



Airlines cancel 350 flights; all services to 11 nations suspended

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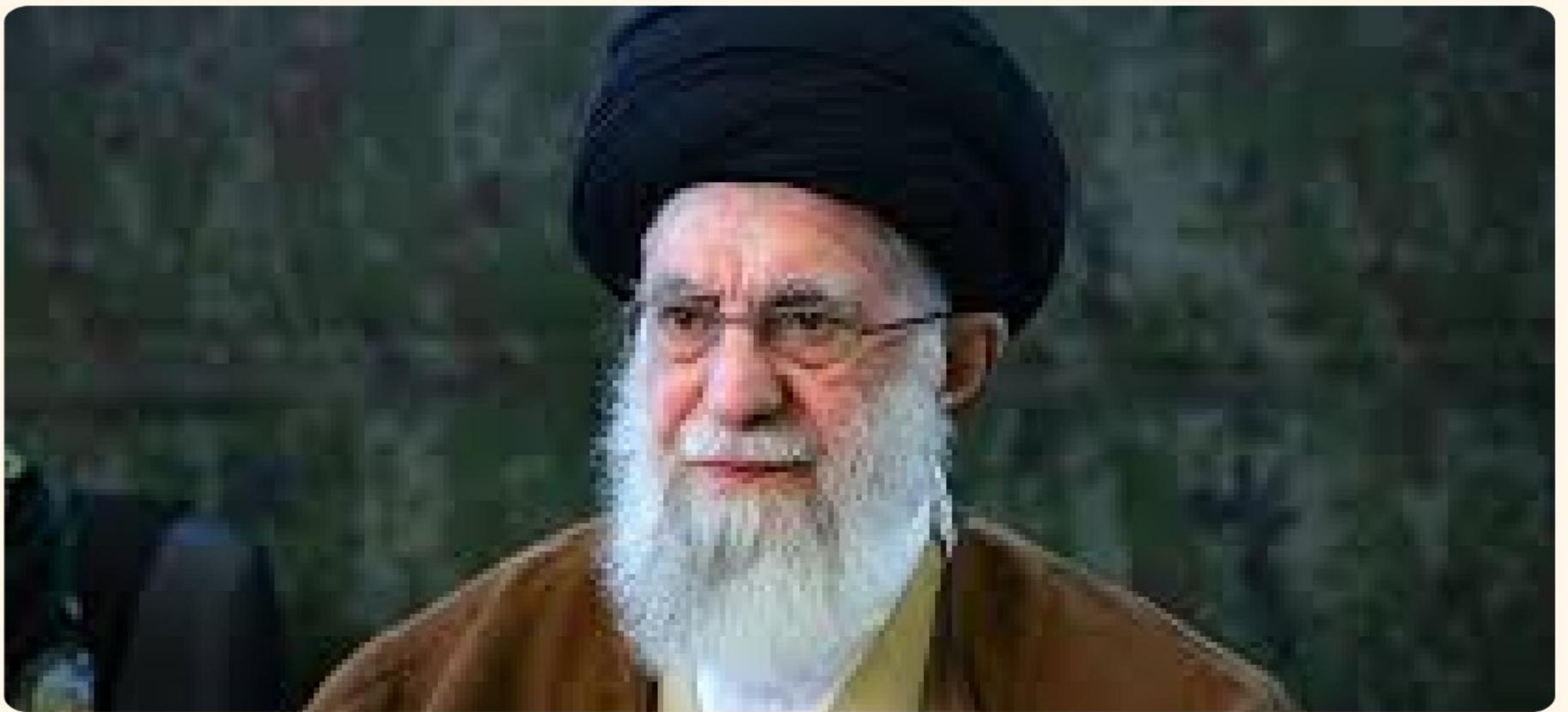


GSI to pursue 300 critical mineral exploration projects next year

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War widens: US and Israel strike Iran which hits nations across Middle East



28-02-2026 - U.S., Israel launch strikes on Iran

The United States and Israel launched major strikes on Iran, targeting sites in Tehran, including areas near Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei's offices. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu suggested Khamenei may no longer be in power, though his death was not confirmed. Iran's Defence Minister Amir Nasirzadeh and Revolutionary Guards commander Mohammed Pakpour were reportedly killed. U.S. President Donald Trump urged Iranians to rise against their leadership. Iran retaliated with missiles and drones targeting Israel and U.S. bases in Bahrain, Kuwait and Qatar, and signalled closure of the Strait of Hormuz. Over 200 people were reported killed.

01-03-2026 - Iran hits Israel, U.S. bases after killing of Khamenei

Iran vowed revenge following the killing of Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei in U.S. and Israeli strikes, escalating the widening conflict. President Donald Trump warned that any retaliation would trigger further escalation but indicated willingness to hold talks. Fresh explosions struck Tehran, including areas near government buildings and state television. Iran reported over 200 deaths since the bombardment began. In response, Iran launched missiles at targets in Israel and Gulf states, while Israel pledged continuous strikes on Iranian leadership. In Israel, missile impacts killed 11 people, and the U.S. confirmed three service members were killed.



West Asian airspace closed; Indian airlines cancel flights

The escalation of the Iran–Israel–U.S. conflict from February 28, 2026, triggered immediate disruption in West Asian airspace. Following U.S. and Israeli strikes on Iran and subsequent Iranian retaliation, Iran and Israel shut their airspace, with several neighbouring countries — including Bahrain, Qatar, the UAE, Iraq and Oman — quickly imposing restrictions. This created a vast no-fly corridor across a critical global aviation zone. India's Directorate General of Civil Aviation (DGCA) issued an urgent advisory directing airlines to avoid 11 West Asian countries. Indian carriers, including Air India Group, IndiGo and Air India Express, suspended or cancelled services to the region, while some international flights were rerouted mid-air. Major transit hubs such as Dubai and Doha were shut, leaving thousands stranded.

By March 1, the disruption had widened beyond the immediate conflict zone, reflecting deeper instability. Nearly 350 Indian flights were cancelled, and Air India suspended additional long-haul services to Europe, North America and other destinations due to rerouting constraints and operational uncertainty. What began as a regional precautionary airspace closure evolved into a broader international aviation crisis, affecting intercontinental connectivity, increasing operational costs and straining passenger management systems.

PM launches Micron ATMP plant in Gujarat

Prime Minister Narendra Modi inaugurated Micron Technology's new semiconductor Assembly, Test, Marking and Packaging (ATMP) facility in *Sanand, Gujarat*. This plant does not manufacture semiconductor chips from scratch; instead, it packages and tests chips that are produced elsewhere before they are sent to the market. The facility will handle advanced memory chips such as Dynamic Random Access Memory (DRAM) and NAND, which are used in data centres, artificial intelligence systems, mobile phones and high-performance computing devices. Micron expects to package tens of millions of chips this year and scale up production significantly next year.

The project has received strong government backing, with *50% capital support from the Union government under the India Semiconductor Mission* and an additional *20% support from the Gujarat government*. This marks an important step in India's efforts to build a domestic semiconductor ecosystem, reduce dependence on imports and position itself as a key player in the global electronics supply chain.



Chronicles of a war foretold

(This article traces the turning points that have shaped the present conflict between Iran, the United States and Israel.)

In the late 1970s, Iran and Israel maintained close but secret strategic ties under Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi. Iran signed multiple “oil-for-arms” agreements with Israel, including the covert “Project Flower,” under which Israel agreed to modify and supply advanced surface-to-surface missiles to Iran. The two sides planned military co-production, with Israel providing technology and Iran offering finances and testing facilities. At that time, Iran was a key pillar of the U.S.–Israel regional security framework.

The 1979 Islamic Revolution radically altered this alignment. After Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini overthrew the Shah and established an Islamic Republic, Iran adopted an openly anti-U.S. and anti-Israel posture. The U.S. Embassy hostage crisis symbolised this shift, and Iran declared opposition to Israel central to its ideology. From being an informal partner of Israel, Iran became its principal regional adversary. Decades later, this hostility has escalated into direct confrontation in 2026, with Israel and the U.S. launching airstrikes inside Iran and Tehran retaliating against Israeli and American targets, marking a full-blown war between former covert partners turned enemies.

The turning point came after the October 7, 2023 Hamas attack on Israel. While Israel declared its immediate aim was to destroy Hamas, it increasingly framed Iran as the principal threat. Israel sought to weaken Iran’s regional “axis,” including Hezbollah and allied groups, and reshape West Asia’s power balance in its favour. By 2024–26, shifting regional dynamics — including Syria’s instability and Iran’s internal unrest — increased Tehran’s vulnerability. Despite indirect nuclear negotiations and signals of compromise, Israel launched direct strikes on Iran in June, shortly before another round of talks, with the U.S. joining soon after. Following 12 days of fighting, a ceasefire was declared, but core disputes remained unresolved. Israel demands Iran’s comprehensive disarmament and an end to its regional activism, while Iran views the confrontation as a struggle for regime survival.



The core dispute between Iran and the U.S. has long centred on Iran’s nuclear programme. Tehran built an extensive nuclear infrastructure but insisted it was for peaceful purposes, while Washington imposed severe sanctions fearing weaponisation. In 2015, under President Barack Obama, the U.S., Iran and other world powers signed the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), which limited Iran’s nuclear activities in exchange for sanctions relief. The deal was widely welcomed but strongly opposed by Israel. In 2018, President Donald Trump withdrew the U.S. from the agreement despite UN verification that Iran was complying, calling it the “worst deal” in U.S. history. Sanctions were reimposed, Iran resumed higher uranium enrichment, and Israel intensified covert operations inside Iran. The 2020 U.S. assassination of General Qassem Soleimani marked a major escalation, though both sides avoided full-scale war.

West Asia's Shifting Power Balance and the Roots of Present Unrest

The confrontation between Iran, Israel and the U.S. cannot be understood in isolation. It is embedded in a wider regional struggle for power across West Asia. A clear way to understand how West Asian countries take sides in the Iran–U.S. confrontation is to see it not as a simple binary divide, but as a layered regional power struggle shaped by ideology, security concerns, and regime survival.

After the 1979 Islamic Revolution, Iran repositioned itself as a revolutionary power opposing both the U.S. and Israel. While several Arab states were gradually moving away from direct confrontation with Israel — beginning with Egypt's recognition of Israel in 1978–79 — Iran adopted the Palestinian cause as a central pillar of its foreign policy. Over time, Tehran built what it calls a “forward defence” strategy by supporting non-state actors such as Hezbollah in Lebanon and later backing Hamas and Islamic Jihad. This network extended Iranian influence across Iraq, Syria and Lebanon, forming what analysts often call a “Shia crescent.” For Iran, this structure serves as strategic depth against U.S. and Israeli pressure. For Israel and many Gulf Arab monarchies, however, it represents destabilising expansionism.

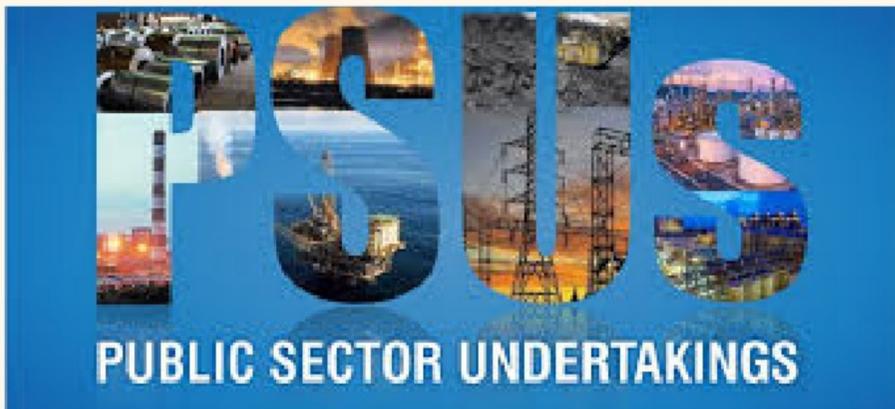
Despite signals that a deal limiting Iran's nuclear programme was within reach, Israel and the U.S. launched coordinated strikes on Iranian leadership and strategic sites, calling it a pre-emptive move. Iranian authorities report that more than 200 people have been killed since the start of the U.S. and Israeli strikes that killed Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and other senior leaders. In response, Iran vowed revenge and exchanged strikes with Israel in an expanding conflict triggered by earlier bombardments. President Trump warned that further retaliation would only lead to escalation, even as he signalled a willingness to hold talks with what remains of Iran's leadership. This mix of intensifying military engagement and tentative diplomacy leaves the conflict at a crossroads: it could spiral into a prolonged regional war or shift toward negotiations shaped by heavy pressure and mutual mistrust. Iran retaliated with missile attacks, framing the confrontation as a fight for regime survival amid efforts to reshape West Asia's balance of power.

Iran's expanding influence in Iraq, Syria and Lebanon altered the regional balance of power and generated concern among Sunni-majority states and Western partners. The 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq unintentionally strengthened Iran's position by empowering Shia political forces in Baghdad, deepening Gulf anxieties. Similarly, Iran's decisive intervention in Syria — alongside Hezbollah and Russia — to preserve the Assad regime reinforced perceptions that Tehran was reshaping the regional balance of power. Given the repeated cycles of escalation and temporary tactical convergence, the region appears locked in a fragile balance shaped by rivalry, proxy competition and periodic negotiation.

Protests in Iran in 2026

In January 2026, economic protests erupted in Iran, prompting U.S. President Trump to voice support for demonstrators as Tehran accused foreign actors of interference. The unrest was violently suppressed, but tensions escalated as Washington increased its military presence in the region even while nuclear talks continued through mediators like Oman.

Centre's focus shifts from selling PSUs to earning more from them



Despite announcing an ambitious disinvestment policy in 2020, the Union government's approach has gradually shifted from outright privatisation to maximising returns from existing public assets. Under the 2021 Public Sector Enterprises Policy, the Centre had stated that it would exit non-strategic sectors and retain only a limited presence in strategic ones. However, disinvestment revenues have declined in recent years, except for a temporary rise in 2022–23 when stakes in companies such as ONGC, LIC and GAIL were sold. Officials cited *low private sector interest, high employee costs and stressed assets* as major hurdles. Reflecting this shift, the government removed a separate disinvestment target from Budget documents and instead clubbed it under “Miscellaneous Capital Receipts.”

At the same time, the government has focused on extracting higher dividends from Central Public Sector Enterprises (CPSEs) and monetising assets without transferring ownership. *Dividend receipts have nearly doubled since 2020–21*, supported by revised guidelines encouraging higher payouts and improved efficiency. The National Monetisation Pipeline (NMP), launched in 2021 to lease brownfield assets to private players, reportedly achieved about 90% of its ₹6 lakh crore target. In 2025, NMP 2.0 was introduced with a larger goal of ₹16.72 lakh crore over five years. Together, these measures indicate a strategic shift from “selling” public assets to “leveraging” them for sustained revenue generation.

GSI to pursue 300 critical mineral exploration projects next year

The Geological Survey of India (GSI) plans to significantly expand its exploration of critical minerals in the upcoming field season. According to Director General Asit Saha, *the number of exploration projects will increase from 236 this season to about 300 next season, with nearly 125–150 focused on rare earth elements*. This move supports the National Critical Minerals Mission (NCMM), which targets 1,200 exploration projects by 2030–31. Between 2020–21 and 2025–26, GSI has already completed 858 projects, indicating strong progress toward the goal. In addition, around 50–60 separate copper exploration projects are planned for 2026–27.

Beyond exploration, the GSI emphasises the importance of developing midstream processing capabilities to convert ores into usable industrial materials. Rare earth deposits have been identified not only in beach sands but also inland rock formations in regions such as Assam, Gujarat (Ambadongar) and Rajasthan (Sivana). On lithium and nickel mining, officials noted that these require a different strategic approach, especially given limited commercial interest in some discovered reserves. The GSI is also exploring opportunities abroad, including assessing a copper site in Zambia.



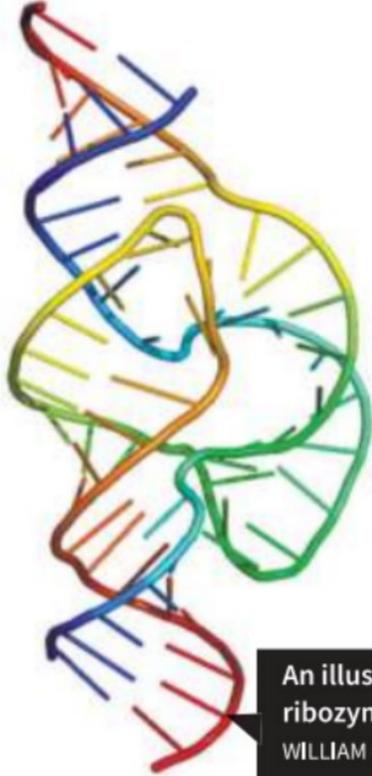
A small piece of RNA copies itself, hinting at how life began

In 1953, Stanley Miller and Harold Urey showed that organic molecules like amino acids could form spontaneously under early Earth conditions, but this didn't explain life's origin because genetic material (DNA/RNA) was missing. Life requires both proteins and a system to copy genetic information—a classic chicken-and-egg problem, since DNA/RNA needs proteins to replicate.

The Genetic Information Problem: Proteins Alone Are Not Enough

In the 1980s, scientists discovered RNA can perform chemical reactions, suggesting it could have been the earliest genetic material. RNA could both store information and catalyze reactions, potentially bypassing the need for proteins. However, previous RNA molecules capable of copying others were too large to replicate themselves. Life cannot rely on proteins alone; it also requires genetic material to store and transmit instructions. DNA or RNA usually encode proteins called polymerases, which in turn copy the genetic material so new cells inherit complete information. This creates a chicken-and-egg problem: proteins are needed to copy DNA/RNA, but DNA/RNA are needed to make proteins. Any primitive life system would therefore need both genetic instructions and a way to replicate them, a fundamental hurdle in understanding the origin of life.

Major takeaway : The development of QT45 RNA is a major breakthrough, demonstrating that self-replicating RNA can exist. While it strengthens the case for RNA as the first genetic material, it does not definitively prove it. QT45 shows a possible pathway for how life could have begun on Earth, illustrating that inert matter can gradually acquire life-like properties. At its core, the origin of life may simply be chemistry learning to remember itself, leaving the exact sequence of events a mystery but providing important insight into life's earliest steps.



From matter to life

QT45 suggests self-replicating RNAs could be the way life first began on the earth

- The Miller-Urey experiment in 1953 showed that amino acids can form naturally but it didn't explain heredity
- Life needs a way to store and copy information, but scientists aren't sure which came first: genes or proteins
- Scientists have also found that RNA can do simple chemical reactions, suggesting RNA could be the earliest genetic material
- Scientists also know that some RNA enzymes can copy other RNAs, but couldn't help RNAs make copies of themselves
- A new study in *Science* has found a short RNA called QT45 that can self-replicate, albeit very slowly
- QT45 is also imperfect, which means natural selection can act on it and help it 'evolve'

An illustration of the hammerhead ribozyme; QT45 is also a ribozyme
 WILLIAM G. SCOTT (CC BY-SA)

Recent Developments

Recently, researchers at the MRC Laboratory of Molecular Biology (UK) developed QT45, a 45-nucleotide RNA molecule that can self-replicate. QT45 was selected from large RNA pools for its replication ability. Though replication is slow (taking weeks for one copy) and requires special conditions, such a process could realistically occur over millions of years on primitive Earth. QT45 assembles a complementary strand using short three-nucleotide blocks and copies itself with ~92–94% accuracy, allowing small mistakes—variations that are essential for natural selection and evolution. While QT45 doesn't prove RNA was life's first genetic material, it demonstrates that self-replicating RNA is possible. This discovery helps us understand that life could have started from simple molecules, showing how chemistry alone might gradually lead to systems that behave like living things, with matter slowly learning to “remember itself.”

PRELIMS CORNER :

Q) 1) With reference to furnace oil, consider the following statements: (2021)

1. It is a product of oil refineries.
2. Some industries use it to generate power
3. Its use causes sulphur emissions into environment.

Which of the statements given above are correct?

- a) 1 and 2 only
- b) 2 and 3 only
- c) 1 and 3 only
- d) 1, 2 and 3

2) What was the reason for Mahatma Gandhi to organise a satyagraha on behalf of the peasants of Kheda?

1. The Administration did not suspend the land revenue collection in spite of a drought.
2. The Administration proposed to introduce Permanent Settlement in Gujarat.

Which of the statements given above is/are correct?

- (a) 1 only
- (b) 2 only
- (c) Both 1 and 2
- (d) Neither 1 nor 2

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HERITAGE

Madurai Sungudi Saris



Madurai Sungudi saris trace their origins to a tale of two weavers resting by the Vaigai River, inspired by the glittering night sky to invent the signature tie-and-dye pattern. This art form was refined by the Saurashtrian community, who settled in Madurai from Gujarat in the 17th century. The saris are woven on a base fabric with a zari border, after which artisans tie intricate knots and immerse the cloth in dye. Once the knots are removed, the fabric is washed, starched, and sun-dried to reveal stunning designs, sometimes featuring over 15,000 tiny white dots. Each sari requires more than 15 days of meticulous work, reflecting the dedication and skill of the weavers. Lightweight and comfortable, Sungudi saris remain popular among people of all ages, with prices ranging from ₹500 to ₹20,000 depending on the thread quality. Recognized with a GI tag in 2005, these saris are a testament to Madurai's rich handloom heritage and have the potential to gain wider appreciation on global fashion platforms.

Prelims Corner: Explanations

1) Ans: option D

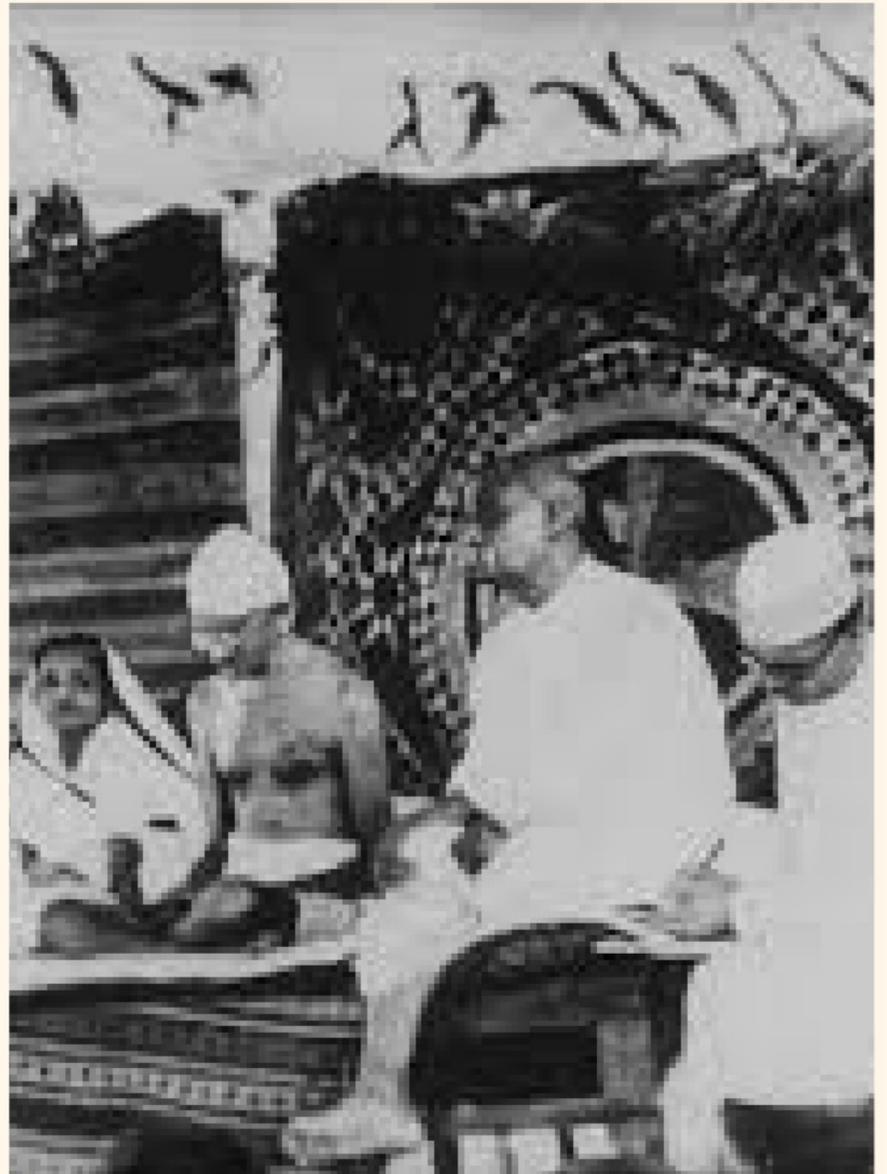
Statement 1: Furnace oil is a product of oil refineries. This is correct. Also called industrial fuel oil, it is a by-product obtained during the crude oil refining process and is mainly used as fuel for industrial purposes.

Statement 2: Some industries use furnace oil to generate power. This is also correct. It is widely employed in industries, particularly in power plants and boilers, to produce steam and electricity, especially where alternatives like natural gas or coal are unavailable or unsuitable.

Statement 3: Its use leads to sulfur emissions. Correct again. Furnace oil contains sulfur, and burning it releases sulfur dioxide (SO₂) into the atmosphere, contributing to air pollution and acid rain, which pose risks to the environment and human health.



2) Answer is option A



The Kheda Satyagraha of 1918 was led by Mahatma Gandhi to support peasants in the Kheda district of Gujarat who were struggling to pay land revenue due to a severe drought and crop failure. Despite their inability to pay, the British colonial administration refused to suspend tax collection, which sparked widespread discontent among the farmers. Gandhi organized a non-violent protest, asking peasants to withhold revenue payments until their demands were met. Statement 2 is incorrect: the Permanent Settlement was never proposed in Gujarat—it was limited to Bengal and nearby regions. Thus, only statement 1 is correct.



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