

## A tragic conflagration

**T**he tragic conflagration caused by a leaking natural gas pipeline in East Godavari district of Andhra Pradesh represents a new type of peril before India. Leaping flames from a pipeline passing through a village conveying gas from a field operated by the Oil and Natural Gas Corporation to a private-sector power plant swept through huts, houses and trees, leaving a trail of death and destruction in a radius of more than 500 metres. It was the deadliest accident in India's energy sector since August 2013, when 28 people were killed in a fire at Hindustan Petroleum Corporation's refinery at Visakhapatnam in the same State. This is the first incident of such a scale for the 30-year-old GAIL, a Maharatna company and by far India's largest pipeline operator. It currently has a network of pipelines running to a length of 8,000 km, a figure that is set to rise to 14,000 km. Every inch of pipeline carrying the highly flammable material poses risks; habitations coming up, sometimes unauthorisedly, along pipeline routes are also a matter of concern.

India's natural gas scenario is undergoing rapid changes and gas, considered a "new age" fuel and the cleanest among fossil fuels, is poised to occupy a significant share in the diversified energy mix. The problem lies in safely transporting the resource through pipelines. Pipeline systems for oil have a long history in India, while those for gas are relatively new. The mechanisms tend to age and deteriorate. The situation calls for a comprehensive, ongoing system of checks and oversight along routes operated by all the players in the field, and round-the-clock monitoring employing advanced technology in quick-response mode. Since GAIL has confirmed that villagers in the area had the previous evening complained of the smell of gas, negligence and failure to respond to danger signals were clearly involved. The government should quickly follow up on the pending proposal for a statutory safety regulator for the oil and gas sector. India needs to expand its gas grids. Unless safety concerns among the public over transporting gas and the operations of power plants are addressed with a sense of urgency, the Union government's efforts to accelerate major energy and infrastructure projects may face delays. For instance, opposition by the Tamil Nadu government has stalled a key section of GAIL's ambitious Kochi-Bangalore-Mangalore pipeline project. Tamil Nadu, through which a section of the pipeline was to pass, says it would affect the livelihood of about 5,500 small farmers and wants the line laid along highways, and not farmlands. There may well be lessons to be drawn from the latest accident while seeking to resolve this issue.