

HEALTHCARE RESET FOR J&K

Jammu & Kashmir's healthcare landscape presents both progress and persistent challenges. While new hospitals and health centres have been established over the years, the urgent priority now is to strengthen existing facilities in line with the Indian Public Health Standards (IPHS)-2022 norms. Given the Union Territory's difficult terrain, scattered population, and harsh winters, ensuring that current institutions function optimally is more practical and impactful than focusing solely on expansion.

IPHS-2022 provides clear benchmarks for infrastructure, staffing, equipment, diagnostics, and service delivery across Sub-Centres, Health and Wellness Centres (HWCs), Primary Health Centres (PHCs), Community Health Centres (CHCs), and District Hospitals.

In many districts such as Doda, Kishtwar, Rajouri, Poonch, and Kupwara, healthcare centres struggle with shortages of specialists, lab technicians, and essential support staff. Filling these vacancies must be a top priority. Incentives for doctors and specialists to serve in remote and border areas can help address chronic manpower shortages.

Infrastructure gaps also demand attention. Reliable electricity, water supply, sanitation, and fully functional operation theatres are basic requirements under IPHS norms.

In snow-bound and far-flung areas, winter preparedness is crucial. Creating buffer stocks of medicines, ensuring proper maintenance of medical equipment, and strengthening ambulance networks can prevent service disruptions during adverse weather.

Diagnostic services remain another weak link. Many patients are compelled to travel long distances to Jammu or Srinagar for advanced tests.

Upgrading district and sub-district hospitals with modern laboratory facilities, digital X-ray, and imaging services will reduce unnecessary referrals and ease the financial burden on families.

Digital health solutions offer additional promise. Telemedicine services can connect remote PHCs and CHCs with specialists in tertiary hospitals, ensuring timely consultations and reducing travel hardships.

Ultimately, healthcare reform in Jammu & Kashmir must prioritize functionality over formality. Aligning existing institutions with IPHS-2022 standards will not only enhance service quality but also restore public confidence.

A resilient healthcare system will emerge when every health centre, regardless of location, delivers reliable and dignified care to the people it serves.

From Grants to Growth: The Silent Revolution in J&K's Economy

ANKIT PATEL

For decades, the economic story of Jammu and Kashmir was one of what ifs. Isolated by geography and tethered to a fragmented, tax-on-tax system, the region's potential remained locked behind red tape and fiscal opacity. Historically, the treasury relied heavily on central lifelines to cover basic costs like salaries and pensions, leaving little room for the bold investments a mountain economy truly needs. That narrative began to shift in July 2017. With the stroke of a pen and a unique constitutional transition, J&K joined the Goods and Services Tax (GST) regime. It wasn't just a policy change; it was a dismantling of the old walls. Between 2022 and 2026, J&K has proven that fiscal formalization is the ultimate catalyst for human development. By trading an opaque past for a digital, unified future, the region is no longer just "managing" its finances, it is investing in its people. Poverty alleviation and socioeconomic stability are no longer just slogans; they are the direct outcomes of a tax system that finally works for the taxpayer.

For decades, Jammu and Kashmir's fiscal heart beat faintly, weakened by an invisible "leakage" where taxes often stayed in the industrial hubs where goods were manufactured, rather than in the mountain markets where they were actually bought. This narrative shifted dramatically between 2022 and 2025, as the Union Territory's treasury transformed into a robust reservoir of growth, amassing a staggering Rs 39,875.92 crore in total GST resources. This wasn't merely a statistical jump; it was the triumph of a destination-based system that finally allowed J&K to capture the true value of its own consumption, pulling in over Rs

15,795 crore in IGST settlements from the central pool. As the shadow economy stepped out of the darkness and into the digital light of formalization, local collections climbed steadily from Rs 7,272 crore to over Rs 8,680 crore annually, proving that by dismantling the fragmented taxes of the past, the region has secured the high-octane fuel necessary to pave its own roads and build its own future.

For years, Jammu and Kashmir risked becoming an "economic island." Researchers once warned that if the region didn't join the national tax grid, local markets would drown in double taxation, making everything from salt to steel more expensive than in the rest of India. But the shift to GST changed the math for the average trader. According to studies by the Institute of Chartered Accountants of India, removing old, hidden "taxes-on-taxes" gave local businesses an immediate win: a saving of about Rs 2.21 for every Rs 100 in sales. This wasn't just a corporate bonus; it made J&K's products more competitive across state lines. While the change was a jump into the deep end for small shopkeepers, tools like the "Composition Scheme" and local help centers acted as life jackets.

Vulnerabilities and Fiscal Volatility:

In April 2025, Jammu and Kashmir's economy was breathing easy. Markets were bustling, and GST collections hit a record peak of Rs 789 crore. But in a consumption-based economy, the ledger is only as steady as the streets. A tragic security incident in Pahalgam that month sent a chill through the region's economic spine, followed quickly by monsoon flash floods that washed away crops and paralyzed mountain roads. The impact was immediate and visible:

By May, tax collections had plummeted by nearly half to Rs 422 crore. It was a "perfect storm" where geopolitical tension met natural disaster. To make matters worse, a massive backlog in government payments to local contractors sucked the liquidity out of the private sector, leaving construction sites silent and laborers without wages. Yet, the story of 2025-26 isn't one of collapse, but of a hard-earned comeback. By January 2026, the silence began to break. As the national economy surged, J&K's tax engines flickered back to life, recording a modest but symbolic 1% growth. This period served as a stark reminder: in J&K, fiscal health isn't just about digital filings or tax rates-it is inextricably tied to the peace on the ground and the money in the pockets of its people. The recovery of early 2026 proves that while the valley's economy is sensitive to shocks, its new formal structure is resilient enough to weather the storm.

Heritage Economy: Handicrafts, Handlooms, and Art

In the quiet workshops of Kanihama, a single Kani shawl can take months of meticulous labor. For years, these masterpieces and the 3.5 lakh artisans behind them struggled against high taxes that made authentic, handmade crafts more expensive than cheap, machine-made fakes. But by slashing the GST on heritage handlooms from 12% to 5%, the government did more than just change a tax bracket; it saved a culture. Today, with nearly half of these artisans being women, this lower tax is a direct investment in their financial independence. This fiscal relief stretches far beyond the loom. In the orchards of North and South Kashmir, which produce 91% of India's almonds, the drop in packaging and processing taxes to 5%

has finally allowed local produce to compete with global giants from California and Iran. From the walnut groves of Kupwara to the dairy farms of Udhampur producing the famous Kaladi cheese, farmers are seeing higher profits and wider markets. By removing the "tax-on-tax" hurdles, the region's agricultural soul is finally getting its fair share of the global pie.

Translating Fiscal Buoyancy into Public Welfare and Human Capital

The real test of any tax system isn't found in a spreadsheet, but in the lives it changes. In Jammu and Kashmir, GST has evolved from a complex policy into a powerful engine for social good. By contributing a massive Rs 14,000 crore to the local budget, GST has allowed the region to stop waiting for central grants and start building its own future. For years, the professional dream for many in Jammu and Kashmir was a secure government desk job. But a quiet shift is happening in the valleys and markets: the youth are no longer just looking for jobs, they are creating them. Through "Mission YUVA," the region is de-risking the leap into business. In the past, starting a "Nano Enterprise" was a terrifying gamble. Today, a young entrepreneur can get a loan for 90% of their project cost without pledging their family home as collateral. With the government stepping in to pay nearly a third of the startup costs, over 40,000 new small businesses have sprouted, putting 1.16 lakh people to work. These aren't just local shops; they are connected to the rest of India through apps that let a weaver in a remote village sell directly to a customer in Mumbai. But the real game-changer is the arrival of big industry. For decades, major corporations stayed away, scared off by complex land laws and the "tax

nightmare" of moving goods across state borders. The unified GST framework fixed that, turning J&K into a competitive manufacturing hub. The result? Over 380 new industrial units have already started production, pumping Rs 9,000 crore into the local economy and creating 52,000 formal, high-paying jobs.

Conclusion: Toward Sustainable Fiscal Autonomy and Inclusive Prosperity

The story of Jammu and Kashmir's economy used to be one of waiting-for grants, waiting for aid, and waiting for a future that always seemed just out of reach. Today, that narrative has flipped. By pooling nearly Rs 40,000 crore in GST resources in just three years, J&K has stopped being a passenger and started being the driver of its own destiny. The year 2025 provided a sobering stress test. When a security incident in Pahalgam and sudden flash floods threatened to derail the economy, the new fiscal system didn't crumble. Instead, it acted as a shield. By keeping taxes low for the local weaver and the walnut farmer, the government ensured that even in hard times, the region's cultural and agricultural heart kept beating.

Ultimately, GST in Jammu and Kashmir has become more than just a tax reform; it is the bridge between a mountain economy and the global market. It has proven that when a region formalizes its trade and secures its own revenue, it doesn't just grow, it becomes sovereign, equitable, and resilient. The ledger is finally balanced, and for the first time in its post-independence history, Jammu and Kashmir is building a future paid for by its own progress.

(The writer is a student of Indian Institute of Mass Communication, Jammu)

Ramadan - A Journey of Faith and Forgiveness

DR. VINOD CHANDRASHEKHAR DIXIT

Ramadan is the ninth and holiest month of the Islamic calendar, marked by 29-30 days of dawn-to-sunset fasting (sawm), daily prayers, and reflection. In 2026, it is observed with communal iftar meals, charity, and special nightly Tarawih prayers, culminating in the joyous Eid al-Fitr celebration. Ramadan brings with it a spirit of unity, with many communities hosting interfaith iftars, promoting solidarity across different backgrounds. It's a time for increased prayer, charity, and kindness, aiming to strengthen their connection with Allah and cultivate compassion and forgiveness.

The observance of Ramadan is very personal and individual and is a time for "sacrifice and renunciation as well as a period of reflection and spiritual growth. Ramadan is the ninth month in the Muslim lunar calendar. Healthy adult Muslims fast in Ramadan from dawn until dusk. This includes abstaining from drinking, eating, immoral acts and anger. Other acts of worship such as prayer, reading the Quran and charity are also encouraged during the holy month. According to the teachings in Islam, Ramadan holds greater importance as it is the first time when Allah SWT (God) revealed the Quran (Holy book of Muslims) to Prophet Muhammad PBUH. The fasting during this month is considered as one of the five pillars of Islam. There is also a verse in the Quran that prescribes fasting for all Muslims who are mature and healthy enough to do so for the full day. Each pillar denotes an obligation of living a good Muslim life. The others include reciting the Muslim profession of faith, daily prayer, giving alms to the poor and making a pilgrimage to Mecca. Ramadan is celebrated with a three-day festival known as Eid al-Fitr, one of Islam's major holidays. It is said that the month of Ramadan is that in which was revealed the Quran, a guidance for the people and clear proofs of guidance and criterion." It is an anniversary of the Book of guidance, which transformed the illiterate Arabs into the most cultured and civilised people within a short period - the shortest in human history.

Muslims go to work and school and take care of

their usual activities during Ramadan; however, some also read the entire Quran, say special prayers and attend mosques more frequently during this time. Muslims fast as an act of worship, a chance to get closer to God, and a way to become more compassionate to those in need. Ramadan, one of the months in the Islamic calendar, was also part of ancient Arabs' calendars. The naming of Ramadan stems from the Arabic root "ar-ramad," which means scorching heat. Muslims believe that in A.D. 610, the angel Gabriel appeared to Prophet Muhammad and revealed to him the Quran, the Islamic holy book. That revelation, Laylat Al Qadar-or the "Night of Power"-is believed to have occurred during Ramadan. The Quran deals with practically every subject related to human life and all branches of knowledge. Teaching someone is considered as an "ongoing charity" - such a person gets rewarded continuously even after his death.

Different cultures have different traditions during Ramadan, whether it is a special food they must cook, or eating iftar with the extended family; Islamic tenets such as generosity inspired most of these traditions, including sharing food and inviting guests over for iftar. During Ramadan, Muslims aim to grow spiritually and build stronger relationships with Allah. They do this by praying and reciting the Quran, making their actions intentional and selfless, and abstaining from gossiping, lying, and fighting. The month of Ramadan is also a month of forgiving. Allah SWT is the most forgiving to all his believers. Most Muslims would make use of this holy month to pray for forgiveness for the sins, intentional or unintentional, they've committed in the past year. Marking the end of Ramadan, Muslims worldwide bid farewell to a month of spiritual growth, self-reflection, and community. The lessons of compassion, forgiveness, and self-discipline learned during this sacred period stay with them, inspiring a renewed commitment to their faith and values.

As Ramadan comes to a close, its spirit lives on, guiding Muslims to spread kindness, empathy, and peace throughout the year.

Handshake or Hammer? In the Era of Trump's Tariffs, Macron 'Jogs' a Different Diplomacy!

TUSHI DEB

When French President Emmanuel Macron chose to lace up his running shoes and jog along Marine Drive before making a symbolic stop at Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Terminus, it was more than an Instagram moment. It was a message - crafted, calibrated, and broadcast with the precision of modern statecraft. Diplomacy today is no longer confined to chandeliers and communiqés. It is theatre. And Macron understands theatre.

For decades, visiting dignitaries to India followed a predictable choreography: Raj Ghat solemnity, Hyderabad House handshakes, banquet platitudes. The real negotiations were cloistered away, shielded from public gaze. But geopolitics in the age of digital immediacy demands something more kinetic. Optics are no longer ornamental - they are strategic.

Macron's jog was not merely fitness enthusiasm. It was symbolism. France is positioning itself as India's most dependable European partner - unencumbered by the moral sermonising that sometimes characterises parts of the European Union. The Rafale partnership, Indo-Pacific convergence, and civil nuclear cooperation are not episodic alignments but structural ones.

By stepping into Mumbai's public spaces, Macron signalled comfort with India's rise. There was no trace of the old European hauteur; no guarded aloofness. Instead, there was informality - and informality in diplomacy often signals confidence.

Yet we must not be naïve. Optics are never accidental. The message was directed as much at Beijing and Washington as it was at New Delhi. France seeks to be the agile middle power in a polarising world - a nation that can speak to the West without antagonising the Global South.

The deeper question, however, is whether India reciprocates such symbolism with strategic clarity. Partnerships are not built on jogging tracks; they are built on converging interests. France has consistently backed India on defence technology transfers and maritime cooperation. It has avoided the intrusive conditionalities that others sometimes smuggle into bilateral ties.

If Macron's morning run was modern diplomacy, India is responding to it with modern realism.

In an era where geopolitics is performed before it is printed, leaders who understand the grammar of imagery will dominate the narrative. Macron clearly does. The jog at Marine Drive was not casual; it was choreography - the choreography of a Europe that wishes to stay relevant in Asia's century. Macron's jog along Marine Drive, sans a bevy of entourage, was diplomacy dressed as informality. When Donald Trump



raises tariffs or threatens economic retaliation, it is diplomacy stripped of pleasantries. Both, however, belong to the same age - the age of muscular, image-conscious geopolitics.

We are witnessing a profound mutation in statecraft. For decades after the Cold War, globalisation created the illusion that trade would tame power politics. Institutions such as the World Trade Organization were meant to civilise economic competition. Tariffs were passé. Supply chains were sacred. Diplomacy was technocratic.

Trump detonated that orthodoxy. His tariff wars - particularly against China and, intermittently, even allies - marked the return of economic nationalism as a central instrument of foreign policy. Trade ceased to be commerce alone; it became coercion. Steel, semiconductors, and rare earths were no longer mere commodities but strategic levers. Modern geopolitics is no longer fought merely with aircraft carriers; it is waged with customs duties, export controls, and technology bans.

Considering the broader arc, Trump's instinct has consistently been transactional. Alliances are weighed against balance sheets. Military commitments are scrutinised through the prism of cost-sharing. Trade deficits are framed as moral failures. The message is blunt: power must pay for itself.

This is not classical diplomacy; it is corporate geopolitics. In this environment, acquisition moves - whether in the form of securing supply chains, reshoring industries, or attempting to corner strategic technologies - become acts of national assertion. Economic sovereignty replaces multilateral romanticism.

Contrast this with Macron's per-

formative outreach. France seeks relevance through engagement and symbolism. Trump's America sought leverage through disruption. Yet both operate within the same structural reality: the erosion of the old liberal order.

India stands at the crossroads of this transformation. New Delhi has carefully navigated between American economic assertiveness and European strategic outreach. It has absorbed supply-chain realignments while safeguarding its own industrial priorities through calibrated protectionism. In many ways, India's policy of "Atmanirbhar Bharat" mirrors the same global shift - sovereignty first, integration second.

The age of polite multilateralism is fading. In its place is the emergence of competitive interdependence. Trump's tariff offensives were not aberrations; they were symptoms. Macron's public diplomacy is not mere charm; it is adaptation. Both reflect a world where perception, power, and economics are fused.

Modern diplomacy is therefore dual track. One track performs - jogging on promenades, invoking civilisational partnerships, and shaping narratives. The other coerces - imposing tariffs, restricting technology flows, and redrawing supply chains.

The 21st century will belong to nations that master both. When Donald Trump weaponised tariffs, he announced the return of unapologetic economic nationalism. Steel duties, trade offensives against China, and pressure on allies conveyed an unmistakable message: power must be asserted, deficits must be punished, and alliances must justify themselves in hard numbers. The era of polite multilateralism was over; the hammer had

returned to global commerce.

In this recalibrated order, diplomacy began to resemble a boardroom negotiation. Commitments were transactional. Partnerships were audited. Geopolitics acquired the tone of a quarterly earnings call. And yet, in the same century, another script has begun unfolding.

When Emmanuel Macron jogged along Marine Drive, he was not renegotiating tariffs or issuing ultimatums; he was performing a subtler act of statecraft - signalling comfort, familiarity, and respect. France's outreach to India has been marked less by coercion and more by convergence.

If Trump's method was disruption, Macron's is calibration. This divergence reflects a deeper transformation in modern geopolitics. India, navigating this shifting terrain, has absorbed lessons from both schools. Strategic autonomy has become doctrine. Partnerships are pursued without surrendering leverage. Protectionism is calibrated, not ideological.

The choice between handshake and hammer is therefore not binary; it is contextual. There are moments that demand assertion and others that reward reassurance. Macron's jog was not naïveté. It was a narrative. It suggested that in a world fatigued by confrontation, influence may sometimes be earned not by raising barriers but by lowering distances. If Trump's tariffs symbolised the hard edge of sovereignty, Macron's stride along the Arabian Sea hinted at diplomacy's enduring human dimension. In an age defined by economic warfare, perhaps the greater power lies not merely in the hammer that compels - but in the handshake that endures.

(The columnist is a noted writer, senior journalist)

YOUR COLUMN

Urgent need to remove illegal encroachments

Dear Editor,

Through the columns of your esteemed newspaper, we wish to draw the attention of the authorities to the alarming encroachment along the road stretch from Bhagat Singh Chowk in Bakshi Nagar to Mahesh Pura Chowk near Government Medical College Jammu.

This entire stretch has been overtaken by unauthorized commercial establishments, including shops, private clinics, diagnostic labs, auto showrooms, and street food vendors. Most of these businesses lack mandatory building permissions, trade licenses, health clearances, and other approvals from the Jammu Municipal Corporation (JMC) and concerned departments. Additionally, the absence of designated parking spaces has drastically reduced the effective road width.

The unchecked encroachment has led to severe daily traffic congestion, especially during peak hours. Students, office-goers, patients visiting hospitals, and local residents face immense inconvenience. Traffic snarls, haphazard parking, and pedestrian obstructions not only waste valuable time but also increase accident risks and pollution levels.

Despite occasional anti-encroachment drives, the problem persists, raising serious concerns about enforcement effectiveness. There is a growing perception that inaction or possible collusion by certain officials has emboldened violators.

We urge the Commissioner, JMC; the Senior Superintendent of Police (Traffic) Jammu; and the Deputy Commissioner Jammu to conduct a joint inspection, launch a sustained removal drive, take strict legal action against violators and negligent officials, and ensure continuous monitoring to prevent re-encroachment.

Timely intervention is essential to restore public space, improve traffic flow, and uphold the rule of law.

Sanjeev Gupta, on behalf of residents of Bhagat Singh Chowk Bakshi Nagar