parties have expanded their social and electoral base, and have been tirelessly demanding for a Census where caste is also enumerated. In Uttar Pradesh, the Samajwadi Party led by Akhilesh Yadav, has created a fruitful alliance with backward classes, Dalits, and minorities, by emphasising on proportional representation for castes. The party secured 37 Lok Sabha seats in the 2024 Lok Sabha elections in Uttar Pradesh. Recently, Congress leader Rahul Gandhi admitted that the party failed to prioritise OBCs and other reserved categories in the past and that they are ready to amend it. As part of the INDIA alliance's Lok Sabha election agenda, he advocated for a Census where caste is enumerated, aiming to consolidate Congress's traditional voter base while also appealing to OBC, Dalit, minorities and Adivasi constituencies. This, he said, will be like a comprehensive "X-ray" of Indian society.

While there is a vast political leadership who came through the lanes of OBC politics and have reached high positions in political parties and legislative spaces, there are fault lines in it. There is a concentration of certain communities in these spaces, especially of intermediary and extremely backward castes. The new Census, with caste enumeration, could create a window of opportunity for the inclusion of those communities who have been left behind. This Census will extend beyond OBCs, encompassing other subaltern communities and minorities. It will also bring out the number of privileged castes. It will reveal demographic compositions, and, if economic data like land ownership is included, the social roots of India's economic inequality. For smaller Scheduled Castes and OBCs lacking

prominent leaders, this Census will offer a vital opportunity for visibility and advocacy, as land reforms and economic equality efforts have failed, deepening caste-based oppression and marginalisation. It will also give voice to, and more importantly, numbers of denotified and nomadic communities.

### An electoral agenda

If one looks at the recent victory of the BJP in Haryana, Rajasthan, Delhi, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh and Uttar Pradesh, one understands how the BJP has attracted small communities to its fold. Social scientist Badri Narayan has been highlighting this phenomenon for a long time now. In Bihar, where Assembly elections are due later this year, the BJP would want to use its recent decision to conduct a caste count in the upcoming Census, along with the symbolism of honouring Karpoori Thakur with a Bharat Ratna Award, to effectively mobilise its political standing, taking the wind out of its ally Nitish Kumar, who has been basking in the glory of carrying out the caste survey in Bihar earlier and has been the beneficiary of EBC support so far. Through the proposed caste enumeration with the Census, the BJP will try to reshape the caste realities of India and consolidate its appeal among a largely untapped voter base. It will try to cement its presence in States where it was a non-dominant player at best. Other national and regional parties will likely pursue similar strategies, but their success to find a foothold in these realigned caste realities will depend on their leadership and party organisation.

Rama Shanker Singh is an independent historian and author of the book *Nadi Putra: Uttar Bharat mein Nisad aur Nadi*. Sarthak Bagchi teaches in Ahmedabad University.

## THE GIST

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# Hydrogen versus battery: The cost of clean public transport

At present, hydrogen fuel cell buses and trucks cost 20-30% more than their battery electric counterparts

## DATA POINT

### The Hindu Data Team

Nearly seven in 10 people in developing countries are expected to be living in cities by 2050 given rapid urbanisation. While urban growth provides greater access to jobs and essential services, it also brings challenges with it such as traffic congestion and air pollution, which significantly impact health.

In India, a *Lancet* study reports that from 2008 to 2019, short-term exposure to PM2.5 particles accounted for nearly 30,000 deaths annually across 10 major cities, representing 7.2% of all deaths. This includes around 5,100 deaths per year in Mumbai, 4,678 in Kolkata, and 2,870 in Chennai (**Chart 1**).

These alarming figures have prompted many cities, including Cairo (Egypt), Dakar (Senegal), Santiago (Chile), and Bogotá (Colombia), to explore cleaner public transport options. As a result, demand for electric vehicles (EVs) has risen globally. By 2023, there were 40 million electric cars on the world's roads – a 35% increase from the previous year. However, EVs still represent only a small share of total global vehicles.

**Chart 2** shows electric car sales from 2012 to 2024. Over half of global sales took place in China, followed by Europe and the U.S., with other regions contributing a much smaller share.

While battery electric vehicles (BEVs) dominate the market, Fuel Cell Electric Vehicles (FCEVs) present an alternative with several advantages – they have a longer driving range due to higher energy density, can refuel in just 5-15 minutes, and are generally lighter than battery-powered vehicles. They are particularly suitable for long-distance travel, rugged terrain, and extreme cold.

However, FCEVs remain rare, with only 93,000 units globally – equating to just one hydrogen veh-

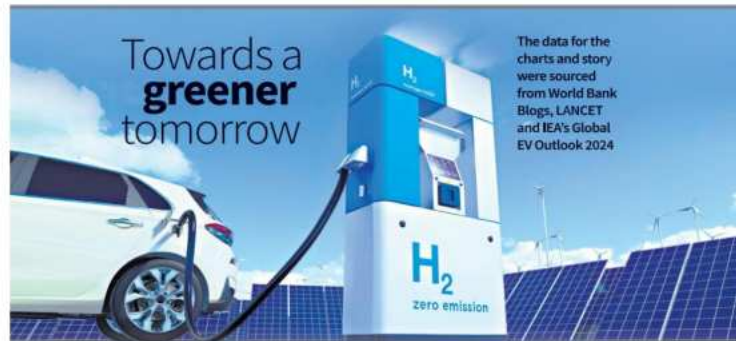
icle for every 330 battery-powered ones. This is largely due to their high initial and operational costs. As shown in **Chart 3**, fuel cell buses and trucks cost 20-30% more than their battery-electric counterparts. Nonetheless, prices for both are expected to converge by 2030 as technology improves.

Operational costs, however, remain a concern. **Chart 4** highlights the cost per kilometre for various vehicle types. Diesel buses cost about \$0.27 per km, while electric buses cost only \$0.17, making them more economical despite their higher upfront cost.

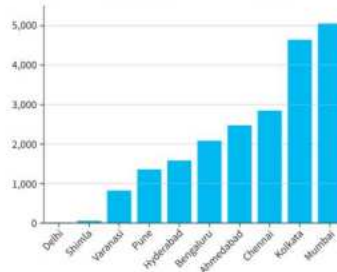
In contrast, hydrogen fuel cell buses are significantly more expensive to operate. Blue hydrogen, produced from natural gas, costs \$0.84 per km, while green hydrogen, derived from renewable sources, costs \$0.91 per km. Experts predict that the initial cost of hydrogen vehicles will match that of battery-electric vehicles within the next five years. However, their operational costs are expected to remain high, even beyond 2030.

In India, the adoption of EVs is progressing at a steady pace. EVs accounted for approximately 5% of total vehicle sales in 2023. Electric car registrations rose by 70% year-on-year to 80,000 units compared to just a 10% growth in overall car sales. However, the most rapid growth was in the three-wheeler segment, where India accounted for nearly 60% of global electric three-wheeler sales. In fact, in 2023, India surpassed China to become the largest market for electric three-wheelers, with over 0.58 million units sold.

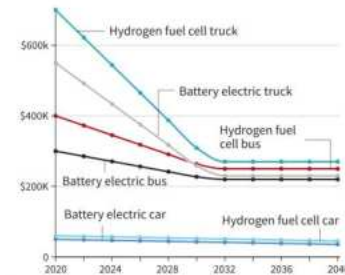
India also ranks as the world's second-largest market for electric two-wheelers, with 0.88 million units sold in 2023. But this figure is significantly lower than China's 6 million units. Notably, China, India, and ASEAN countries dominate the global market for electric two- and three-wheelers, while all other regions combined contribute less than 5% to global sales in these categories.



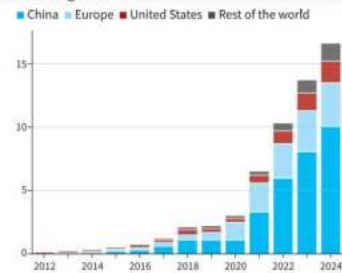
**Chart 1:** Deaths attributable to PM2.5 exposure every year in the 2008-2019 period



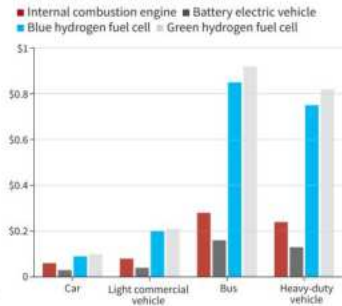
**Chart 3:** The chart shows the initial cost of various vehicles in \$1000 (k)



**Chart 2:** Electric car sales between 2012 and 2024. Figures in million



**Chart 4:** The chart highlights the cost per kilometre for various vehicle types



# Redrawing the not-so-pretty energy footprint of AI

**G**enerative Artificial Intelligence (AI) has undoubtedly eased access to art and reduced the time and the effort required to complete certain tasks. For example, ChatGPT-4o can generate a Studio Ghibli-inspired portrait in seconds with just a prompt. But this ease comes at a significant energy cost that is often overlooked – one that has even led to Graphic Processing Units (GPUs) melting. As AI tools advance, this environmental impact will continue to become more detrimental, making this an unsustainable technology. How can AI be developed sustainably? And can leveraging nuclear energy, specifically Small Modular Reactors (SMR), be a possible alternative?

AI is not free. Every time one uses ChatGPT or any other AI tool, somewhere in the world, there is a data centre chugging electricity, much of which is generated from fossil fuels. "It's super fun seeing people love images in ChatGPT, but our GPUs are melting," tweeted Sam Altman, CEO of OpenAI. Projections indicate that these data centres could account for 10% of the world's total electricity usage by 2030. Though these estimates mirror worldwide energy trends, it is necessary to highlight that India currently has sufficient capacity to generate electricity for its own domestic AI needs. Yet, with increasing adoption and ambitions, proactive planning is imperative.

Training an AI model, whether it is a conversational tool such as ChatGPT or an image-generator tool such as Midjourney, can generate the same amount of CO<sub>2</sub> as five cars running continuously across their life. Once deployed, AI tools continue to draw immense power from data centres as they serve countless users around the globe. This resource consumption is staggering, and it is becoming more unsustainable as AI adoption grows.

To start with, AI companies need to be transparent about their energy consumption. Just



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Small modular  
nuclear reactors  
could be the  
energy answer  
to support  
booming AI and  
data  
infrastructure

as some regulations mandate the disclosure of privacy practices surrounding data usage, companies must also be mandated to disclose their environmental impact – first, how much energy is being consumed? Second, where is it coming from? Third, what steps are being taken to minimise energy consumption? Such data would provide further insights on where energy is being used the most and encourage research and development to create a more sustainable model of AI development.

## Advantages of SMRs

Another, perhaps controversial, solution would be to address the energy source behind all of this technological growth. It is time nuclear energy, particularly SMRs, is discussed seriously. While this is often a subject of heated debate, it is also a powerful potential solution to the energy demands created by AI and other emerging technologies. The AI boom is happening fast, and the current energy infrastructure will just not be able to keep up.

SMRs present a transformative opportunity for the global energy landscape to support booming AI and data infrastructure. Unlike traditional large-scale nuclear power plants that demand extensive land, water, and infrastructure, SMRs are designed to be compact and scalable. This flexibility allows them to be deployed closer to high-energy-demand facilities, such as data centres, which require consistent and reliable power to manage vast amounts of computational workloads. Their ability to provide 24x7, zero-carbon, baseload electricity makes them an ideal alternative to renewable sources such as solar and wind by ensuring a stable energy supply regardless of weather conditions.

The benefits of SMRs extend beyond just energy reliability. Their modular construction reduces construction time and costs when

compared to conventional nuclear plants, enabling faster deployment to meet the rapidly growing demands of AI and data-driven industries. Additionally, SMRs offer enhanced safety features, with passive safety systems that rely on natural phenomena to cool the reactor core and safely shut down, reducing the risk of accidents. This makes them more acceptable and easier to integrate into regions where large-scale nuclear facilities would face opposition. The ability of SMR to operate in diverse environments, from urban areas to remote locations, also supports the decentralisation of energy production, reducing transmission losses and enhancing grid resilience.

## Some of the challenges

However, the adoption of SMRs is not without challenges. Significant policy shifts will be required to create a robust regulatory framework that addresses safety, waste management and public perception. There is also the matter of substantial upfront investment, as the technology is still maturing and may face issues of cost competitiveness when compared to established energy sources. Additionally, coordinating SMR deployment with existing renewable energy initiatives will require careful planning to maximise synergies while minimising redundancy. In India's case, despite these challenges, the cost of electricity from SMRs is predicted to fall from ₹10.3 to ₹5 per kWh after the reactors are functional, which is less than the average cost of electricity.

In conclusion, a public-private partnership model presents a realistic solution to the challenges of sustainable AI development. By leveraging the strengths of both sectors, this model can facilitate the efficient development of SMRs alongside other forms of renewable energy to support advancements in AI.





# Cast of characters

## Caste census presents both challenges and opportunities

**F**or the first time since 1931, Census forms will record the caste of Indians, but questions remain on the extent of the impact that the data would have on India's affirmative action programmes. Decadal censuses, until now, have categorised citizens as SCs, STs and as per religion. In decades of reservation for SCs, STs, and OBCs, there have been concerns about which communities or individuals within these groups are able to access the benefits. The demands for a creamy layer to eliminate the economically better-off sections from reservation quotas, and for sub-categorisation to ensure smaller or relatively more backward communities are not crowded out, have gained moral and political legitimacy. The Supreme Court of India, last August, cleared the way for sub-categorisation within SCs and STs and the Justice G. Rohini Commission in 2023 finished a study to examine sub-categorisation within OBCs. The Court's judgment was quick to draw a sharp fault line within SC and ST communities on the issue of sub-categorisation and the potential for upset in the Commission's report has forced the government to keep its findings closely guarded. Caste groupings continue to be a determinant of political and social life and empirical data on these are essential for more effective development planning. However, the search for increased representativeness through slicing and relabelling of social groups could be an infinite process, leaving some group or the other always dissatisfied.

The other challenge is the logistics of how caste enumeration should be conducted in a country where community-based claims are numerous. The understanding of what caste is, the difference between a sub-caste and a caste group, and the reconciliation of the understanding of caste names with their morphing according to linguistic and regional variations are issues. This gap in understanding caste was reflected in the SECC 2011 dataset as well, which yielded more than 46 lakh different "castes". Apart from the fact that there is no repository of all castes except for the lists of SCs, STs, and OBCs, the question of how to classify communities as castes, tribes, or socially and educationally backward classes continues to be litigated in High Courts and the Court in the form of countless petitions for inclusion or exclusion. The decision to enumerate caste can also be an opportunity to arrive at a consensus on these questions. The political diatribe that accompanied caste enumeration exercises in Bihar, Karnataka, and Telangana shows that this could be volatile. The Centre should build consensus on the details, now that all parties are in agreement with caste enumeration in principle. That will keep the integrity of its finding intact and beyond reproach.





# The messaging from putting the IWT in 'abeyance'

**O**n April 24, India announced that it would hold the Indus Waters Treaty (IWT) of 1960 in abeyance until Pakistan ceased its support for cross-border terrorism. The term "abeyance," as used by the Government of India, suggests a temporary suspension, leaving open the possibility of reinstatement should Pakistan take credible steps to curb terrorism, particularly in light of the Pahalgam terror attack, on April 22.

## The meaning of 'abeyance'

The term "abeyance" finds no legal recognition under the IWT or the Vienna Convention on the Law of Treaties, 1969 (VCLT). India is not a party to the VCLT, while Pakistan has signed it, but has not ratified it. Further, unilateral suspension of treaty obligations, as implied by "abeyance," lacks legitimacy under customary international law and international water law that promotes 'water cooperation' as the peremptory norm fundamental to the international legal order. Critically, in the IWT's, Articles XII(3) and (4) stipulate that modifications or termination require a mutually ratified treaty – a prospect that seems remote given the current status quo between India-Pakistan.

Thus, the IWT's specific provisions preclude unilateral suspension of substantive or procedural obligations. More broadly, in the VCLT, Articles 60, 61, and 62 permit suspension of a treaty only under exceptional circumstances, such as a material breach, impossibility of performance, or a fundamental change in circumstances, respectively – none of which India has formally invoked. Therefore, India's invocation of "abeyance" may be seen as a political signal rather than a legally enforceable action, potentially putting procedural cooperation on hold. In practical terms, by using abeyance, India can temporarily refuse to carry out all joint mechanisms necessary for the treaty's operation. India can choose not to share details on water resource development projects on western rivers and hydrological data crucial for flood forecasting and planning for irrigation, hydropower and drinking water that could jeopardise Pakistan's water interests, internal water planning and water security, temporarily if not permanently. Moreover, India could flush silt from its reservoirs (which also requires reservoirs to be filled) without issuing any prior warning to Pakistan.

On January 25, 2023, New Delhi issued a notice to Pakistan through the Indus Commissioners, citing a material breach of the IWT. India argued that Pakistan's unilateral decision to approach the Permanent Court of Arbitration violated the treaty's dispute resolution mechanisms outlined in Articles VIII and IX. This time, New Delhi has invoked the Treaty as a counter-terrorism deterrent, opting for the term "abeyance" rather than "suspension" or "termination".

This choice raises pertinent questions. Article 60 of the VCLT allows for the termination or suspension of a treaty in response to a material breach. Does Pakistan's alleged support for cross-border terrorism not constitute such a

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breach? Likewise, Article 62 permits treaty suspension or withdrawal in the event of a fundamental change in circumstances. Could the persistent threat to national security from cross-border terrorism not fulfil this condition? Yet, these arguments hinge on untested legal interpretations, as neither the IWT nor customary international law explicitly links terrorism to treaty obligations, risking escalation in an already volatile bilateral relationship.

## Abeyance as a two-level game

The decision to use "abeyance" likely arises from strategic and tactical considerations. First, India's Cabinet Committee on Security may have opted for abeyance as a cautious step to address public sentiment quickly and offer solace to grieving families. The limited time to fully evaluate the legal and diplomatic implications may have influenced this decision. Second, abeyance may also reflect a calculated move to relieve itself from the continuous legal objection it had witnessed vis-à-vis the construction of run-of-the-river projects planned on western rivers. India could leverage this pause to consolidate its rights to optimally use its entitled water usage allocations in western and eastern rivers, particularly through infrastructure projects that enhance its control over the Indus waters. However, this strategy risks escalating tensions, as Pakistan, heavily dependent on the Indus waters, is already viewing such actions as an 'act of war' and a direct threat to its water security.

The choice of terminology is even more critical given Pakistan's current instability. With the military losing the support of the youth since Imran Khan's imprisonment and its attempts to internationalise the Kashmir issue during the U.S. Vice-President's India visit, Pakistan's political and economic instability is even more visible. This uncertainty makes it challenging for New Delhi to navigate relations with a state in turmoil. Did India fully account for this while formulating the decision announced by the Foreign Secretary? In such a context, can the abeyance of the IWT genuinely exert meaningful pressure on Pakistan? More fundamentally, will leveraging the IWT as a tool to compel Pakistan to end its support for cross-border terrorism prove effective at all?

It is widely acknowledged that Pakistan, as a failing state, is unlikely to comply with India's demands. By invoking "abeyance", India may buy time to pursue domestic goals, particularly advancing water infrastructure projects on the western and eastern rivers. Many of these projects, including the Kishenganga, Baglihar, and Ratle hydel projects, have faced significant delays due to Pakistan's legal interventions. This move could provide India with the leverage needed to expedite such initiatives. While the Kishenganga and Baglihar were eventually resolved, projects such as Tulbul-Navigation and Ratle remain uncertain. These long-standing tensions, along with the 2021 Parliamentary Committee's emphasis on the need for infrastructure to fully utilise India's allocated waters, mark a critical inflexion point. However,

questions persist about the feasibility of such projects, especially regarding environmental clearances.

In the weeks and months ahead, we could witness a complex interplay of domestic and international strategies, or a "two-level game", between India and Pakistan. Both nations must manage domestic expectations, engage diplomatically to safeguard their interests, and justify their actions as victories. For India, invoking the IWT in "abeyance" serves dual purposes: domestically, it demonstrates a firm stance against terrorism, aligning with public sentiment and reinforcing national security priorities. Internationally, it signals India's frustration with Pakistan's alleged support for terrorism. But could there be more to this strategy?

## Ramifications for India

While in India, the decision has resonated emotionally with the public and garnered widespread political support, it risks overshadowing the more profound implications of such a strategy. On the global stage, unilaterally violating the IWT could lead to India facing the Permanent Court of Arbitration or the International Court of Justice, damaging its credibility as a responsible international actor. However, domestically, the strategy raises critical questions about the balance between national security and ecological prudence. The rush to fast-track water infrastructure projects, ostensibly to strengthen India's water rights, risks bypassing essential public and environmental scrutiny. Such actions could have dire consequences in the biodiversity-rich and seismically sensitive Indus basin. Weaponising water resources as a strategic tool may provide short-term leverage but could inadvertently harm India, undermining the foundational principles of democratic governance and constitutional integrity.

At the same time, public sentiment demands a stronger stance against Pakistan, with some public intellectuals advocating escalated military actions akin to the surgical strikes of 2016 and 2019. While such actions might serve as immediate displays of strength, they do not address the root cause of cross-border terrorism. The challenge lies in navigating a path that satisfies national sentiment while ensuring long-term stability and security. New Delhi must carefully craft its narrative and future on-the-ground steps around the IWT abeyance, ensuring that India aligns with broader geopolitical goals and has a sound legal basis within the IWT framework.

Actions taken must reflect strategic foresight, aiming to pressure Pakistan into reevaluating its stance on cross-border terrorism while avoiding harm to India's own ecological and social fabric. The focus should remain on measures that strengthen India's position as a responsible global power, leveraging its democratic values and environmental stewardship. This would uphold India's international standing, ensuring that its actions do not inadvertently harm the region that it seeks to protect.

Leveraging water resources as a strategic tool may provide short-term benefit, but could end up harming India



# India's Forest Rights Act stands apart from exclusionary laws globally

Most of the world's biodiverse regions are in places indigenous communities have traditionally lived and governed; they have protected biodiversity and nurtured it while being nurtured in return: laws that secure their tenure and recognise their rights can thus strengthen traditional governance

Aditi Valpey  
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In many parts of the world, conservation laws and policies are becoming more exclusionary. They are disenfranchising local communities and indigenous people, disregarding their rights and role in conservation, and allowing the state as well as private interests to exploit resources.

Conservation science and its legal frameworks are rooted in colonial ideas, and define nature as "pristine" and untouched by humans. When wielding this approach – often called the fortress model – exclusive spaces called "protected areas" are created, where conservation is implemented with centralised state control, criminalising indigenous peoples and local communities (IPLCs) as encroachers.

Researchers have found that the fortress conservation model has displaced 10 to 20 million people around the world by separating their lives, livelihoods, and cultures from landscapes condoned off as protected areas. While global conservation legislation is fairly recent, the role of IPLCs like the Maasai and Ogiek in Kenya, the Batwa in Uganda, the Ashaninka in Peru, and Adivasis in India is well documented. Most of the world's biodiverse regions are in places where these communities have traditionally lived and governed.

This is no coincidence: IPLCs have been custodians of local biodiversity, protecting it against being exploited and nurturing it while being nurtured in return. In turn, laws that secure IPLCs' tenure and recognise their rights can strengthen traditional governance systems used to sustainably manage their lands.

**Conservation with laws**  
In the prevailing global scenario, laws are crucial to facilitate conservation. The Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) is the largest international legal instrument from which many conservation and biodiversity-related multilateral treaties and legal frameworks have emerged. First presented at the Rio Earth Summit in 1992, 196 countries are party to the CBD today, with their national legal frameworks being guided by the CBD framework. The CBD's main objectives are conservation, sustainable use, and fair and equitable sharing of the benefits of biodiversity, including landscapes, species, and genetic resources.

India, one of the world's 17 megadiverse countries, is a signatory to the CBD and has a rich history of community-led environmental protection and conservation campaigns. It enacted the Biological Diversity Act (BDA) in 2002 to implement the objectives of the CBD. The Act provides for a three-tier institutional system: the National Biodiversity Authority is at the Centre and the State Biodiversity Boards and the Biodiversity Management Committees (BMCs) operate at the local level, to promote the conservation of local plants, animals, and habitats including documenting biodiversity-related traditional knowledge.

While attempts have been made to include communities in conservation through programmes such as Joint Forest Management, broader forest and resource laws have historically denied Adivasi and other traditional communities their access to forests and criminalised their rights, leading to large-scale dispossession. India formalised the protected area model under the Wildlife Protection Act 1972 and Project Tiger in 1973. As of February 2025, the country has already notified 1,134 protected areas with 58 tiger reserves. Experts have recorded at least six lakh people displaced in this manner as a result.

Then, in 2006, Parliament passed the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, or FRA, in a critical turning point in Indian legislation. The FRA linked the recognition of the rights of forest dwellers and Adivasis with the governance, management, and conservation of forests, natural resources, and biodiversity. To achieve this, the Act provides a framework for democratic, decentralised governance and management by vesting institutional authority in village-level gram sabhas.

**IPLCs and conservation**  
At present, many international legislative institutions are recognising the crucial role indigenous peoples and local communities (IPLCs) play in biodiversity



An Adivasi farmer tends paddy at her farm in Payagbodi village near Dang district in Gujarat. RIL PHOTO

conservation. Indeed, IPLCs have been campaigning to have their rights recognised at international meetings of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (the climate COP) and of the CBD.

Since 1992, the CBD has urged countries to "respect, preserve and maintain knowledge, innovations and practices of indigenous and local communities embodying traditional lifestyles relevant for the conservation and sustainable use of biological diversity" through Article 8(j). Many protocols, working groups and subcommittees have been set up over the years to realise the Article's vision – to ensure governments recognise IPLC rights – but progress has been slow.

In 2007, the UN passed its Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples to address the discrimination IPLCs face throughout the world and to emphasise their right to "maintain and strengthen their own institutions, cultures and traditions."

**The Indian constitution**  
India voted in favour of this Declaration in 2007 yet the government has refrained from using the term and concept of "indigenous peoples" in its own laws, claiming all Indians are indigenous. However, the Indian constitution recognises Scheduled Tribe groups and provides an advanced framework to recognise and protect their rights. The Constitution also includes provisions related to Scheduled and Tribal Areas with Articles 244 and 244A. The 2011 Census reported that Adivasis numbered around 104 million, then 8.6% of the Indian population: effectively the world's largest population of indigenous people in a single country.

Over the years, the government has also advanced this constitutional framework by enacting parliamentary legislations, including the Provisions of the Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas), or PESA, Act 1996 and the FRA 2006.

In fact, the FRA is arguably one of the most advanced legal frameworks in the world: it legally recognises the relationships between tenure security, rights of forest dependent communities, and biodiversity conservation and creates democratic mechanisms to strengthen these bonds. The Act also recognises that Adivasis and other traditional forest dwellers, have suffered historical injustice.

The Kunming Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (KMGBF), which CBD signatories adopted at their COP-15 summit in 2022 in Canada, seeks to integrate and ensure equitable

**The FRA is arguably one of the most advanced legal frameworks in the world: it legally recognises the relationships between tenure security, rights of forest dependent communities, and biodiversity conservation, and creates democratic mechanisms to strengthen these bonds**

representation of IPLCs and their traditional knowledge in the implementation of the framework. The KMGBF envisions a world living in harmony with nature with a list of 23 targets to achieve it. An important one is titled '30 by 30', i.e. countries committing to bring 30% of the world's land and marine areas under their protection by 2030. The targets also mention consultation and inclusion of IPLCs, their cultural practices, and their traditional knowledge.

The FRA, on the other hand, adopts a more nuanced approach to conserving biodiversity. Of the 13 kinds of rights recognised under the Act, two are especially important in the present context: "right of access to biodiversity and community, right to intellectual property and traditional knowledge related to biodiversity, and cultural diversity," and "right to protect, regenerate, or conserve or manage any community forest resource that they have been traditionally protecting and conserving for sustainable use."

**The situation in 2025**  
In November, the CBD's COP-16 summit established a permanent subsidiary body for IPLCs and also adopted a programme of work on Article 8(j). This body made the CBD the only UN Convention with a dedicated platform to implement the rights of IPLCs.

India also came up with a list of 23 targets under its updated National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan (NBSAPs) that it aims to achieve by 2030. While these targets include protecting the rights of local communities and conserving biodiversity, the plan itself banks on existing institutional frameworks. Even though updated NBSAPs emphasise a paradigm shift towards a bottom-up governance approach – as in the FRA – it excessively favours State forest departments and State-led conservation measures over decentralised approaches.

The implementation of the updated NBSAPs rely significantly on the BMCs (which have yet to become fully functional). It's not clear how the NBSAPs will build synergy between the different

governance approaches.

Thus, for all these international victories, the struggle for the rights of IPLCs in conservation approaches is far from over. The premise of the '30 by 30' agenda itself jeopardises these rights because it promotes the idea that simply expanding protected areas will arrest biodiversity loss.

**Beyond protected areas**

The KMGBF makes provisions to move beyond protected areas through its "other effective area-based conservation measures" (OECMs). India plans to notify the OECM guidelines soon. Some experts have expressed optimism that this is an opportunity to involve communities in conservation.

Each OECM is to be identified by four features: shouldn't already be a protected area; is already governed and managed by governments, private entities or IPLCs; makes sustainable efforts to conserve biodiversity; and protects ecosystem functions as well as cultural, socio-economic, etc. values. But without proper checks and legal recognition of rights, OECMs can become tools of exploitation – just the way the CBD and the BDA are designed to "monetise" nature in a way that accrues benefits to IPLCs yet renders biodiversity and traditional knowledge vulnerable to being exploited for corporate interests. It therefore behooves the BDA framework to strengthen the existing FRA framework.

Indeed, the Union Ministry of Tribal Affairs stressed in its response to the draft Biodiversity Rules 2024 (dated April 10, 2024): that instead of creating new mechanisms to manage resources and biodiversity, the government should combine them with the gram-sabha-led community forest resource management systems under FRA. It also asks that before declaring any biodiversity heritage sites, the government must ensure it has completed the process of settling forest dwellers rights under the FRA and received the prior informed consent of respective gram sabhas.

Research estimates that FRA has the potential to protect at least 4 crore ha of forest land, including existing protected areas. To enable it to do so without also dispossessing the stewards of this land, other laws and policies must comply with the FRA.

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