



An energy crisis in disguise



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A nation, like a person, can go for long periods avoiding what it would prefer not to know about itself. The economy occupies one set of conversations and one set of professionals; the climate occupies another; the inner condition of the citizen, if it is examined at all, belongs to a third domain, often dismissed as private or soft. These separations make ordinary public life manageable. They also make certain kinds of understanding nearly impossible.

Such a moment arrived in India this month. When our Prime Minister appealed to Indians to drive less, take public transport, work from home where possible, delay foreign travel and refrain from buying gold, he made a request that was reasonable, practical and entirely correct. It was also, in a more fundamental sense, an indictment.

The problem runs in two directions. One is ignorance: the ordinary citizen has no idea what petrol consumption costs the country or the climate. The other is more uncomfortable: some of what needs to be known has been encountered and set aside because genuinely absorbing it would require a reckoning with one's own habits, which is harder than ignoring them. The first failure is educational. The second is a failure of intent.

India spent \$134.7 billion on crude oil alone in the financial year ending March 2026. With the Iran war having driven Brent crude above \$109 per barrel, CRISIL has projected the current account deficit to widen to 2.2 per cent of GDP in FY27. India's foreign exchange reserves have declined by \$40 billion since the Iran war began, and the rupee has lost 7 per cent of its value against the dollar in 2026, making it Asia's worst-performing major currency. India is simultaneously the world's second-largest importer of gold, spending a record \$72 billion in FY 2025-26 on what is primarily a consumption and status purchase.

The concentration of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere has risen from 280 parts per million before industrialisation to 430 today, with fossil fuel combustion responsible for 90 per cent of that change. Species are being driven to extinction by fossil fuel combustion at rates climate scientists classify as the sixth mass extinction in Earth's half-billion-year history, the first caused not by an asteroid or volcanic event but by the accumulated choices of one species acting upon unexamined desire. India's own carbon dioxide emissions grew by 4.6 per cent in 2024, the highest rate among major economies.

Rising income explains the capacity to consume. It does not explain the compulsion. These are different things, and conflating them produces recommendations that address the first while leaving the second entirely untouched.

The connection between fuel consumption and the absence of a genuine inner life is not metaphorical. It is a mechanical chain. The human being who believes satisfaction must be sought outward, because he has found no access to genuine sufficiency within, acts upon his emotions and desires without examining what drives them. Every desire acted upon requires energy. Energy, in a civilisation built on fossil fuels, means burning them. The citizen sitting in traffic in his third car is not simply making an economic choice. He is pursuing a fullness he has not found within and does not see what he is doing. The fuel is not the cost of getting somewhere. It is the cost of the attempt.

The dispersed centre, the ego that has no fixed point of sufficiency, has scattered its search across a hundred objects simultaneously. A vehicle here, a gold purchase there, a foreign holiday, an apartment upgrade, a new phone before the old one has worn out, a flight taken not for any destination but for the proof of having gone: none of these objects resolves the insufficiency; each merely displaces it briefly. The centre is not completed by any of them because it is not the absence of objects that has made it incomplete. It is incomplete by definition, constitutively, as the very structure of what it is to be an ego at all. The reaching does not end because the ego finds what it was reaching for. It ends only when the ego honestly sees what the reaching is and what it is not.

A population of people who cannot sit quietly with themselves will consume more than a population that can. This is not a moral judgement. It is a mechanical description of how inner poverty converts into outer demand. In the aggregate of 1.4 billion people, the inner condition of each person adds up to a macroeconomic profile and a carbon footprint. These are not separate domains. They are the same domain described in different units.

The citizen who cannot examine what actually drives his consumption cannot restrain it because he does not know what he would be restraining. He does not see that what he calls aspiration is the ego's perpetual dissatisfaction wearing the costume of legitimate ambition.

This is the second and more serious failure the appeal reveals: not merely the failure of information, but the failure of a society to honestly recognise what it has encountered and quietly set aside. People have encountered the information and chosen not to be changed by it because being changed by it would cost something. That cost is the only cost that actually matters. It is also the only one that a government appeal cannot assess or collect on anyone's behalf.

What the appeal could not say, because public discourse has not yet developed the vocabulary, is that the petrol problem and the gold problem and the current account problem and the carbon dioxide problem are not four separate failures but one: a vast population of egos running a structural deficit, reaching outward for what can only be found, if it can be found at all, in the other direction.

An economy that rests on this kind of demand carries a fragility that no foreign exchange reserve can fully buffer, no interest rate can adequately hedge and no government appeal, however sincere and urgent, can structurally address. The appeal was necessary. In a nation genuinely awake to itself, it would not have been. That gap is the real measure of the distance India has to travel, not in kilometres of pipeline or gigawatts of renewable capacity, but in the quality of what the citizen knows about himself and what no policy instrument, however well designed, can provide in his place.



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