

EXAM LEAK RESPONSE SHIFTS TO FAST-TRACK COURTS

Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s announcement of fast-track courts for examination paper-leak cases is, technically, a way forward. However, to say it will pacify the protesters, the short answer is no. The Government’s response has arrived 45 days into a sit-in at Jantar Mantar, three days after a “Chalo Sansad” march on Parliament ended in lathi charges, and a day before a nationwide strike called by the Cockroach Janta Party (CJP), the youth outfit leading the agitation. The demand on the street was never primarily about court speed. It was - and remains - the resignation of Education Minister Dharmendra Pradhan.

That mismatch explains why the announcement has, if anything, hardened the stand-off rather than softened it. CJP’s national spokesperson dismissed it as a fix for the wrong fracture. Having said that, fast-track courts are still worth having: certain, swift punishment beats the slow cases that previously allowed leak networks to regroup. They can act as a deterrent and dissuade perpetrators from such adventurism. It may not be a remedy for paper leaks, but it is certainly one of the many steps required to fix the problem.

Parliament’s Monsoon Session, which opened the same day the march was blocked, remains deadlocked over the issue. None of this looks like a movement preparing to stand down - CJP called another round of strikes explicitly to protest the police crackdown, not to welcome the court announcement.

There is also a credibility problem no single X post can fix. This is not India’s first paper-leak reckoning. The 2024 NEET-UG leak produced near-identical protests, an identical resignation demand, a new central law criminalising exam fraud, and a seven-member expert panel under former ISRO chief K. Radhakrishnan that filed roughly sixty recommendations. Two years and one more compromised exam later - the same racket, investigators say, also breached the 2025 paper - the cycle repeated. Fast-track courts prosecute a leak after it happens. They do nothing to stop the next one. That is the more useful question buried under the resignation politics: what actually stops a paper from leaking? The evidence points to an insider problem, not a punishment gap: leaks trace back to the question-setting, printing and transport chain, where coaching-linked intermediaries buy access - not outside hackers.

The Radhakrishnan committee’s central recommendation - which the Supreme Court is now pressing the ministry to implement - was structural: replace the National Testing Agency’s dependence on contractual staff with permanent, professional staffing, and build identity-linked custody records for every hand a paper passes through. Separately, the ministry’s own plan to shift NEET to a computer-based, possibly multi-stage format from 2027 would shrink the payoff of any single leak, but that does not happen overnight. CJP’s demands now include compensation for the families of a dozen-plus students it says have died by suicide since the exam was scrapped and re-run - a grief no courtroom timeline addresses. Pacifying this protest will likely require visible proof that the Government is willing to listen to them and has a plan to fix the problem once and for all.

Nilantha Ilangamuwa

Saudi Arabia and Iran were hardly natural allies during the reign of Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, yet their rivalry remained largely contained within the conventions of statecraft. The Iranian Revolution of 1979 transformed that competition into something altogether different. From that moment onwards, West Asia became the arena for a struggle that extended far beyond borders, armies and diplomacy.

Over the following decades, sectarian identity became increasingly weaponised as political currency. Sunni and Shia communities that had coexisted for centuries across the region found themselves drawn into conflicts manufactured by states pursuing influence rather than reconciliation. Reports that circulated during the opening phase of Donald Trump’s war on Iran suggested that Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, rather than Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, had urged Washington that the moment had come to topple the already weakened government in Tehran. Whatever the extent of Riyadh’s influence over Washington’s decision-making, the broader strategic reality is unmistakable. The region has entered another dangerous phase, while Saudi Arabia finds itself emerging as one of its greatest geopolitical beneficiaries.

For decades, Western governments have presented themselves as guardians of democracy, human rights, freedom of expression and the international rules-based order. Yet these same standards have demonstrated remarkable flexibility whenever Saudi Arabia occupies the centre of the discussion. The murder of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi inside the Saudi Consulate in Istanbul was not merely another human rights violation; it became one of the most thoroughly documented acts of state violence in modern diplomatic history. Yet only a few years later, many of those same governments, businesses and political figures returned to the Kingdom with remarkable enthusiasm, demonstrating how moral language often survives only until sufficiently large strategic or commercial incentives appear.

Amnesty International’s latest report documents widespread abuse of Filipino



domestic workers in Saudi Arabia, alleging excessive working hours, unpaid wages, physical and sexual abuse, and severe restrictions on their freedom under the Kingdom’s labour sponsorship system. The organisation has urged Saudi authorities to strengthen legal protections, dismantle the remaining elements of the kafala system, and ensure accountability for employers accused of exploitation. The historical record surrounding Saudi Arabia’s religious establishment presents another uncomfortable reality. The ideological movement established by Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab emerged not merely as a theological reform movement but as a doctrine that sharply distinguished between those regarded as authentic believers and those deemed to have fallen into unbelief. As David Commins demonstrates in The Wahhabi Mission and Saudi Arabia, the alliance between religious doctrine and the House of Saud became one of the most enduring political partnerships in modern history. GeographicReference

The ideological infrastructure established through schools, charities and universities extended far beyond the Arabian Peninsula, with enormous resources invested in exporting a particular interpretation of Islam that profoundly shaped later generations of radical movements. The seizure of the Grand Mosque in Mecca in November 1979 exposed these contradictions. Yaroslav Trofimov’s The Siege of Mecca presents the uprising as a moment that revealed the internal tensions of Saudi religious and political life. Juhayman al-Otaybi and his followers did not reject

Wahhabi doctrine. They claimed to be restoring it to what they believed was its uncompromised form. Their rebellion emerged from accusations that the Saudi monarchy had abandoned genuine Islamic governance through its alliances with Western powers, growing wealth and accommodation with modernity.

Rather than fundamentally challenging the ideological assumptions that had nourished such radicalism, the monarchy strengthened many elements of the religious establishment in exchange for renewed political legitimacy. The global expansion of conservative religious institutions accelerated during precisely the same period that transnational jihadist movements were beginning to emerge.

The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan transformed this ideological current into an international military enterprise. Backed by the United States, Saudi Arabia and Pakistan during the Cold War, thousands of foreign volunteers, including Osama bin Laden, travelled to Afghanistan under the banner of jihad. Al-Qaeda emerged through a convergence of ideological, geopolitical and military circumstances rather than Saudi religious doctrine alone. Nevertheless, both bin Laden and fifteen of the nineteen perpetrators of the September 11, 2001 attacks were Saudi nationals, while al-Qaeda and the so-called Islamic State developed overwhelmingly within extremist Sunni traditions rather than Shia movements associated with Tehran. This does not absolve Iran of supporting armed proxies, a reality starkly illustrated by Yemen. It does, however, complicate simplistic narratives that portray one source of extremism as the exclusive threat.

Against this historical background, the newly signed civilian nuclear cooperation agreement between the United States and

Saudi Arabia represents far more than an energy partnership. During the Cold War, Washington actively helped establish Iran’s civilian nuclear programme under Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, supplying its first research reactor, highly enriched uranium fuel and technical expertise through the Atoms for Peace initiative. That programme was presented as a peaceful endeavour, yet the infrastructure created with American support later became central to one of the world’s most contentious nuclear disputes.

Reports indicate that the agreement departs from what has long been regarded as the American ‘gold standard’ for nuclear cooperation by not requiring Saudi Arabia permanently to renounce uranium enrichment and spent-fuel reprocessing. Those distinctions matter because civilian nuclear programmes and military nuclear capabilities exist upon a technological continuum. Not every country possessing civilian reactors pursues nuclear weapons, but every nuclear weapons programme requires technological foundations that civilian programmes may eventually provide. The issue is therefore not immediate weaponisation but future strategic options. GeographicReference

Perhaps the most revealing aspect of this agreement lies not within its technical provisions but within the broader political transformation that made it possible. History rarely rewards the most virtuous governments. More often, it rewards those that recognise that power is ultimately negotiated through interests rather than principles. Mohammed bin Salman appears to have understood this better than many of his counterparts. While liberal democracies continue to present themselves as defenders of human rights, democratic accountability and the international rules-based order, their policies towards Riyadh repeatedly demonstrate the exact opposite. Whatever history’s final verdict on his legacy may be, one conclusion is difficult to dispute: Mohammed bin Salman has transformed Saudi Arabia’s geopolitical position with remarkable effectiveness. In a region fractured by war, exhausted by proxy conflicts and increasingly shaped by transactional diplomacy, he has outmanoeuvred many of his rivals and critics alike. For now, he has the last laugh.

THE THINGS WE LEAVE FOR LATER

Deeba Salim Irfan

Few years back, at one of my writing retreats, a participant gave me a story. Books& Literature

“It isn’t very good “she said quickly. “I haven’t written in forty years.”

Forty years. I looked at her. Wondered what had happened in those decades. Not because she hadn’t written, but because she had stopped believing she could write. Life had happened, of course.

Marriage. Kids. School runs. Ageing parents. Deadlines. Responsibilities. The small acts of care that hold families together. As I listened to her, I thought about all the things we give up.

The girl who wanted to write stories.

The young man who dreamed of opening a café.

The woman who wanted to start a business.

The traveller who kept postponing the trip.

We don’t stop wanting these things. We just think there will be time later. Later is a tricky word.

It sounds reassuring. Patient. Responsible.



Years fly past fast. One day you put a dream on hold for a few months. The next twenty years have passed.

Lately I’ve noticed something changing. Friends in their fifties are taking courses they never took in their twenties. A neighbour is learning Arabic. Another started an online business from home. Someone I know started his PhD well into his 60’s because education was unfinished.

These stories won’t make headlines. They move me more than tales of quick success.

Maybe because they’re not about achievement.

They’re about giving yourself permission. Permission to start before you’re ready. Permission to be bad at something. Permission to want more from life even when life has given you much. We live in a

culture that loves youth. Ads and social media content try to convince us that our best years are behind us by forty. That one cannot achieve much after. But, as I grow older, my faith in these claims is shaking. I’ve met women who became more confident with every passing year, well into their late fifties. More than they were in their twenties. I’ve seen people find purpose after retirement. I’ve seen friendships grow, marriages appear from places buried for decades. Advertising& Marketing

Dreams return.

Life is not a road. It’s like a mountain path.

There are bends.

There are pauses.

Sometimes there are stretches where nothing happens. Then unexpectedly the view changes. The participant finished her story. Then she wrote another. Last year she sent me a message to say one of her pieces was published. I was happy for her. What stayed with me was something else she wrote. “I wish I hadn’t waited this long.” I understand what she meant. Maybe there’s another way to look at it. She started. And sometimes, that is the bravest thing a person can do.

AI can reshape environmental governance

Leena Nandan | Suryaprabha Sadasivan

Artificial intelligence is rapidly becoming central to India’s development story. Through the IndiaAI Mission and investments in digital infrastructure, data centres and advanced computing, India has made clear its ambition to become a global AI leader.

Increasingly, the national conversation has moved beyond AI models and computing power to how AI can strengthen institutions, improve productivity and address real-world development challenges. Yet one important area has received relatively little attention: environmental governance.

This deserves greater focus because environmental governance sits at the intersection of economic growth, climate resilience and public welfare. Decisions on water, agriculture, infrastructure, urbanisation and disaster preparedness increasingly shape India’s long-term development

trajectory. As environmental risks become economic risks, the quality of environmental governance will increasingly influence the quality of growth itself.

Much of the public debate on AI has focused on its environmental footprint, particularly the energy and water needed to support computing infrastructure. Those concerns are legitimate and deserve attention. But they capture only one side of the story.

An equally important question is how AI can strengthen governments’ ability to understand and manage the natural systems on which development depends.

Environmental governance has long faced a challenge not of data scarcity but of data integration. India today generates enormous amounts of information on rainfall, rivers, groundwater, weather, land use and ecosystems. The challenge has been bringing these different streams of information together in ways that support timely public decisions. Valuable information exists, but it often remains frag-

mented across institutions and programmes. Today, advances in satellite imagery, geospatial technologies, sensor networks, cloud computing and AI make it possible to analyse multiple environmental datasets simultaneously, identify patterns that would otherwise remain hidden and generate more timely insights for decision-making. This is more than better monitoring. It enables governments to anticipate risks, understand how different systems interact and respond before problems become crises. MachineLearning& Artificial Intelligence Water offers perhaps the clearest illustration. India is home to nearly 18 per cent of the world’s population but has only around 4 per cent of its freshwater resources. Groundwater acts as a critical buffer against monsoon variability, supporting more than 60 per cent of irrigation and around 85 per cent of rural drinking water. As climate variability increases, managing this resource is becoming more complex.

Yet decisions relating to river basins, groundwater, irrigation, urban water supply and disaster management are often informed by separate datasets, institutions and planning processes, even though water does not recognise administrative boundaries.

Integrating satellite imagery from ISRO, hydrological observations under the National Hydrology Project, groundwater assessments by the Central Ground Water Board, weather forecasts, reservoir operations and water quality monitoring into shared decision-support systems would enable policymakers to understand how river basins are evolving and intervene earlier.

Water is only one example. The same approach can strengthen air quality management, improve pollution surveillance, support ecosystem monitoring and help governments respond earlier to emerging environmental risks. Better environmental intelligence is therefore not simply an environmental objective; it in-

creasingly shapes decisions on agriculture, infrastructure, industrial investment, urban planning and disaster resilience. India is not starting from scratch. Platforms such as India-WRIS, the National Hydrology Project and PARIVESH have already demonstrated how digital technologies can strengthen environmental governance. The next step is to connect these capabilities rather than continue developing them in isolation.

There is a useful lesson here from India’s Digital Public Infrastructure. Its success came from creating shared standards and trusted digital systems on which governments, businesses and innovators could build. Environmental governance requires a similar approach. Shared environmental data, common standards and secure data-sharing can help institutions work from a shared understanding of environmental conditions rather than fragmented information.

At its core, governance is about making decisions under condi-

tions of uncertainty. Technology cannot eliminate that uncertainty, but it can reduce it. Management

The real value of AI lies not in replacing human judgement but in helping governments understand emerging risks earlier, see connections more clearly and make better-informed decisions. Data quality, institutional capacity and collaboration across government remain indispensable.

As India builds its AI ecosystem, environmental governance should be recognised as one of its priority public-sector applications. A practical starting point would be AI-enabled pilot projects in selected river basins, integrating hydrological, groundwater, meteorological and geospatial datasets into shared decision-support systems. Building on existing platforms rather than creating new institutions would demonstrate how AI can improve public decision-making and generate lessons for other sectors and states.

India has rightly set itself the

ambition of becoming a global AI leader. But leadership will ultimately be measured by more than the sophistication of models or the scale of computing infrastructure. It will also depend on how effectively AI is applied to solve real public challenges.

India’s first digital revolution transformed public service delivery. Its next has the opportunity to strengthen the quality of public decision-making itself. If AI helps governments better understand and manage water, air and other natural systems with greater foresight, it will not only improve environmental outcomes. It will demonstrate that AI creates its greatest public value when it helps governments govern better. The real value of AI lies not in replacing human judgement but in helping governments understand emerging risks earlier, see connections more clearly and make better-informed decisions. Data quality, institutional capacity and collaboration across government remain indispensable