



Troubled transition

Interim government in Nepal must resist illegitimate demands

After violent protests that left 74 dead, Nepal's elected government has fallen, with its Parliament dissolved and former jurist Sushila Karki leading an interim government until the 2026 elections. While the Gen Z protesters had legitimate grievances including poor governance, entrenched corruption and intolerance of critical views, seen in the ousted CPN-UML-led government's banning of 23 social media websites – the transition itself was blatantly unconstitutional, violating Article 76 of Nepal's 2015 Constitution which permits dissolution only after failed Prime Minister appointments. Yet, considering the exigent circumstances, there is little purchase for judicial review of the steps taken last week. Notably, the President did not dissolve the upper house, the National Assembly. More troubling were the protesters' egregious actions which included burning Parliament and the Supreme Court (destroying vital documents). Nepal is expected to suffer severe economic losses besides governance issues due to the destruction of property and documents. The targeting of democratic institutions suggests an assault on Nepal's post-Constitutional order – institutions established after the painstaking constitution-writing process that followed the much-needed ending of a decade-long civil war in 2006, overcoming an anachronistic and discredited monarchy and which included marginalised sections beyond Kathmandu valley's power structures – even if there was half-hearted or ineffective implementation of the Constitution's spirit and letter.

The interim government must bring the criminals to justice as any inaction will lead to a normalisation of violence threatening all institutions that were set up to fulfil the promises of deeper democratisation and Nepal's transformation into a republic. Even if Gen Z protesters claim that impostors carried out the violence, their continued reliance on online forums, such as Discord, for decision-making reveals immaturity and an unrepresentative nature. The reliance on online forums, which feature anonymity, frivolity and impersonation, and the fact that there is no guarantee that these views are representative of the many marginalised groups suggest that giving into the demands from these unaccountable groups uncritically could be hazardous. The failures of mainstream leaders – the K.P. Sharma Oli-Sher Bahadur Deuba-Pushpa Kamal Dahal troika and their coteries – cannot justify discrediting democracy or the polity itself, as some protesters have made it out to be, echoing anti-social and destructive pro-monarchic elements. One outcome is that the entrenched leadership of mainstream parties could be compelled by party members to give way to fresh blood. Meanwhile, the interim government must protect Nepal's institutions and constitutional achievements while building the stage for free and fair elections – this is the surest path to safeguarding the promise of a democratic, plural and republican “Naya Nepal”.

Holistic approach

India needs a multi-pronged strategy to deal with stubble burning

The Supreme Court of India has broached the possibility of prosecuting farmers, caught setting fire to their fields, to prepare for winter sowing or *rabi* crop. ‘Stubble burning’ is a major contributor to air pollution in Delhi, Uttar Pradesh, Punjab and Haryana, particularly in October and November, when the southwest monsoon has receded and adverse meteorological conditions trap toxic particulate matter emissions from vehicles, industry, garbage burning and agricultural waste. While the causes and the ways to reduce particulate matter pollution from agriculture are known, the efforts by the Centre to tackle the long-standing problem have been half-hearted. The creation of the Commission for Air Quality Management (CAQM), a central body with the power to reach out across the borders of Punjab, Haryana, Delhi, Uttar Pradesh and Rajasthan, was a positive step and an acknowledgement that air pollution in one State cannot be tackled without the cooperation of others. However, the four-year-old statutory body has failed to exercise its powers in a manner that is independent of political pressure. Take the example of its recent order to ban the sale of petrol and diesel in the National Capital Region to ‘end-of-life’ vehicles, from July 1. A public outcry in Delhi and its political leaders – largely on technical grounds – and the Court's intervention, forced its implementation to November this year, that too beginning with parts of the NCR that are not a part of the Delhi municipalities. In stubble burning too, the CAQM has not been able to impress upon the judiciary that stubble burning was due to recalcitrant farmers, limited enforcement by Punjab and Haryana and the structure of agricultural economics that left the average, debt-ridden farmer with little choice. In recent years, it has emerged that Punjab has been claiming a reduction in farm fires when it was in fact increasing. The CAQM chose not to disclose this.

In the absence of a transparent mechanism to evaluate and address an issue and being cowed down by imagined political repercussions, it is not surprising that suggestions such as to “jail farmers” to act as a deterrent to others are being bandied about. While no section of citizens – farmer or industrialist – can be considered to be above the law, creating better incentives, enforcing existing laws and being transparent about what is realistically achievable are more advisable steps than ‘carrot and stick’ approaches.

The publication, in February 2024, of a household consumption survey by the National Sample Survey (NSS) Office, after a gap of over a decade, has made it possible to estimate the poverty rate in India. One such estimate, released by the World Bank in April 2025, has received the most attention. It points to the poverty rate being very low by now. To quote the World Bank, “Over the past decade, India has significantly reduced poverty. Extreme poverty (living on less than \$2.15 per day) fell from 16.2 percent in 2011-12 to 2.3 percent in 2022-23....” (‘Poverty and Equity Brief: INDIA’, 2025). If this is indeed an accurate description, it would be a source of satisfaction, for it suggests that extreme poverty has virtually disappeared from the country.

The ‘thali meal’ as a consumption metric
The conventional approach to poverty measurement, pioneered by the Government of India over half a century ago, entails first determining the income that would enable food intake of a specified caloric value, and then classifying those with less as poor. This is a physiological approach, and has some merit. But there could be other approaches, based on the consumption of goods, for instance. One such approach would recognise that humans are likely to approach food from an angle wider than just its calorie content, taking into account the energy it provides, which calories measure, nourishment, and the satisfaction it gives. We believe the *thali* meal reflects this thinking, making it a natural choice to measure food consumption in real terms.

As a combination of carbohydrates, protein and vitamins, the *thali* is a balanced and self-contained unit of food consumption in south Asia, even if the nomenclature may vary across it. With this in mind, we have estimated the number of *thalis* the monthly expenditure reported in the Household Consumption Expenditure Survey of 2024 would translate into. The rating agency, Crisil, has estimated the cost of a home-cooked *thali*, comprising rice, *dal*, vegetables, *roti*, curd and salad, as ₹30. Adopting this price, we found that in 2023-24, up to 50% of the rural population and up to 20% of the urban population could not have afforded two *thalis* per day at the food expenditure recorded. If two *thalis* a day is taken as the minimum acceptable standard of food consumption, our estimates point to much greater food deprivation in India than conveyed by the poverty figures from the World Bank.

A crucial reason why our findings differ is that



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Expanding the Public Distribution System to ensure desirable levels of consumption of pulses by eliminating subsidies for those whose food consumption exceeds a reasonable norm will be an ideal step

we do not assume that all of a household's income is available for spending on food. A household needs to spend on rent, transportation, telephony, health maintenance and education to just remain in the workforce. Now, expenditure on food ends up as the residual. Therefore, we have based our estimates on the actual expenditure on food.

It tends to be assumed that the Public Distribution System (PDS) deals effectively with food deprivation. To assess this, we have computed the value of food consumption including the imputed value of supplies received via the PDS – both purchased and free of cost. With the value of consumption thus adjusted, the proportion of the population that cannot afford two *thalis* declines to 40% in rural areas and 10% in urban areas. Notably, food deprivation remains very high in the former even with subsidised food.

The role of PDS

To understand how the PDS can be leveraged to alleviate food deprivation, we estimated the subsidy per person across expenditure classes. What is interesting is that both PDS purchases and free food availed of by sections of the population that can afford more than two *thalis* a day are high. For instance, in rural India, the subsidy received by an individual in the 90%-95% fractile is 88% of the subsidy received by an individual in 0%-5% fractile, even as the first has a consumption expenditure more than three times greater, and going by our own *thali* index does not require further support. By contrast, in urban India, the subsidy regime is strongly progressive. But here too about 80% receive subsidised sales from the PDS and also free food, even when they too can afford more than two *thalis* per day.

Based on the data on food deprivation and the structuring of the food subsidy regime we make a proposal on how policy should evolve. This data point to what needs to be done and how it can be achieved. First, there is scope for restructuring the food subsidy, raising it at the lower end of the distribution and eliminating it altogether at the upper. However, we learn from the most recent consumption survey that there is a constraint to be faced: cereals consumption is almost identical for individuals in the 0%-5% fractile and the 95%-100% fractile.

This suggests that the desired level of consumption of cereals, both rice and wheat, has been reached, for the richest can afford to purchase all the cereals that they desire. While it points to the success of the PDS, in that it has

India needs more focus to reach SDG 3, a crucial goal

In June this year, India secured its best-ever position in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) Index, ranking 99 out of 167 nations in the 2025 edition of the SDG Report. This marked a significant improvement from its rank of 109 rank in 2024, reflecting steady progress since 2021. India has demonstrated advancement in areas such as access to basic services and infrastructure. Yet, the report also flagged pressing challenges in key sectors, particularly health and nutrition, where progress has been uneven, especially in rural and tribal communities.

There is still ground to be covered
In this backdrop, it is critical to ponder over SDG 3. Its goal is to “ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages”, and is one of the most crucial, yet demanding, goals in India's SDG journey. It encompasses specific targets that India has committed to achieve by 2030. Despite gains in some areas, the overall trajectory indicates that India is not on track in most targets. For example, the Maternal Mortality Ratio (MMR) – the number of mothers dying after childbirth per 100,000 live births – stands at 97 deaths per 100,000 live births, higher than the 2030 target of 70.

Even the under-five mortality rate remains at 32 deaths per 1,000 live births against the target of 25. In developed countries, it ranges between two and six deaths. Life expectancy now is only 70 years, falling short of the target of 73.63 years. Out-of-pocket health-care expenditure continues to burden families at 13% of total consumption, nearly double the targeted 7.83%. Even immunisation coverage, though commendably high at 93.23%, has not yet reached the universal target of 100%.

There are multiple reasons for these gaps. They include, first, lack of access to quality health care partially due to poor infrastructure and economic factors; second, non-economic factors such as poor nutrition, hygiene and sanitation and other lifestyle choices and, third, cultural



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Compulsory health education in schools is one measure that can help close the gap

practices and stigma around physical and mental health. These cultural practices and limited awareness often prevent communities from accessing even the health-care services available to them.

If India is to accelerate progress on SDG Goal 3, a three-pronged approach is essential and one that focuses on treatment and prevention of diseases. The first is providing Universal Health Insurance to the population. World Bank studies show that countries with robust insurance systems have lowered catastrophic health-care expenditure while ensuring greater equity in access. The second is to have high-quality primary health centres across the country and coordination of primary, secondary and tertiary care.

The World Health Statistics 2022 by the World Health Organization highlights that strong primary systems help in detecting diseases earlier, reducing hospitalisation costs, and achieving better long-term outcomes. This will also require harnessing the transformative potential of digital health tools. Telemedicine and integrated digital health records can bridge access gaps, especially in rural and underserved regions. Evidence from the Lancet Digital Health Commission shows how digital platforms have improved maternal health care and vaccination tracking in several low and middle-income countries, offering lessons that India can adapt.

Health education at the school level
Prevention of diseases is more cost-effective than treating them. To prevent diseases, we need to provide health education to all schoolchildren. Children need to be educated about healthy nutrition, good hygiene and sanitation, reproductive health, road safety, and on mental health topics.

At this young age, they need to improve their health behaviour and not just their knowledge. The health habits they develop at this age will be maintained as they grow to be adults. When girls

equalised the consumption of a staple food, at the same time, it points to the limits to using the PDS in its present form to end food deprivation. Not only has cereals consumption very likely reached its desired level across the population but also it constitutes only 10% of the average household's expenditure.

It is unreasonable, from considerations of both logistics and expense, to expect that a government can distribute the entire food basket to any section. There is a middle path though, and that is to expand the distribution of pulses through the PDS. In a further comparison of the consumption patterns at the two ends of the distribution, we find that unlike in the case of the cereals, the per capita consumption of pulses in the 0%-5% fractile is exactly half of that in the 95%-100% fractile.

Pulses consumption

The PDS can be leveraged to equalise the primary food consumption across the population. The expansion of the PDS to ensure desirable levels of consumption of pulses – for many Indians, the only source of protein and a very costly food item – is both desirable and feasible. The financial aspect can be addressed by restructuring the PDS. The per capita consumption of rice and wheat in the 0%-5% fractile implies that the PDS entitlement of rice and wheat is well above what is necessary for a significant number.

Expanding the subsidy regime to supply cereal to 80 crore people, as done by the central government in January 2024 and the particularly large entitlement of rice given to those below the poverty line in some States, do not reflect need. Also, they come at a cost to the economy, given the alternative uses of public funds. Trimming the current entitlement of cereals to levels indicated as needed by the recent consumption survey at the lower end of the distribution and eliminating it altogether at the upper end would also require lower stocking requirements for the Food Corporation of India, with substantial gains.

We have proposed an expansion of the PDS in the direction of the food most needed by the least well-off, namely pulses, accompanied by the elimination of subsidies for those whose food consumption exceeds a reasonable norm, such as two *thalis* a day. Right now, the PDS is both unwieldy and ineffective, as it spreads resources thin. Our proposal will render it compact, enabling the equalisation of primary food consumption in India by raising that of the poorest household to the highest level observed in the economy, a globally significant outcome.

become mothers, they will be more educated about their health and advocate this for themselves and their family. Over the long term, the school health education initiative has the potential to reduce MMR ratio, under-five mortality and deaths due to road accidents. At the same time, it can increase life expectancy and immunisation rates.

Finland's school-based health reforms in the 1970s, which wove lessons on nutrition, hygiene and lifestyle into the curricula, played a central role in reducing cardiovascular disease rates in the decades that followed. In Japan, compulsory health education has been linked to improved hygiene practices and longer life expectancy. A structured and progressive curriculum in India can achieve similar results.

Need for concerted actions
Therefore, closing the SDG gap requires action by policymakers to individual actions. Policymakers need to embed health education in school curricula while simultaneously investing in universal health coverage and primary health care.

All parents have an important role to play in the health education of youth. They can review their child's school curriculum and determine whether topics on physical, mental and social health are being covered. If not, they should push for it by communicating this to the department of education.

India's improved SDG ranking is encouraging. But it should not obscure the reality that only 17% of global SDG targets are currently on track to be achieved by 2030. Educating its youth about healthy behaviour, supported by stronger health-care systems, can act as the foundation for sustainable progress. And while 2030 is an important milestone to reach, the true vision lies further ahead – building a healthier and stronger India. A government that devotes its attention to embedding health education in school curricula can help achieve the goal of a Viksit Bharat 2047.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

The Jews and Israel today
The Jews have been the most persecuted race — the Holocaust is the darkest chapter in human history. Therefore, one would expect that the Jews would inherently imbibe qualities of empathy and tolerance, given their sufferings in the past. However, it seems that the oppressed have turned oppressor with renewed force. How else can one explain the atrocities that Israel is perpetrating in Gaza? Even today, German children are taught about

the shameful role that the Germans played in the annihilation of Jews during the World War, lest they forget. Similarly, let the people of Israel pause for a moment and rethink on how history will judge them for the genocide in Gaza. They may soon have to contend with the possibility that their victimisation during the Second World War will be relegated to the last pages of history in the aftermath of their actions. **Sharada Sivaram,** Kochi, Kerala

India's inexplicable and continued silence on the genocide in Gaza reflects its narrow-mindedness, and its strange unwillingness to challenge executive decisions on foreign policy. As the world grapples with the mounting toll of the Gaza conflict, India's role as a silent bystander is growing increasingly untenable. The Prime Minister of India and the External Affairs Minister may frame their diplomacy as pragmatic, but history will judge them as moral

failures. The cost of complicity — both for Palestine and for India's global standing — is far too high to ignore. The question now is whether India will continue down this path of strategic expediency or rediscover the courage to condemn the genocide in Gaza — which it ought to do so. The answer will shape not only the fate of Palestine but also India's legacy in the global order. **R. Sivakumar,** Chennai

A loyal BSNL customer
I have been a long-standing BSNL customer, for nearly 20 years. The only reason my family and I (nearly 75 members) have continued with BSNL is out of our conviction to support a Government of India enterprise and promote its services. We have encouraged others in our circle to use BSNL despite its known limitations. Although BSNL has officially launched eSIM, it is still not available in Kerala. Even more concerning is the

explanation by customer-care representatives — that eSIM facilities are not available for long-standing customers. This policy shows a disregard for loyal customers. In the absence of BSNL's rollout of eSIM services, I am left with no choice but to consider porting my number to another operator. **Akhil S. Karun,** Kochi, Kerala
Letters emailed to letters@thehindu.co.in must carry the postal address.

A ND-NDE