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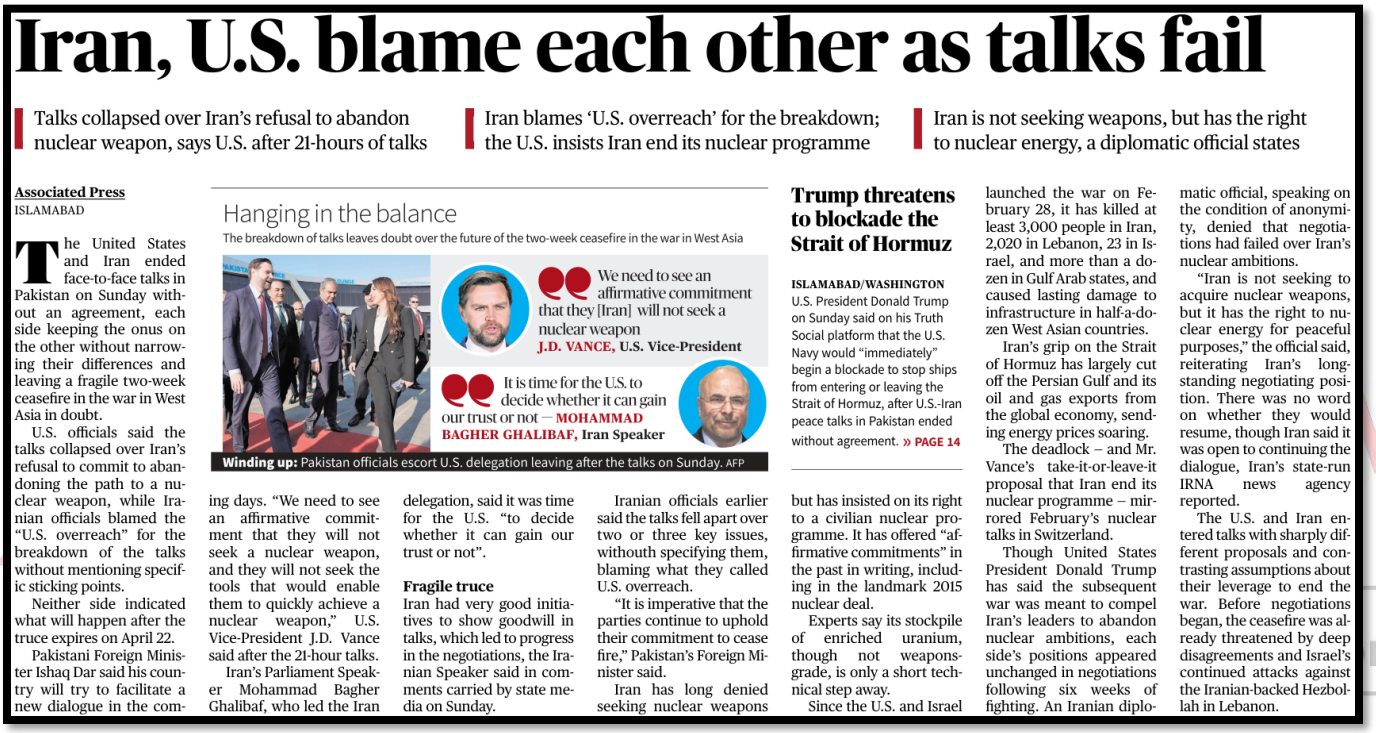
Page 01 : GS II : International Relations / Prelims Exam

The collapse of the 21-hour marathon talks in Islamabad marks a critical juncture in the 2026 West Asia War. Following a massive military campaign launched by the U.S. and Israel on February 28, 2026—which resulted in the death of Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei—the failure of this direct dialogue threatens to end a fragile two-week ceasefire. The impasse revolves around the "Nuclear-Energy-Security" trilemma: the U.S. demands an end to Iran's nuclear program, while Iran asserts its sovereign right to peaceful nuclear energy and control over the strategic Strait of Hormuz.



Iran, U.S. blame each other as talks fail

Talks collapsed over Iran's refusal to abandon nuclear weapon, says U.S. after 21-hours of talks

Iran blames 'U.S. overreach' for the breakdown; the U.S. insists Iran end its nuclear programme

Iran is not seeking weapons, but has the right to nuclear energy, a diplomatic official states

Associated Press
ISLAMABAD

The United States and Iran ended face-to-face talks in Pakistan on Sunday without an agreement, each side keeping the onus on the other without narrowing their differences and leaving a fragile two-week ceasefire in the war in West Asia in doubt.

U.S. officials said the talks collapsed over Iran's refusal to commit to abandoning the path to a nuclear weapon, while Iranian officials blamed the "U.S. overreach" for the breakdown of the talks without mentioning specific sticking points.

Neither side indicated what will happen after the truce expires on April 22.

Pakistani Foreign Minister Ishaq Dar said his country will try to facilitate a new dialogue in the coming days. "We need to see an affirmative commitment that they will not seek a nuclear weapon, and they will not seek the tools that would enable them to quickly achieve a nuclear weapon," U.S. Vice-President J.D. Vance said after the 21-hour talks.

Iran's Parliament Speaker Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf, who led the Iran delegation, said it was time for the U.S. "to decide whether it can gain our trust or not".

Fragile truce

Iran had very good initiatives to show goodwill in talks, which led to progress in the negotiations, the Iranian Speaker said in comments carried by state media on Sunday.

Iranian officials earlier said the talks fell apart over two or three key issues, withouth specifying them, blaming what they called U.S. overreach.

"It is imperative that the parties continue to uphold their commitment to cease fire," Pakistan's Foreign Minister said.

Iran has long denied seeking nuclear weapons but has insisted on its right to a civilian nuclear programme. It has offered "affirmative commitments" in the past in writing, including in the landmark 2015 nuclear deal.

Experts say its stockpile of enriched uranium, though not weapons-grade, is only a short technical step away.

Since the U.S. and Israel launched the war on February 28, it has killed at least 3,000 people in Iran, 2,020 in Lebanon, 23 in Israel, and more than a dozen in Gulf Arab states, and caused lasting damage to infrastructure in half-a-dozen West Asian countries.

Iran's grip on the Strait of Hormuz has largely cut off the Persian Gulf and its oil and gas exports from the global economy, sending energy prices soaring.

The deadlock – and Mr. Vance's take-it-or-leave-it proposal that Iran end its nuclear programme – mirrored February's nuclear talks in Switzerland.

Though United States President Donald Trump has said the subsequent war was meant to compel Iran's leaders to abandon nuclear ambitions, each side's positions appeared unchanged in negotiations following six weeks of fighting. An Iranian diplomatic official, speaking on the condition of anonymity, denied that negotiations had failed over Iran's nuclear ambitions.

"Iran is not seeking to acquire nuclear weapons, but it has the right to nuclear energy for peaceful purposes," the official said, reiterating Iran's long-standing negotiating position. There was no word on whether they would resume, though Iran said it was open to continuing the dialogue, Iran's state-run IRNA news agency reported.

The U.S. and Iran entered talks with sharply different proposals and contrasting assumptions about their leverage to end the war. Before negotiations began, the ceasefire was already threatened by deep disagreements and Israel's continued attacks against the Iranian-backed Hezbollah in Lebanon.

Hanging in the balance

The breakdown of talks leaves doubt over the future of the two-week ceasefire in the war in West Asia

We need to see an affirmative commitment that they [Iran] will not seek a nuclear weapon
J.D. VANCE, U.S. Vice-President

It is time for the U.S. to decide whether it can gain our trust or not — **MOHAMMAD BAGHER GHALIBAF, Iran Speaker**

Winding up: Pakistan officials escort U.S. delegation leaving after the talks on Sunday. AFP

Trump threatens to blockade the Strait of Hormuz

ISLAMABAD/WASHINGTON

U.S. President Donald Trump on Sunday said on his Truth Social platform that the U.S. Navy would "immediately" begin a blockade to stop ships from entering or leaving the Strait of Hormuz, after U.S.-Iran peace talks in Pakistan ended without agreement. » PAGE 14

Key Dimensions of the Crisis

1. The Nuclear Sticking Point

The fundamental disagreement remains the nature of Iran's nuclear program.

- **The U.S. Position:** Led by Vice President J.D. Vance, the U.S. insists on an "affirmative commitment" from Iran to abandon not just weapons development, but the tools (like high-level enrichment) that allow for a "breakout" capability.
- **The Iranian Position:** Represented by Parliament Speaker Ghalibaf, Iran maintains that its program is for civilian energy. Under the NPT (Non-Proliferation Treaty), Iran claims an inalienable right to peaceful nuclear technology.
- **Technical Reality:** Experts note that Iran's current enriched uranium stockpile is a "short technical step" from weapons-grade (90% $U\text{-}235$), making the U.S. wary of any enrichment activities.

2. Strategic and Economic Implications: The Strait of Hormuz

Iran's closure of the Strait of Hormuz has transformed a regional conflict into a global economic crisis.

Energy Security: Approximately **20%** of the world's oil and LNG passes through this choke point. The blockade has sent energy prices soaring, impacting global inflation and supply chains.

Naval Blockade: In response to the failed talks, the Trump administration has threatened a naval blockade to intercept vessels and "re-open" the strait, raising the risk of direct naval skirmishes.

3. Regional Spillover and Proxy Dynamics

The conflict is no longer contained within Iranian borders.

Israel-Hezbollah Front: Continued Israeli strikes against Hezbollah in Lebanon serve as a parallel conflict that complicates ceasefire negotiations.

Humanitarian Cost: With over **5,000 casualties** across Iran, Lebanon, and Israel in just six weeks, the regional humanitarian crisis is deepening.

Analysis: Challenges to Diplomacy

Feature	U.S. Strategy (15-Point Plan)	Iran Strategy (10-Point Plan)
Objective	Counter-proliferation & Regime Stability	Sovereignty & Sanctions Removal
Demands	Total end to enrichment; opening the Strait	Control over the Strait; war reparations
Leverage	Military superiority; decapitation strikes	Control over global oil flow; proxy network

Trust Deficit: Ghalibaf's remark about the U.S. needing to "gain trust" refers to the 2018 U.S. withdrawal from the JCPOA (2015 Nuclear Deal). Iran is hesitant to sign new agreements without guarantees of longevity.

The Role of Pakistan: Acting as a mediator, Pakistan (represented by FM Ishaq Dar) is navigating a complex role to prevent a full-scale continental war, highlighting the importance of "middle powers" in modern diplomacy.

Conclusion

The breakdown of the Islamabad talks suggests that both Washington and Tehran currently believe they have more to gain from continued leverage than from a "take-it-or-leave-it" compromise. For India, this deadlock is particularly concerning due to our dependence on West Asian oil and the safety of the large Indian diaspora in the Gulf. As the April 22 ceasefire deadline approaches, the transition from a "fragile truce" back to "active hostilities" appears increasingly likely unless a third-party

mediator (like the UN or a coalition of regional powers) can bridge the gap between Iran's "right to energy" and the U.S. "demand for non-proliferation.

UPSC Prelims Exam Practice Question

Ques: "Breakout capability" in nuclear diplomacy refers to:

(a) Ability to deploy nuclear weapons across continents

(b) Capability to quickly produce weapons-grade fissile material

(c) Use of nuclear energy for civilian purposes

(d) Deployment of missile defense systems

Ans: b)

UPSC Mains Exam Practice Question

Ques: The 'Nuclear-Energy-Security' trilemma lies at the heart of the West Asia conflict. Critically examine the competing positions of the United States and Iran in this context. **(150 Words)**

Page 09 : GS III : Indian Economy : Agriculture / Prelims Exam

The Union Budget 2026-27 has signaled a shift toward "Integrated Reservoir Development," targeting 500 reservoirs and Amrit Sarovars. With India already the world's second-largest fish producer, the government is now pivoting from traditional capture fisheries to intensive aquaculture in inland water bodies. This strategy aims to double current productivity and integrate fish farmers into a modern, tech-driven value chain.

Tapping fisheries in reservoirs

Abhilaksh Likhi
Union Secretary, Department of Fisheries, Government of India

Budget 2026-27 highlights undertaking of initiatives for integrated development of fisheries in 500 reservoirs and Amrit Sarovars (ponds developed under Mission Amrit Sarovar) to enhance income of fish farmers. This will also involve strengthening market access to fish farmer-producer organisations and cooperatives.

India is the second largest fish producer in the world. Now, it is also the second largest globally in aquaculture production. The country has witnessed a 106% increase in the national fish production since 2013-14 that stands at a record 197.75 lakh tonnes in 2024-25. Interestingly, 75% of our fish production comes from inland fisheries that include freshwater, brackish, and saline water resources. Reservoirs, spread over an area of more than 31.50 lakh hectares, are a major source of freshwater fisheries and aquaculture. Fish production from these water bodies is approximately 18 lakh tonnes.

Located primarily in eastern, central and the peninsular regions, these reservoirs contribute to the livelihood of millions of fish farmers. This is especially true for economically backward and water-scarce regions where they play a crucial role in providing direct/indirect employment and food security.

While Madhya Pradesh has the maximum area under reservoirs (about six lakh hectares), Tamil Nadu has the highest number of reservoirs at over 8,000.

A key factor in the rise of the country's fish production is the increase in fish productivity in reservoirs to 100 kg per hectare compared to 50 kg in 2006. This has been made possible by application of cage culture technology with sufficient stocking of quality seed backed by requisite budgetary support under flagship programmes such as Blue Revolution (BR) and the Pradhan Mantri Matsya Sampada Yojana (PMMSY). While the Indian major carps (Catla, Rohu, Mrigal) form the core species for stocking, need-based stocking of additional species (Tilapia, Pangasius, etc.), in consultation with beneficiaries, is provided under the above programmes.

The rise in the country's fish production has been made possible by the application of cage culture technology

These reservoir cages, floating or stationary, are typically made of synthetic netting or mesh with a structure for support. The mesh allows for natural water flow, ensuring oxygen and nutrient exchange with the surrounding environment. These cages are anchored to the bottom or suspended from buoys to maintain their position and depth. This facilitates easier feeding, monitoring, and disease management. Further, to promote species diversification, in addition to rectangular cages, circular cages are increasingly being deployed.

Bimal Chandra Oran is a fish farmer from Saraikela district in Jharkhand who has taken up aquaculture for his livelihood in the Chandil reservoir ecosystem. As a member of the Chandil Bandh Visthapit Matsyajibhi Swalambhi Sahkar Samiti (CBVMSS), he set up two cages and was provided subsidised seed and feed inputs. This was followed by a series of capacity-building trainings to upgrade his skills. Over the years, he has cultured Tilapia and Pangasius species through the reservoir cage technology. Backed by marketing support through cooperative society, he has been able to produce three tonnes of fish, thereby achieving an annual turnover of more than ₹3 lakh.

An Indian Council of Agricultural Research (ICAR)-Central Institute of Inland Fisheries (CIFRI) study envisions that aquaculture productivity can go up to 300 kg from the current 100 kg per hectare in such reservoirs. To achieve this potential, experts suggest adopting a value chain approach through the integrated development of these reservoirs. This includes converged setting up of hatcheries, feed mills, storage sheds, ice plants, berthing platforms, auction centres, and marketing retail outlets, and ensuring availability of boats and refrigerated trucks.

To ground the above value chain approach, a cluster-based strategy is being implemented by the National Fisheries Development Board (NFDB) to enhance the competitiveness of the reservoir ecosystem through end-to-end solutions. In line with this strategy, recently a reservoir cluster has been announced for the Halalai and Indra Sagar dams in Madhya Pradesh. The effort will be, first and foremost, to identify sectoral gaps in fisheries production, productivity, and processing capacities within this reservoir ecosystem. Critical, for instance, herein will be the assessment of multiplicity of agencies owning fishing rights, which sometimes poses challenges in data gathering. And without doubt, it will also entail enhancing economies of scale for local fish farmers by their aggregation through cooperatives and fish farmer-producer organisations. Such reservoir clusters will be replicated in other States and Union Territories as well.

In addition, Mission Amrit Sarovar is being implemented with the core vision of conserving surface and underground water in district ponds. A key innovation herein is mapping of user groups for pond management through community participation. Each Amrit Sarovar is designed to have a pondage area of minimum one acre with a holding capacity of 10,000 cubic metres. The Amrit Sarovar at Dine Dite Rijo in Upper Subansiri district of Arunachal Pradesh is a success story of a retention basin that has been successfully used for stocking and aquaculture of ornamental fishes. Tapping fisheries in reservoirs and Amrit Sarovars aligns with the Viksit Bharat@2047 vision to empower fishermen families to thrive and contribute to the nation's Blue Revolution.

Status of Indian Fisheries (2024-25)

Global Standing: 2nd in total fish production; 2nd in aquaculture production.

Production Milestone: Record **197.75 lakh tonnes** (a 106% increase since 2013-14).

Sectoral Shift: 75% of production now comes from **Inland Fisheries** (freshwater, brackish, and saline).

The Reservoir Potential: India has over **31.50 lakh hectares** of reservoir area, currently producing 18 lakh tonnes.

Key Technological & Policy Interventions

1. Cage Culture Technology

The transition from 50 kg/hectare (2006) to **100 kg/hectare** (current) is primarily attributed to cage culture.

Mechanism: Synthetic mesh cages (rectangular or circular) are suspended in reservoirs. This allows natural water exchange while enabling controlled feeding and monitoring.

Species Diversification: Beyond Indian Major Carps (Catla, Rohu, Mrigal), there is a push for high-yield species like **Tilapia** and **Pangasius**.

2. The Cluster-Based Value Chain Approach

To reach the projected potential of **300 kg/hectare**, the National Fisheries Development Board (NFDB) is shifting from isolated subsidies to "Cluster Development" (e.g., Halalai and Indra Sagar dams in MP).

Upstream: Hatcheries for quality seed and specialized feed mills.

Downstream: Ice plants, cold storage, refrigerated trucks, and auction centers.

Aggregation: Strengthening Fish Farmer Producer Organizations (FFPOs) and cooperatives to ensure better bargaining power.

3. Mission Amrit Sarovar Integration

Objective: Utilizing ponds created for water conservation for aquaculture.

Innovation: Community-led pond management and diversification into high-value niches like **ornamental fisheries** (e.g., success in Arunachal Pradesh).

Significance for Rural Economy

Benefit	Description
Income Growth	Farmers like Bimal Chandra (Jharkhand) report annual turnovers of ₹3 lakh+ from small-scale cage units.
Food Security	Provides a low-cost protein source in water-scarce and economically backward regions.
Employment	Generates direct/indirect jobs in processing, logistics, and retail.

Benefit	Description
Viksit Bharat @ 2047	Aligns with the vision of a self-reliant, prosperous rural India via the "Blue Revolution."

Challenges & The Way Forward

Governance: Multiplicity of agencies owning fishing rights complicates data collection and licensing.

Sustainability: Ensuring that intensive cage culture does not lead to eutrophication (nutrient overloading) of reservoir waters.

Climate Resilience: Developing insurance and tech-support for fish farmers against fluctuating water levels in reservoirs.

Conclusion

The focus on reservoirs and Amrit Sarovars represents a "Blue Transformation." By treating water bodies not just as storage but as productive economic assets, India is moving toward an **Integrated Blue Economy**. The success of this model depends on bridging the gap between production and market access through the proposed 500-reservoir cluster initiative, ensuring that the benefits of the 106% production growth trickle down to the individual fish farmer.

UPSC Prelims Exam Practice Question

Ques: The term "Eutrophication" refers to:

(a) Depletion of oxygen due to excessive nutrient enrichment

(b) Increase in salinity of water bodies

(c) Conversion of freshwater into brackish water

(d) Sedimentation in reservoirs

Ans: a)

UPSC Mains Exam Practice Question

Ques: Examine the role of inland fisheries in doubling farmers' income in India. How can a cluster-based approach resolve the structural bottlenecks in the fisheries value chain? (**150 Words)**

Page 10 : GS II : Indian Polity / Prelims Exam

In April 2026, a Madurai trial court sentenced nine suspended policemen to death for the 2020 custodial murder of P. Jayaraj and J. Bennix. While the verdict is hailed as a victory against custodial torture, the legal reasoning reveals a "sentencing trap" created by the Supreme Court's 2015 Sriharan ruling. The trial judge felt "forced to the rope" (death penalty) because he lacked the power to award a middle-ground sentence—life imprisonment without remission.

Between 14 years and the gallows

The Sattankulam trial judge accepted the Sriharan bar in his sentencing order and was forced to the rope; even ordinary life imprisonment, the judge wrote, would let the convicts come out in fourteen years through determined effort

LETTER AND SPIRIT

V. Venkatesan

On April 6, the Madurai trial court in *Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) v Sridhar* sentenced nine suspended policemen to death. They had killed P. Jayaraj and his son J. Bennix in police custody in June 2020. Judge G. Muthukumaran's reasoning is being celebrated as judicial intolerance of uniformed brutality. It is also worth reading as a confession. The case fell within the rarest of rare, he wrote, in terms that left no room for life imprisonment

The doctrine he was applying comes from *Bachan Singh v State of Punjab* (1980). There a Constitution Bench held that the death sentence may be imposed only in the rarest of rare cases when the "alternative option of life imprisonment is unquestionably foreclosed". The Sattankulam judge believed it was foreclosed. The trial court had only two options. It could send the convicts away for life. Or it could send them to the gallows. What it could not do was occupy the middle ground constitutional courts have fashioned since 2008. That ground is a life sentence quantified in years, twenty or thirty or forty, served without remission. The intermediate sentence has become a fixture of Indian capital jurisprudence. It remains off-limits to the trial courts themselves.

The doctrinal source is the 3:2 majority of the Constitution Bench in *Union of India v V. Sriharan @ Murugan* in December 2015. The majority built on *Swamy Shraddananda v State of Karnataka* (2008). It held that only the High Courts and the Supreme Court could commute death to a fixed-term life sentence beyond statutory remission. Sessions courts, the bench ruled, could not invent a special category of sentencing. The principle has since been reaffirmed in *Kiran v State of Karnataka* (2025) and applied in *Sukhdev Yadav v State (NCT of Delhi)* (2025).

GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCKPHOTO

The Sattankulam trial judge accepted the bar in his own sentencing order. He cited the December 2025 *Kiran* ruling which held that Sessions Courts cannot bridge "the hiatus between 14 years and death". In paragraph 323 of his order, Judge Muthukumaran recorded that the Sessions Court has no power to impose imprisonment for life until death. The defence for the fourth accused had pleaded the same limitation, citing the same authority.

Limitations on Trial Courts

The justification offered in *Sriharan* is surprisingly thin. The majority called the special category an inherent power of constitutional courts, unavailable to trial courts. Yet trial courts already wield the most consequential sentencing power the Code of Criminal Procedure (CrPC) recognises. If they can extinguish life under *Bachan Singh*, why may they not impose the lesser sentence of life without remission?

The Supreme Court has acknowledged the trap. In *Kiran*, the Bench described Shraddananda's concern: ordinary life imprisonment amounts to fourteen years with remission, leaving a gap that grave crimes outstrip. The special category was devised to bridge the hiatus. *Sriharan* then withheld the bridge from the trial courts most likely to need it.

The consequence in Sattankulam is plain. Even ordinary life imprisonment, the judge wrote, would let the convicts come out in fourteen years through determined effort. Section 433A of the CrPC fixed that minimum. He found the interval derisory for the brutality before him. *Sriharan* denied him the calibrated alternative. He could not direct, say, thirty years of actual incarceration without remission, a sentence second only to death. He could only choose between a sentence he considered inadequate and the rope. He chose the rope.

The defenders of *Sriharan* must be heard. Uniformity, they argue, requires the special category to remain with constitutional courts, lest sessions judges impose idiosyncratic non-remittable terms. They invoke appellate scrutiny in death references as the only safeguard. Trial courts also impose death sentences, subject to confirmation under Section 366 of the Code. Uniformity is achieved through appellate correction, not through pre-emptive denial of jurisdiction.

A sharper critique is empirical. The Square Circle Clinic at NALSAR released its Annual Statistics Report on the death penalty in February. Its findings cut against any easy reading of the Sattankulam result. In *Manoj v State of Madhya Pradesh* (2022), the Supreme Court directed trial courts to gather information about the prisoner's background, mental health and prison conduct before imposing a death sentence. These guidelines are routinely ignored. *Vasanta Sampat Dupare* (2025) elevated compliance with *Manoj* to a fair trial right under Article 21, without changing trial court practice.

At the same time, the special category *Shraddananda* devised has become the rule rather than the exception at the appellate level. All five Supreme Court commutations in 2025 went to whole-life without remission.

The Sattankulam verdict will travel to the Madras High Court on confirmation. The Madurai Bench has followed this case since taking *suo motu* cognisance in June 2020. It will have the option *Sriharan* denied the trial judge. It may convert the sentences into fixed-term life imprisonment without remission. That outcome would expose the contradiction. A special category trial courts cannot use is becoming the default above them.

According to the Square Circle Clinic's report, most trial courts impose death sentences without the mitigation hearings *Manoj* demands. The Sattankulam judge did hold them, and the architecture failed him anyway. Extending the special category of fixed-term sentencing to him would appear to remedy one rung of a broken ladder. Yet reconsideration of the post-*Bachan Singh* edifice would still be overdue.

(The author is a journalist and legal researcher.)

THE GIST

- The death sentences for the Sattankulam custodial killings highlight a conflict between the "rarest of rare" doctrine and legal restrictions, with the trial judge choosing the death penalty over an inadequate life sentence because judicial precedents barred them from imposing a fixed-term, non-remittable sentence.
- Critics argue this outcome highlights a "broken ladder" in Indian jurisprudence, where the Supreme Court's *Sriharan* decision forces trial courts into binary sentencing (death or '14-year jail') by withholding the "middle ground" of long-term imprisonment, a tool now default at the appellate level.

The Core Legal Conflict: The "Sriharan Bar"

The Indian sentencing framework currently operates on three levels, but trial courts are restricted to only two.

1. The Two Conventional Options (Trial Courts)

Life Imprisonment: Under Section 433A of the CrPC, this often means a minimum of 14 years, after which the government can grant remission (early release).

The Death Penalty: Reserved for the "Rarest of Rare" cases under the Bachan Singh (1980) doctrine, where the alternative of life imprisonment is "unquestionably foreclosed."

2. The "Middle Ground" (Constitutional Courts Only)

Fixed-term Life Sentence: In Swamy Shraddananda (2008) and Union of India v. V. Sriharan (2015), the Supreme Court created a special category: Imprisonment for a fixed term (e.g., 30 or 40 years) without the possibility of remission.

The Restriction: The Supreme Court ruled that only High Courts and the Supreme Court can award this intermediate sentence. Trial courts (Sessions Courts) are barred from using it.

Analysis: The "Sattankulam Dilemma"

The trial judge, G. Muthukumaran, faced a judicial paradox:

Inadequacy of Life Term: The judge believed that 14 years (ordinary life imprisonment) was a derisory punishment for the brutal nature of the custodial torture.

Lack of Intermediate Power: Because of the Sriharan bar, he could not sentence the policemen to, say, 30 years without remission.

The Forced Choice: Since he felt 14 years was too little and he couldn't bridge the "hiatus between 14 years and death," he was compelled to choose the death penalty to satisfy the ends of justice.

Critical Issues for UPSC Analysis

1. Judicial Hierarchy vs. Justice

If a trial court is trusted with the power to "extinguish life" (death penalty), why is it not trusted with the "lesser" power of awarding life without remission? The article argues that the Sriharan justification—ensuring uniformity—is thin, as appellate courts can always correct "idiosyncratic" sentences.

2. Non-Compliance with Reformative Guidelines

The article highlights that despite the SC's directions in Manoj v. State of MP (2022) to gather data on a prisoner's background and mental health before awarding death, many trial courts ignore these "mitigation hearings."

3. The Default Shift

Data from 2025 shows that the "Special Category" (Life without remission) is becoming the default at the appellate level. All five SC commutations in 2025 resulted in this middle-ground sentence. This suggests a growing gap between trial court practice and appellate jurisprudence.

Ethical & Administrative Perspective

Custodial Torture: The case reaffirms that uniformed brutality is a "rarest of rare" offense, warranting the highest punishment to act as a deterrent.

Retributive vs. Reformative Justice: The judge's struggle reflects the tension between wanting to punish a heinous crime sufficiently and the legal constraints that limit nuanced sentencing.

Conclusion

The Sattankulam verdict is a "confession" of the limitations of India's current sentencing architecture. By denying trial courts the power to bridge the gap between 14 years and the gallows, the judiciary has created a situation where death sentences might be awarded not because they are the only option, but because the "calibrated alternative" is legally unavailable at the first instance. As the case moves to the High Court for confirmation, it reopens the debate on whether the Sriharan bar needs a constitutional rethink.

UPSC Prelims Exam Practice Question

Ques : **"Mitigation hearing" in criminal jurisprudence refers to:**

(a) Hearing to determine guilt of the accused

(b) Hearing to assess aggravating circumstances only

(c) Hearing to evaluate background, mental health, and reformative potential before sentencing

(d) Appeal against conviction

Ans: c)

UPSC Mains Exam Practice Question

Ques: The 'Sriharan bar' limits the sentencing discretion of trial courts, potentially leading to an increase in death penalty awards. Evaluate the need for a middle-path sentencing category for trial courts in India. **(150 Words)**

Page 10 : GS II : Social Justice / Prelims Exam

The 2026 LPG crisis, exacerbated by regional conflicts (such as the West Asian war and the closure of the Strait of Hormuz), has pushed rural and semi-urban households back toward firewood. While traditional biomass use is associated with health hazards and environmental degradation, Modern Improved Cookstoves (ICS) are emerging as a bridge technology. They offer a way to utilize renewable biomass with the efficiency and safety levels that approach clean energy standards.

Are biomass stoves a cleaner, cheaper alternative to LPG?

Can modern cookstoves turn the return of firewood into a sustainable alternative during the LPG crisis?

Ankit Mathur

The story so far:

Owing to the LPG crisis, many areas—especially rural regions—have reported going back to firewood that are generally seen as increasing drudgery for women, while also causing pollution and health hazards.

Are today's firewood-based stoves less polluting and benign to human use?

Modern biomass stoves, often called improved cookstoves (ICS), represent a major step up from traditional cooking methods. Unlike old-fashioned mud stoves, they can cut fuel use by up to two-thirds while dramatically reducing smoke.

Traditional "chulhas" waste most of their heat through poor airflow and have an efficiency of barely 10%. By contrast, modern stoves reach thermal efficiency levels of 38% to 45%. Technologies such as secondary aeration help to catch soot and harmful gases before they turn into smoke.

How can mass firewood-based cooking be made sustainable?

Cooking with firewood can be sustainable, provided the wood is harvested and used responsibly. Firewood is a renewable resource as long as the rate of extraction does not exceed the rate of regrowth. Since improved cookstoves burn fuel more efficiently, they can reduce the amount of wood needed for a meal.

Modern cookstoves can also run on alternative biomass fuels, including pellets and briquettes made from sawdust or agricultural waste. This widens the fuel base and takes some pressure off raw firewood.

Financing is key to achieving deployment at scale. Emissions savings enabled by improved cookstoves can be tracked and turned into carbon credits, creating a funding stream that makes stoves more affordable for lower-income families.

What about the cost of equipment and fuel expenses?

Upfront costs vary significantly. Household models start below ₹2,000, while commercial systems can exceed ₹20,000, depending on the manufacturer and purchase channel (whether direct, through e-commerce, or via distributors). For low- and middle-income households, managing upfront costs can be made easier through financing partnerships involving microfinance, CSR programs, and carbon finance.

The principal operating cost is fuel, and modern cookstoves' high thermal efficiency can significantly reduce fuel requirements. Today's stoves have cut firewood consumption by more than 50%.

Firewood is highly cost-effective compared with LPG, especially during the ongoing supply crunch when commercial LPG rates in major cities have exceeded ₹100/kg. From the wide range of prices available for different firewood types, it is possible to assume a rough average cost of around ₹10/kg (if firewood is being bought instead of being simply scavenged). Considering that 4 kilos of firewood deliver the same cooking energy output as 1 kg of commercial LPG (in an improved cookstove), firewood could potentially offer cost savings of well over 60%.

What supply chain would be needed for mass adoption? Will this be a massive investment?

Adopting biomass cookstoves on a large scale absolutely does not require a massive investment in fuel supply chains. Since the primary fuels - like firewood, crop waste, and dung cakes - are already widely available in rural and semi-urban areas, there is less need for expensive, centralised infrastructure.

Scaling up is therefore more about strengthening distribution networks. Success depends on improving logistics, last-mile delivery, and local partnerships. Just as importantly, building user awareness and providing reliable after-sales support are essential to making sure these stoves remain a permanent part of daily life.

(The author is co-founder and CEO, Greenway Grameen)

THE GIST

- Improved Cookstoves (ICS) offer a sustainable solution by increasing thermal efficiency, reducing smoke, and cutting firewood usage by over 50%.
- Mass adoption of efficient biomass stoves does not require massive infrastructure investment, as local, renewable fuels (wood, agricultural waste) are readily available.

Comparative Analysis: LPG vs. Biomass ICS

The shift from LPG to ICS is driven by two primary factors: Economics and Technology.

1. Thermal Efficiency & Technology

Traditional mud chulhas are notoriously inefficient, losing 90% of heat. Modern ICS use Secondary Aeration and optimized combustion chambers to achieve much higher performance.

Feature	Traditional Chulha	Modern ICS	LPG (For Reference)
Thermal Efficiency	~10%	38% – 45%	~60%
Fuel Usage	High (Baseline)	66% Reduction	N/A
Emission Control	None (High Smoke/Soot)	Secondary aeration burns gases	Very Low

2. The Economic Argument

The "LPG Crisis" has seen prices surge beyond ₹100/kg. Biomass offers a significant cost advantage:

- **Operating Cost:** Firewood averages ~₹10/kg. Even though 4 kg of firewood is needed to match the energy of 1 kg of LPG, the cost is only ₹40 vs. ₹100.
- **Savings:** Households can potentially save over 60% on fuel expenses compared to commercial LPG.
- **Upfront Costs:** Household models are affordable (starting <₹2,000), and financing can be bridged via **Carbon Credits** (monetizing emission savings).

Sustainability and the Supply Chain

The "Renewable" Cycle

Cooking with wood is sustainable if the rate of extraction < rate of regrowth. ICS make this easier by reducing the volume of wood required by half.

- **Alternative Fuels:** ICS can burn pellets or briquettes made from agricultural waste (parali) and sawdust, addressing the issue of stubble burning while providing energy.

Decentralized Infrastructure

Unlike LPG, which requires expensive pipelines, bottling plants, and specialized trucks, biomass has a ready-made supply chain:

- **Local Availability:** Firewood, dung cakes, and crop residue are already present in rural ecosystems.
- **Low Investment:** Scaling doesn't require "massive investment" in infrastructure, only better last-mile logistics and after-sales support.

Critical Impacts

1. Health

Traditional firewood use is a major cause of Indoor Air Pollution (IAP), leading to respiratory diseases in women and children. ICS dramatically reduces particulate matter, addressing the "drudgery" and health risks associated with traditional cooking.

2. Environmental Policy

- **Carbon Credits:** ICS deployment is a prime candidate for carbon financing. By tracking reduced emissions, these projects help India meet its Net Zero 2070 goals.
- **Blue Revolution & Green Growth:** As discussed in previous analyses, integrated rural development (fisheries & sustainable energy) forms the backbone of the Viksit Bharat vision.

Conclusion

Modern cookstoves are not a "step backward" to the primitive past, but a "step forward" into a Circular Economy. While LPG remains the gold standard for cleanliness, the 2026 supply crunch has proven that over-reliance on imported fossil fuels is a vulnerability. A "multi-fuel" strategy—where LPG is supplemented by high-efficiency biomass stoves—offers India Energy Security, economic relief for the poor, and a pragmatic path toward sustainable rural development.

UPSC Prelims Exam Practice Question

Ques: Which of the following best describes a "circular economy" approach in rural energy systems?

(a) Dependence on imported fossil fuels

(b) Recycling and reuse of locally available biomass resources

(c) Exclusive reliance on electricity

(d) Elimination of all traditional practices

Ans: b)

UPSC Mains Exam Practice Question

Ques: Evaluate the potential of Improved Cookstoves (ICS) in achieving India's dual goals of energy security and reduced indoor air pollution in the face of fluctuating global fuel prices. **(150 Words)**

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The current discourse on the tech industry is dominated by an "AI-Impacted" label on every corporate downsizing. However, a deeper analysis reveals that the "death of software engineering" is being prematurely declared. The article argues that current layoffs at giants like Oracle, Block, and Atlassian are driven more by declining stock prices, pandemic-era over-hiring, and macroeconomic resets than by AI replacement. This phenomenon, termed "AI-washing," obscures the structural shifts happening in the labor market.

What an Oracle foretells about jobs and careers in the AI era

Of late, any enterprise announcing layoffs has an 'Impacted by AI' label; though companies like Block, Atlassian and Oracle have their own contexts for layoffs, the media narrative suggests AI impact, we are refusing to acknowledge their declining stock price in the last six months as a larger factor

NEWS ANALYSIS

Kamal Karanth

Knowing what you know now, would you have taken a different career path after college or advised your family and friends to pursue something else altogether? The other day, a former high school classmate called up to ask if his daughter, who wants to pursue computer science engineering, was making the right choice in a world filled with AI noise. I told him I am no oracle on the future of jobs, But if I were him, I would bet on his girl, who was not only a topper in Std XII but also passionate about the subject.

Bleak future: No longer can we celebrate hiring of lakhs of engineering students by big firms. FILE PHOTO

AI-washing layoffs

Of late, any enterprise announcing layoffs has an 'Impacted by AI' label on it. Though companies like Block, Atlassian and Oracle have their own contexts for layoffs, the media narrative suggests AI impact. We are refusing to acknowledge their declining stock price in the last six months as a larger factor.

It might be worthwhile to share the details surrounding a recent layoff, where I was almost a fly on the wall. In this tech company, the CXO informed his VPs that the global HQ had given him a headcount reduction target. He asked how many full-time employees (FTE) could be laid off? The first solution the VPs offered was, "Can we reduce the number of our contractors"? When reminded that the target was FTEs, each manager came up with a few names. The CXO didn't even ask why those names were picked. There were no discussions about whether AI would replace the laid-off employees. It was redundancy as usual. When I read about this layoff story in the news later, it appeared with an AI flavour.

Labour fallacy

Significantly, the top 10 AI companies, including OpenAI, Anthropic, and Perplexity, have added 7,500 new employees in the last 12 months. Despite the vibe-coding gains and telling the world to get rid of software engineers, new-age AI companies are adding more engineers themselves. Perhaps we should hold our horses before writing a death sentence on software engineering as a profession. Marc Benioff, founder and CEO of Salesforce, recently said, "Companies are cutting jobs for three very different reasons: cost that got out of hand, data centre financial commitments, and some genuine AI-driven rebalancing." Treating them as one story is a mistake.

> Companies are cutting jobs for 3 different reasons: cost that got out of hand, data centre financial commitments, and some genuine AI-driven rebalancing

Marc Andreessen, co-founder of venture capital fund Andreessen Horowitz, has an interesting take. His VC firm has invested not only in some marquee new-age companies like Figma, Databricks, Stripe and Roblox but also GitHub, Airbnb, Twitter, and Pinterest. Despite major bets on the future of AI with companies like OpenAI, Elon Musk's xAI, and Mistral AI, Andreessen recently said most large companies are overstaffed by 25-75% due to excessive pandemic-era hiring and are using AI as a cover to cut jobs. He called it the 'lump of labour' fallacy – the mistaken belief that there is a fixed amount of work to be done in an economy, thereby meaning that if one person works more or faster, another works less. It incorrectly assumes that rising automation, immigration, or productivity causes unemployment.

Future tense

Unnoticed amid the news of war and AI, mass hiring in the tech sector has seen a structural shift. No longer can we celebrate the hiring of lakhs of engineering students by large tech firms. The numbers have dwindled due to macro-economic conditions, and with the anticipation that AI can do much of the entry-level grunt work. India, though, still holds promise with 100 new global capability centres setting up shop. However, with 2.5 lakh computer science engineers graduating in India each year, the surface area for new tech jobs is shrinking. Going by the recent Claude AI agent source code leak, the roadmap for the three capabilities Claude has lined up as WIP is interesting – proactive mode, dream mode and autonomous mode, which may bring the Agentic AI closer to non-binary human capabilities.

According to a Goldman Sachs analysis of 40 years of labour market data, workers who lost jobs due to technological changes saw an average 3% drop in real earnings compared to those displaced by stable roles. In the ten years after losing a job, such workers saw earnings growth that was 10 percentage points lower than those who remained employed. Looks scary?

A country that exported close to $300 billion worth of software services last year has been the dream destination for the 8.5 lakh freshly minted engineers each year.

This cohort of engineers has mostly chose the IT sector over others like manufacturing, given the salary levels and the sector's continuous growth over the last three decades. From a time when every neighbourhood kid we knew went onsite, to one where someone close to us is getting laid off, the tech reset is hitting hard. Most jobseekers' CVs are now laced with some AI skill; every leader has to have familiarity with Open Claw and how Claude is simplifying the workflow. It's become tough to differentiate between fluff and reality. All consulting companies are putting out surveys that preach how AI and human beings working together make for a productive workforce.

Suzy Welch's best-selling self-help book *Becoming You* has a take on 'purpose'. She writes that it requires taking action to "go through the fire" of self-discovery and purposefully constructing the bridge between the life you are currently living and the life you want to live. Let's hope that AI brings the best of us for us and makes it a breakthrough of our lifetime, and not a Kodak moment for us.

(Kamal Karanth is co-founder of Xpheno, a specialist staffing firm)

Key Themes and Analysis

1. The "Lump of Labour" Fallacy

The article highlights a classic economic misconception cited by Marc Andreessen:

The Fallacy: The belief that there is a fixed amount of work to be done in an economy. Therefore, if AI does the work faster, humans must work less or lose jobs.

The Reality: Automation and productivity typically create new types of work. However, the short-term reality involves "AI-driven rebalancing," where companies use the buzzword of AI to cover for cost-cutting necessitated by high data center costs and cooling stock markets.

2. The Shift in Indian Engineering Employment

For decades, the Indian IT sector was the "dream destination" for 8.5 lakh engineers annually.

Structural Change: The era of mass hiring (lakhs of students at once) is ending. While Global Capability Centres (GCCs) are still growing, the "surface area" for entry-level "grunt work" is shrinking because AI can handle basic coding and documentation.

The Skill Gap: CVs are now "laced with AI skills," but differentiating between actual capability and "AI-fluff" has become a challenge for recruiters.

3. Economic Impact on Displaced Workers

Citing Goldman Sachs data, the article points out the long-term cost of technological displacement:

Workers displaced by tech changes see a 3% drop in real earnings.

Over 10 years, their earnings growth is 10 percentage points lower than those who remained in stable roles.

Agentic AI: The Next Frontier

The mention of the Claude AI source code leak points to a shift toward Agentic AI:

Proactive Mode: AI that takes initiative without waiting for a prompt.

Autonomous Mode: AI that handles end-to-end tasks.

This moves AI from a "tool" to a "non-binary human-like capability," further threatening entry-level roles in software services.

Critical Analysis

Point of Focus	Detail
Labour Market Rigidity	India's reliance on software exports ($300B) makes its workforce vulnerable to global tech resets.

Point of Focus	Detail
Education vs. Industry	With 2.5 lakh CS engineers graduating yearly, there is an urgent need to shift curriculum toward System Design and AI Orchestration.
The "Kodak Moment" Risk	A warning that workers who fail to adapt might face obsolescence, similar to Kodak's failure to adapt to digital photography.

Conclusion

The "Oracle" of the future suggests that while software engineering is not dying, the mass-hiring, low-skill entry model is. The current layoffs are a mix of corporate "right-sizing" and genuine AI integration. For India, the challenge lies in moving up the value chain—transitioning from being the "back-office of the world" to the "AI-orchestration hub." The breakthrough of AI will only be beneficial if the workforce treats it as a tool for "Agentic productivity" rather than a replacement for human purpose.

UPSC Prelims Exam Practice Question

Ques: The "Lump of Labour Fallacy" refers to:

(a) The belief that labour supply is always surplus in an economy

(b) The assumption that there is a fixed amount of work available in an economy

(c) The idea that automation always reduces productivity

(d) The concept that wages are fixed across sectors

Ans: b)

UPSC Mains Exam Practice Question

Ques: Discuss the 'Lump of Labour' fallacy in the context of the current AI revolution. How should India's engineering education system evolve to mitigate the risks of technological displacement? **(250 Words)**

Why India's established elite is afraid of taking risks

In F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Beautiful and Damned*, Anthony Patch possesses everything except the willingness to act. He has education, social connections, and even reasonable intelligence. What destroys him is not external circumstance but internal paralysis. He spends years waiting for his grandfather's inheritance, and by the time it arrives, he has forgotten how to exercise agency. The money comes, but the man capable of using it meaningfully no longer exists. While this might seem like a distant literary tragedy, versions of it are unfolding across India's business elite today.

Something unusual has been happening in Indian business over the past few years. Well-managed family businesses with healthy cash flows are being sold not because they face distress or strategic dead ends, but because the next generation prefers liquidity over operational continuity. VIP Industries, a leading player in the Indian branded luggage market, is one example.

What makes this pattern strange is that these exits are happening during a period of unprecedented opportunity. India's domestic market is expanding, global supply chains are diversifying, and capital is abundant. Yet many second- and third-generation business families seem to be choosing passive investment avenues, such as running family offices, over the businesses their parents built, even though these generations are better educated and more globally networked than their predecessors. Why are they choosing not to build?

Preservation over creation

Peter Turchin's theory of elite overproduction offers one lens for understanding this. He argues that societies become unstable when they produce more credentialed elite aspirants than the number of elite positions available. The usual result is political instability as the surplus elites challenge the incumbents for power. But India seems to be generating a different outcome. While there is clearly an oversupply of educated, well-connected individuals relative to the number of influential positions, rather than triggering open conflict or displacement, what the country is seeing is a risk retreat among incumbents.

Existing business families are not being forced out. They are choosing custodianship over creation. Capital gets recycled into assets that preserve wealth, rather than create it, such as real estate portfolios, financial market positions, and established brands. Succession planning becomes about maintaining control, and not about expanding the frontier of what the family enterprise does. The result is stasis rather than revolution. India has surplus elite capacity, but that capacity is not being channelled into high-risk, long-gestation ventures. It is being absorbed into wealth preservation.

Kiran Mahasuar

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The inherited elite, the people who control the most capital and have the most institutional access, are opting out of the riskiest, and most transformational kinds of building

The R&D problem

Consider how India's private sector approaches Research and Development (R&D). As a percentage of revenue, Indian companies spend dramatically less on R&D than their counterparts in China, South Korea, or Taiwan. This is not because Indian firms are less profitable or because the regulatory environment makes R&D impossible. The issue seems to be that R&D represents exactly the kind of risk that second-generation business families find unattractive. It requires patient capital; and results are uncertain. Failures are visible and cannot be easily explained to minority shareholders accustomed to steady dividends. The payoff, if it comes, arrives years later and may benefit successors rather than the decision-maker. By contrast, acquiring an existing brand, expanding into real estate, or optimising an inherited manufacturing process offers more legible returns with less reputational exposure. The anomaly becomes clearer when you compare today's business elite with first-generation entrepreneurs. When Dhirubhai Ambani built the Patalganga refinery, he was betting everything on an outcome that was far from certain. The investment could not be quickly reversed, and failure would have been total and public. But that irreversibility was precisely what made the bet transformational. India's pivot to a market-oriented economy is interspersed with many such stories of first-generation entrepreneurs taking risky bets. So, what changed in the last two decades or so?

One hypothesis is that for someone inheriting a successful business, the calculation reverses. Risk is no longer the source of differentiation. It is a threat to something already secured. Moreover, there are more avenues for being a passive investor, such as a venture capitalist or a limited partner. Then, how can India's private sector be incentivised to invest in R&D?

Oswald Spengler made a distinction that feels relevant here, though he was writing about civilisational cycles rather than emerging economies. He argued that societies move from what he called 'culture' to 'civilisation'. Culture is rooted, productive, and comfortable with risk because it is still building foundational institutions. Civilisation is abstract, financial, and focused on administering and extracting value from what already exists. The pattern he describes maps uncomfortably well onto what is happening among India's urban business elite. Increasingly, wealth is held by people who think like portfolio managers rather than operators. Their assets are internationally diversified. Their downside is cushioned by family networks and political connections. They sell, diversify, and preserve. However, the aggregate outcome is a business elite that no longer behaves like it has skin in the game over generational time horizons.

India's dilemma

The problem is not that India lacks entrepreneurs. First-generation founders are still emerging and taking risks. The problem is that the inherited elite, the people who control the most capital and have the most institutional access, are opting out of the riskiest, and most transformational kinds of building. Anthony Patch's tragedy was that his inheritance arrived after he had lost the capacity to use it. India now has an inheritance class that receives wealth and position early enough to use it, but chooses not to, because the social structures that would make risk-taking rational have been replaced by ones that make waiting and selling more attractive.

The question, then, is not whether India has capital. The question is whether the people who control that capital still see themselves as builders of something larger than their own portfolio returns. And if they do not, what does that mean for the kind of economy India becomes over the next several decades?

GS Paper III: **Indian Economy**

UPSC Mains Exam Practice Question: Analyze the reasons behind the low private sector contribution to R&D in India. How does the 'risk-aversion' of established business houses impact India's goal of becoming a global manufacturing hub? **(150 Words)**

Context : In recent years, a paradox has emerged in the Indian corporate landscape: while the country enters a period of high growth and global supply chain shifts, the "Old Guard"—second and third-generation family businesses—is increasingly opting for exits and wealth preservation over expansion. This "risk retreat" among the inherited elite threatens India's long-term industrial competitiveness, especially in capital-intensive and research-heavy sectors.

Key Theoretical Frameworks

1. Elite Overproduction & Risk Retreat

Drawing on Peter Turchin's theory, the article notes that India is producing a surplus of highly educated, globally networked elite aspirants. However, instead of using this "surplus capacity" to challenge frontiers or disrupt markets, the elite are retreating into:

Liquidity: Selling operational businesses to hold cash.

Family Offices: Shifting from being "operators" (running factories) to "investors" (managing stocks/real estate).

Custodianship: Prioritizing the maintenance of existing wealth over the creation of new assets.

2. The Spenglerian Shift: Culture vs. Civilisation

Using Oswald Spengler's definitions, the analysis suggests a civilizational cycle:

Culture (The First Generation): Like Dhirubhai Ambani, this phase is "rooted" and takes irreversible, transformational bets (e.g., the Patalganga refinery).

Civilisation (The Inherited Elite): This phase is "abstract and financial," focused on administering and extracting value from what already exists.

The R&D Crisis in India

The most visible symptom of this risk aversion is India's dismal private sector investment in Research and Development (R&D) compared to peers like South Korea or China.

Factor	First-Generation Founders	Inherited Business Elite
View on Risk	Source of differentiation/growth.	Threat to secured wealth.
Investment Horizon	Long-gestation, patient capital.	Short-term, legible returns.
Primary Vehicle	Greenfield projects/Innovation.	Acquisitions, Real Estate, Financial Markets.
Skin in the Game	High (Failure is public and total).	Low (Diversified international portfolios).

Why the Elite Avoid R&D:

Uncertainty: Results are not guaranteed and failures are visible to minority shareholders.

Delayed Gratification: The payoff often arrives years later, benefiting the next successor rather than the current decision-maker.

Reputational Exposure: High-risk ventures carry a "social cost" of failure that established families are unwilling to pay.

Implications for India's Economy

1. The "Middle-Income Trap" Risk

If the owners of the most capital and institutional access refuse to invest in "long-gestation" transformational projects (like semiconductors or deep-tech), India risks becoming an economy of service-providers and assemblers rather than innovators.

2. Social Stability and Agency

The story of Anthony Patch serves as a metaphor for "internal paralysis." When the inheritance class loses the "capacity to act," the economy loses its primary engine of industrial maturity. While first-generation entrepreneurs (start-up founders) are filling the gap, they often lack the massive capital reserves held by established family houses.

Conclusion

India's dilemma is not a lack of capital, but a lack of "Builder Intent" among those who hold the most of it. The shift toward passive investment (Family Offices and VCs) might protect individual family fortunes, but it stalls the nation's "Blue Revolution" and industrial depth. To become a Viksit Bharat @ 2047, the Indian private sector must move beyond "wealth preservation" and rediscover the appetite for the "irreversible bet."