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India, New Zealand sign 'historic' trade deal

Deal will be implemented following ratification by the New Zealand Parliament later this year

Trade pact is a milestone, showing 'convergence of values, trust and shared ambition', says PM

This FTA is one of the fastest negotiated by India; talks began in March and concluded in Dec. 2025

T.C.A. Sharad Raghavan
NEW DELHI

India and New Zealand on Monday signed a Free Trade Agreement (FTA) that Prime Ministers of both the countries hailed as a "historic" step towards deepening trade, investment, and people-to-people ties.

The FTA, signed by Commerce Minister Piyush Goyal and his New Zealand counterpart Todd McClay in New Delhi, will see New Zealand removing tariffs on all goods imported from India, while India will remove or reduce tariffs on 95% of current imports from New Zealand.

"Today marks a historic milestone in India's journey towards deeper global engagement and shared prosperity," a statement read out by Mr. Goyal quoted Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who is currently in West Bengal, as saying.

"The signing of the India-New Zealand Free Trade Agreement reflects our strengthening economic partnership and a convergence of values, trust and shared ambition between two vibrant democracies."

The FTA, discussions for which were announced in March 2025 and concluded in December 2025, is one of the fastest India has negotiated.

The deal still needs to be ratified by New Zealand's Parliament, which Mr. McClay said would happen soon while adding that it would come into force within this year.

New Zealand Prime Minister Christopher Luxon, in a statement read out by Mr. McClay, said that during a time of global uncertainty, this FTA is a clear commitment by both sides to a stable, predictable and rules-based trade.

"And the India-New Zealand story is about more than trade," Mr. Luxon said. "New Zealand and India are building a relationship that is bigger, deeper and more exciting every year – across trade, investment, defence, sport, and innovation."

Gains beyond trade

India's exports to New Zealand grew 32.1% in 2024-25 to $711.1 million, the latest full financial year for which data is available. Imports from New Zealand grew 75.2% to $587.1 million over the same period.

"This FTA is far more than an agreement on tariffs and rules of origin," Mr. Goyal said. "It is a comprehensive framework spanning market access, agricultural productivity, investment, and mobility, designed to benefit manufacturing, farmers, artisans, MSMEs, women entrepreneurs, students, and skilled professionals across both nations."

Apart from the tariff concessions, the FTA also includes several provisions relating to mobility of working professionals and students from India.

Mr. McClay exuded confidence that the deal would benefit New Zealander exporters substantially.

The FTA includes a provision wherein New Zealand has committed to facilitate $20 billion in investments into India over the next 15 years.

"Our Make in India flagship initiative offers synergy to New Zealand's investment commitment of $20 billion in India and delivers a vibrant partnership that goes beyond trade," Mr. Modi said in his statement.

Industry hails deal

Industry bodies and exporters welcomed the deal. "The FTA will open new avenues for Indian exporters by enhancing market access to New Zealand across key sectors such as agriculture, textiles, pharmaceuticals, engineering goods, and services such as IT & ITES, business services, engineering, education, construction and health services," President of the Federation of Indian Export Organisations S.C. Ralhan said.

The Confederation of India Industry, in a statement, said that New Zealand's commitment to facilitate $20 billion in investment is expected to spur the development of industrial infrastructure, manufacturing ecosystems, and innovation clusters across India.

India has managed to negotiate the exclusion of several key items from the deal, including all dairy products such as milk, cream, whey, yoghurt, cheese, etc., animal products other than sheep meat, vegetable products such as onions, chana, peas, corn, almonds, etc., sugar, artificial honey, animal, vegetable or microbial fats and oils, arms and ammunition, gems and jewellery, and copper and aluminium and products.

Deal dynamics

The graphic lists select products on which India will be reducing or eliminating tariffs, as well as items excluded from the deal. New Zealand has removed tariffs on all items.

Immediate elimination
- Wood | Wool
- Leather-raw hides

Phased elimination
- Petroleum oil
- Vegetable oils
- Select electrical machinery

Tariff reductions
- Wine and pharma
- Polymers, aluminium, iron and steel articles

Products excluded by India
- Dairy products (milk, cream, whey, yoghurt, cheese etc.)
- Animal products (other than sheep meat)
- Agricultural products (onions, chana, peas, corn, almonds etc.)
- Sugar | Artificial honey
- Copper and Articles thereof (Cathodes, cartridges, rods)
- Aluminium and articles thereof (Ingots, billets etc.)

Sealing the deal: Union Minister of Commerce and Industry, Piyush Goyal, with New Zealand's Minister for Trade and Investment, Todd McClay, during the signing ceremony of the FTA in New Delhi on Monday. SUSHIL KUMAR VERMA

KEY HIGHLIGHTS

Context of the News

- India and New Zealand signed a Free Trade Agreement (FTA) in April 2026.
- Signed by Piyush Goyal and Todd McClay in New Delhi.
- Negotiations: March 2025 – December 2025 (fast-track FTA).
- Aims to enhance trade, investment, mobility, and strategic partnership.

Key Points

- Tariff Liberalisation
  - New Zealand: 100% tariff elimination on Indian goods
  - India: ~95% tariff reduction/removal on imports
- Trade Data (2024–25)
  - Exports: $711.1 million (↑32.1%)
  - Imports: $587.1 million (↑75.2%)
- Investment
  - Commitment: $20 billion investment over 15 years
- Mobility
  - Facilitates movement of students and skilled professionals
- Sectoral Gains
  - Goods: textiles, pharma, agriculture, engineering
  - Services: IT, education, healthcare
- Sensitive Sector Protection (India)
  - Dairy products
  - Agricultural items (onion, pulses, corn, etc.)
  - Sugar, edible oils
  - Strategic sectors (arms, metals, gems & jewellery)

Static Linkages

- FTAs governed under WTO (GATT Article XXIV)
- Key concepts:
  - Trade Creation vs Trade Diversion (Jacob Viner)
  - Rules of Origin to prevent dumping
- India's cautious approach due to past experiences (e.g., Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership exit)
- Role of FTAs in improving Balance of Payments (BoP) and export competitiveness

Critical Analysis

Positives

- Expands market access for Indian exports
- Boosts FDI inflows and infrastructure
- Strengthens Indo-Pacific economic ties
- Enhances services exports & mobility
- Supports MSMEs and value chains

Concerns

- Risk of import surge harming domestic industry
- Agricultural vulnerability despite exclusions
- Low FTA utilisation rate historically
- Monitoring challenges (Rules of Origin misuse)

Way Forward

- Strengthen domestic manufacturing & competitiveness
- Improve export diversification
- Ensure strict Rules of Origin compliance
- Conduct regular FTA impact assessments
- Align with Make in India & Atmanirbhar Bharat

Iran offers to reopen Strait of Hormuz if the U.S. lifts naval blockade, ends war

Associated Press
CAIRO

Iran has offered to end its chokehold on the Strait of Hormuz if the U.S. lifts its blockade on the country and ends the war in a proposal that would postpone discussions on the Islamic Republic's nuclear programme, two regional officials said on Monday.

U.S. President Donald Trump seems unlikely to accept the offer, which was passed to Americans by Pakistan and would leave unresolved the disagreements that led the U.S. and Israel to go to war on February 28. Mr. Trump has said one of the major reasons he went to war was to deny Iran the ability to develop nuclear weapons.

Putin vows support

The offer emerged as Iran's Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi visited Russia and met President Vladimir Putin, who, according to state news agency Tass, praised Iranian people as "bravely and heroically fighting for their sovereignty". Russia would do everything possible to bring peace to West Asia, Tass reported Mr. Putin as saying. It is unclear what, if any, assistance Moscow, which has long been a key backer of Tehran, might offer now.

Iran's ability to choke off traffic in the Strait of Hormuz, the narrow mouth of the Persian Gulf, has proved one of its biggest strategic advantages in a war that has often boiled down to which side can take more pain.

The Iranian Foreign Minister, in a video interview posted by Iran's state-run IRNA news agency before his meeting with the Russian President, said that it was "a good opportunity for us to consult with our Russian friends about the developments that have occurred in relation to the war during this period and what is happening now."

Tehran's outreach

Over the weekend, Mr. Araghchi made two stops in Pakistan and a visit to Oman, which shares the strait with Iran. He also spoke by phone with counterparts in Qatar and Saudi Arabia on Sunday.

Iran wants to persuade Oman to back a mechanism to collect tolls from vessels passing through the strait, according to a regional official. The official, who is involved in mediation efforts, also said Iran insisted on ending the U.S. blockade before new talks and that Pakistan-led mediators are trying to bridge significant gaps between the countries.

Mr. Trump told journalists on Saturday that after he called off a trip by his envoys to Pakistan, Iran sent a "much better" proposal.

Russian President Vladimir Putin with Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi in St. Petersburg on Monday. AFP

Direct talks with Israel rejected by Hezbollah leader Qassem

Agence France-Presse
BEIRUT

Hezbollah leader Naim Qassem on Monday rejected Lebanon's planned direct talks with Israel, calling them a "grave sin" that will destabilise Lebanon.

Later, Lebanese President Joseph Aoun took a jab at the Iran-backed group, saying those who dragged the country to war had committed "treason". Lebanon and Israel's U.S. Ambassadors met twice in Washington over the past weeks, the first of their kind in decades.

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KEY HIGHLIGHTS

Context of the News

- Iran has proposed conditional de-escalation: it may ease its control over the Strait of Hormuz if the U.S. lifts sanctions and ends hostilities.
- The proposal, routed via Pakistan, seeks to postpone discussions on Iran's nuclear programme.
- The U.S. (under Donald Trump) remains focused on preventing Iran's nuclear weapon capability, making acceptance unlikely.
- Iran has intensified diplomacy—engaging Russia (meeting with Vladimir Putin) and Gulf countries (Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia).

Key Points

- Strategic chokepoint: Strait of Hormuz carries ~20–30% of global oil trade (EIA).
- Geographical location:
  - Connects Persian Gulf → Gulf of Oman → Arabian Sea.
  - Bordered by Iran (north) and Oman (south).
- Iran's leverage: Ability to disrupt shipping gives it asymmetric power in conflict.
- Global impact:
  - Any disruption → spike in crude prices → global inflationary pressures.
- India's concern:
  - ~85% crude oil import dependence; major supplies transit through this route.

Static Linkages

- UNCLOS (1982):
  - Defines international straits.
  - Ensures Right of Transit Passage (cannot be suspended).
- NPT (Non-Proliferation Treaty):
  - Iran is a signatory; disputes over uranium enrichment persist.
- Major Global Chokepoints:
  - Strait of Hormuz
  - Bab-el-Mandeb
  - Malacca Strait
  - Suez Canal
- Energy Security (India):
  - Strategic Petroleum Reserves (Visakhapatnam, Mangaluru, Padur).

Critical Analysis

Pros

- Opens diplomatic space for de-escalation.
- Reduces immediate risks to global oil supply chains.

Cons

- Core issue (Iran's nuclear programme) remains unresolved.
- Proposal may be a tactical delay rather than a durable solution.
- Risk of escalation involving multiple actors (U.S., Israel, Russia).

Stakeholders

- Iran: Seeks sanctions relief and strategic leverage.
- U.S.: Focus on nuclear non-proliferation and regional influence.
- India: Energy security and stable oil prices.
- Gulf States: Regional stability vs Iran's growing influence.

Challenges

- Deep trust deficit between Iran and the U.S.
- Complex geopolitical alignments.
- Ensuring freedom of navigation amid conflict.

Way Forward

- Revive nuclear negotiations (JCPOA-type framework).
- Strengthen adherence to UNCLOS principles.
- Promote multilateral mediation (UN, regional actors).
- India should:
  - Diversify energy imports.
  - Expand Strategic Petroleum Reserves.
  - Maintain balanced diplomacy in West Asia.

Chairman of Rajya Sabha recognises the merger of AAP defectors with BJP

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

The Rajya Sabha Secretariat on Monday updated the party-wise list of members in the House, counting seven Aam Aadmi Party MPs, including Raghav Chadha, with the Bharatiya Janata Party, indicating that Chairman C.P. Radhakrishnan has accepted their request to switch sides.

With the change, the BJP's strength in the Upper House has risen to 113 while the Congress, the largest Opposition party, remains a distant second with 29 members.

Welcoming the seven MPs in a post on X, Parliamentary Affairs Minister Kiren Rijiju said: "For a long time, I have observed that these seven Hon'ble MPs have not resorted to abusive language and have never created indiscipline or indulged in unparliamentary conduct. Welcome to nation building NDA under the visionary leadership of Prime Minister @narendramodi ji and goodbye to the Tukde-Tukde INDI Alliance."

On Friday, seven of the AAP's 10 Rajya Sabha members – Mr. Chadha, Ashok Mittal, Sandeep Pathak, Harbhajan Singh, Rajendra Gupta, Vikramjit Sahney and Swati Maliwal – quit the party and submitted a letter to the Chairman informing him of their "merger" with the BJP.

The AAP reacted on Sunday with its Rajya Sabha leader Sanjay Singh filing a petition seeking their disqualification, calling the move a violation of the anti-defection law. "The Chairman has taken cognisance of the letter submitted by those seven MPs and, based on that, accepted their merger. The objections raised by us and the disqualification sought under the Tenth Schedule of the Constitution have not even been considered," Mr. Singh said. He added that the party hoped the Chairman would act "in favour of the Constitution and democracy" by disqualifying the seven members. "If that does not happen, we will approach the court. It is wrong to break a party in this manner," he said.

Under the laid-down procedure, the Rajya Sabha Chairman is the final authority in deciding disqualification petitions.

Joining hands: Rajya Sabha members Raghav Chadha and others meeting BJP president Nitin Nabin in New Delhi on Friday. ANI

KEY HIGHLIGHTS

Context of the News

- The Rajya Sabha Secretariat updated its party-wise list, showing seven MPs from Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) merged with the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP).
- The MPs include Raghav Chadha, Sandeep Pathak, Harbhajan Singh, among others.
- The merger was accepted by the Chairman, C. P. Radhakrishnan, indicating prima facie recognition of the move.
- BJP's strength in the Rajya Sabha increased to 113 seats, while Indian National Congress remains at 29.
- AAP has challenged the move, invoking the Tenth Schedule (Anti-Defection Law) and seeking disqualification of the MPs.

Key Points

- Merger vs Defection Issue:
  - MPs claimed a "merger" with BJP to avoid disqualification.
  - AAP argues it is a defection, violating constitutional provisions.
- Role of Chairman:
  - The Rajya Sabha Chairman is the final authority to decide disqualification under the Tenth Schedule.
  - His decision is subject to judicial review (as per Supreme Court rulings).
- Strength in Rajya Sabha:
  - BJP's increased numbers improve legislative leverage, though still short of absolute majority (currently 245 strength).
- Legal Trigger:
  - Petition filed by Sanjay Singh seeking disqualification under anti-defection provisions.
- Political Context:
  - Reflects fluidity in party alignments and coalition politics at the national level.

Static Linkages

- Tenth Schedule (52nd Constitutional Amendment Act, 1985):
  - Introduced to curb political defections.
  - Grounds: voluntary giving up membership, voting against party whip.
- 91st Constitutional Amendment Act, 2003:
  - Strengthened anti-defection law.
  - Removed exemption for "split" (earlier 1/3 members).
- Merger Provision:
  - Valid if at least 2/3 members of a legislature party agree to merge with another party.
- Kihoto Hollohan v. Zachillhu (1992):
  - Supreme Court upheld validity of anti-defection law.
  - Allowed judicial review of Speaker/Chairman's decisions.
- Rajya Sabha Composition:
  - Maximum strength: 250 (currently 245).
  - Permanent body; 1/3 members retire every 2 years.

Critical Analysis

- Positive Aspects:
  - May enhance legislative efficiency and stability
  - Reflects flexibility within parliamentary democracy
- Concerns:
  - Possible misuse of merger provision to bypass disqualification
  - Undermines party discipline and voter mandate
  - Raises questions about neutrality of the Chairman
  - Weakens opposition in a bicameral system
- Constitutional/Ethical Issues:
  - Balance between legislator autonomy vs party loyalty
  - Integrity of democratic representation

Way Forward

- Establish clearer guidelines for determining a valid merger
- Ensure time-bound decisions on disqualification petitions
- Consider independent tribunal instead of presiding officer
- Strengthen intra-party democracy to reduce defections
- Enhance judicial oversight in contentious cases

Electoral roll purges raise constitutional questions

P.D.T. Achary
Former Secretary General, Lok Sabha

Voter deletions under the Special Intensive Revision of electoral rolls raise concerns over constitutional and procedural validity

The Election Commission of India (ECI) has invented the term "logical discrepancy" to delete voters from the voters' list in the recent elections (the States of Assam, Kerala, Tamil Nadu and West Bengal, and the Union Territory of Puducherry). It is alleged that lakhs of voters have been removed from the voter list in States where elections have been held recently. Even the Supreme Court of India's innovative idea of tribunals could not get these voters back onto the list, mainly because of the near-total mess created by the ECI's Special Intensive Revision (SIR) of electoral rolls exercise.

It has been pointed out by many commentators – including this writer in this daily – that the SIR, as designed by the ECI, is deeply flawed and, if continued, will result in the elimination of a very large number of Indian citizens from the electoral roll. Media reports indicate an alarming situation, particularly in West Bengal, where lakhs of genuine citizens have had their names removed from the electoral roll and placed under the category of "logical discrepancies". The fact is that many of them were unable to vote in the election/first phase of the election.

Citizenship as basic requirement

The issue of the elimination of people from the voter list revolves around the question of citizenship. Article 326 enjoins that every person who is a citizen of India and who is not less than 18 years of age and who is not disqualified under the Constitution or law shall be entitled to be registered "as a voter at any election". Thus, citizenship is the basic requirement for anyone to be registered as a voter.

The citizenship law is administered by the Union Home Ministry. Therefore, it is the duty of the Ministry to announce the list of documents required to prove the citizenship of Indians. However, as far as is known, the Ministry has not issued any such list.

Instead, the ECI announced a list of documents at the time of initiating the SIR in Bihar. Since many documents that citizens normally use for various purposes, such as Aadhaar card, ration card, and even the photo voter identity card issued by the ECI itself, were not accepted by the ECI as proof of citizenship, people began running helter-skelter in search of the documents listed by the ECI. Many of such documents were hard to find, especially for rural people who are not in the habit of preserving such documents. Thus, as many as 91 lakh voters were removed from the voter list in West Bengal because they could not produce the documents that the ECI required to prove their citizenship

Duty of the Home Ministry

A question of great constitutional significance arises here. Does the ECI have the power under Article 324 to determine what documents the citizens should produce to prove their citizenship? The simple answer is that such power is vested in the Union Home Ministry, and it is the constitutional duty of the Home Ministry to announce publicly the documents required for this purpose. The ECI can only verify those documents while enrolling citizens in the voters' list. Here, the ECI is acting beyond its jurisdiction. Article 324 does not empower the ECI to usurp the power of the Home Ministry. But it is surprising that the Supreme Court did not address this question when the issue of documents came before it. It was expected that the Court would direct the Union government to announce the list of documents and submit an affidavit in this regard. Instead, the Court merely requested the ECI to consider whether the Aadhaar card could also be counted as a relevant document.

The SIR has been conducted in the election-bound States, deviating from the law. Section 21 in The Representation Of The People Act, 1950 says that the electoral roll shall be revised before each general election and before a bye-election and also in any year as directed by the ECI. Apart from these the ECI can also undertake a special revision of the roll of a constituency or part of it for reasons to be recorded. Rule 25 of the Registration of Electors Rules, 1960 explains that the revision can be done summarily or intensively, which makes it clear that pre-election revision is summary in nature and the revision done in any year (when there is no election coming up) is intensive.

A combined reading of Section 21(2) of The Representation Of The People Act, 1950, and Rule 25 of the Registration of Electors Rules makes it clear that only a summary revision of the rules can be done before the general election or any bye-election.

The intensive revision can be done at any other time when elections are not due, the reason being that such a revision is very comprehensive and the voters' list needs to be prepared afresh. It is a very time-consuming exercise and cannot be done in such a hasty manner. The SIR conducted by the ECI a couple of months before the Bihar election, and, thereafter, in Kerala, Tamil Nadu and West Bengal is thus a clear deviation from the law and past practice.

In West Bengal, where the SIR exercise was absolutely chaotic, over 91 lakh voters have been removed from the voter list, many of whom have been placed in the category of "logical discrepancy". This categorisation of citizens is unknown to the election law. The Registration of Electors Rules, 1960 lays out a detailed scheme for the preparation of the electoral roll. Besides, the ECI has issued detailed instructions, one of which is that the booth-level officers (BLOs) should distribute enumeration forms to all existing electors through house-to-house visits.

Rule 8 clearly states that the occupants of the dwelling houses shall furnish the information called for to the best of their ability. This should mean that the ECI will have to accept the information that the occupants of the house have collected to the best of their ability. It makes no sense for the ECI to insist on obtaining information that, in the normal course, is not possible to procure, particularly for unlettered rural people in remote parts of the country. The fact that 64 lakh voters in Bihar and 91 lakh in West Bengal were removed from the voters' list amply demonstrates the deliberate non-adherence to this and other rules by the ECI.

An instance of violations

The object of this hastily conducted SIR seems to be to remove millions of voters from the voters' list. Media reports suggest that much of these deletions have been done without giving those affected a hearing, which is a blatant denial of natural justice as well as a violation of statutory provisions. Free and fair elections cannot be ensured by deviating from or violating the statute. The justice system in the country cannot permanently turn a blind eye to it.

KEY HIGHLIGHTS

Context of the News

- The Election Commission of India undertook a Special Intensive Revision (SIR) of electoral rolls in several States.
- Reports indicate large-scale deletion of voters, many marked under "logical discrepancy".
- A significant number of eligible citizens were allegedly excluded from voting due to removal from electoral rolls.
- Concerns raised regarding:
  - Timing of revision (pre-election period)
  - Procedural lapses and lack of due process
  - Jurisdictional issues related to citizenship verification

Key Points

- Article 326:
  - Provides for universal adult suffrage based on citizenship, age (18+), and non-disqualification.
- Legal Framework:
  - Section 21, Representation of the People Act, 1950:
    - Mandates revision of electoral rolls before elections.
  - Rule 25, Registration of Electors Rules, 1960:
    - Summary revision → before elections.
    - Intensive revision → when elections are not imminent.
- Observed Issues in SIR:
  - Intensive revision conducted close to elections (deviation from law).
  - Exclusion of common identity documents (Aadhaar, ration card, EPIC).
  - Undefined category: "logical discrepancy" not recognized in law.
  - Absence of hearing before deletion → violation of natural justice.
- Scale of Deletions:
  - Lakhs of voters reportedly removed across States.
- Jurisdictional Concern:
  - Citizenship determination lies with Union government, not ECI.

Static Linkages

- Universal Adult Franchise (Indian Constitution).
- Article 324: Powers and functions of ECI.
- Representation of the People Act, 1950.
- Principles of Natural Justice (Audi alteram partem).
- Doctrine of Ultra Vires.
- Rule of Law and procedural fairness.

Critical Analysis

Advantages

- Helps eliminate duplicate/fake entries in electoral rolls.
- Aims to enhance accuracy and integrity of elections.

Challenges / Concerns

- Disenfranchisement risk: Genuine voters excluded.
- Procedural violations:
  - No adequate notice or hearing.
- Legal inconsistency:
  - Intensive revision conducted at inappropriate time.
- Administrative overreach:
  - ECI prescribing citizenship proof criteria.
- Equity concerns:
  - Marginalized and rural populations disproportionately affected.
- Democratic impact:
  - Undermines free and fair elections.

Way Forward

- Union government should notify clear list of citizenship documents.
- Strict adherence to statutory provisions (RPA 1950 & Rules 1960).
- Ensure pre-deletion notice and hearing.
- Strengthen grievance redressal mechanisms.
- Use technology with safeguards for verification.
- Promote inclusion-oriented electoral management.
- Enable judicial and parliamentary oversight.

A tightening of the fist in India's digital public square

Vikram Raj
Journalist associated with the Internet Freedom Foundation

The draft amendments to India's Information Technology Rules trigger fears of digital overreach and a departure from existing judicial rulings

Imagine this. You leave a sharp, satirical comment on social media or under a news article about rising fuel prices, and it gets a few likes. A few hours later, the comment disappears. The platform does not explain. Your account remains, but you notice that posts on similar topics no longer appear publicly. You have not been charged with any offence. No court has issued an order. Yet something has quietly shifted.

This is not a far-fetched scenario. It is a plausible outcome under the draft amendments to India's Information Technology Rules released by the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology (MeitY) on March 30, 2026. Presented as technical clarifications, the changes mark a deeper transformation in how speech is governed online and who gets to decide its limits.

Core area of concern

At the centre of concern is a proposed expansion of executive power that risks bypassing Parliament and the courts. One provision, Rule 3(4), would require platforms to comply with a wide array of government-issued instruments, including advisories, directions and standard operating procedures, as a condition for retaining "safe harbour" protection under Section 79 of the IT Act. In plain terms, platforms would be legally safer if they follow government instructions, even when those instructions do not arise from formal law.

This sits uneasily with the Supreme Court of India's landmark ruling in *Shreya Singhal vs Union of India* (2015), which held that platforms are only required to act on unlawful content when they receive a court order or a government notification grounded in law. By allowing informal directives to trigger compliance obligations, the draft rules appear to dilute that constitutional safeguard.

The likely result is not targeted moderation but broad over-censorship. Faced with uncertain and potentially unpublished directives, platforms will err on the side of removal. It is the predictable logic of risk management. When liability is unclear, speech becomes expendable.

A second shift expands the scope of state oversight far beyond traditional publishers. Amendments to Rule 8 bring ordinary users who post or share news and current affairs content within the ambit of the government's oversight mechanism. This includes the Inter-Departmental Committee, a body empowered to review content and recommend blocking.

This is not merely an administrative adjustment. It reintroduces, through a different route, a regulatory framework that has already faced judicial scrutiny. In 2021, the Bombay High Court stayed key provisions of the IT Rules, citing concerns under Article 19(1)(a) of the Constitution. The Madras High Court later observed that such oversight could undermine media independence. Those challenges remain pending. Yet, the new draft effectively reconstructs the same architecture while those questions are unresolved.

An undefined role

Equally troubling is the transformation of the Inter-Departmental Committee itself. Originally designed to address grievances, it is now empowered to examine any "matter" referred by the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting. The term is left undefined. A procedure is currently in place under Rule 14 but compliance remains an issue. There is no clear threshold for intervention, and no guarantee that affected users will be heard before action is taken.

This shift from grievance redress to proactive scrutiny changes the character of the body. It becomes less a forum for dispute resolution and more an instrument of preemptive control.

The third major concern lies in expanded data retention obligations. The draft clarifies that platform duties to retain user data operate in addition to requirements under any other law. In practice, this could mean that personal data, browsing activity and communication records are stored for extended periods, potentially years, depending on overlapping legal mandates.

The risks here are not abstract. Longer retention increases the surface area for misuse, whether through unauthorised access, data breaches or function creep. It also alters the relationship between citizens and digital spaces. When every interaction may be archived indefinitely, self-censorship follows naturally.

Taken together, these amendments signal a shift toward a model where executive discretion plays a dominant role in shaping online speech. The concern is not only about individual provisions but about their cumulative effect. Each change reinforces the other. Informal directives gain force through safe harbour rules. Oversight expands to include ordinary users. Data retention deepens the state's informational reach.

Upsetting the balance

Supporters of the policy may argue that governments require flexible tools to manage harmful content. That is true in principle. But constitutional systems impose limits on how that power is exercised. Delegated legislation must remain within the bounds of its parent statute, a principle affirmed in cases such as *Indian Express Newspapers vs Union of India* (1986). When rules begin to create new obligations that are not clearly grounded in law, the balance between regulation and overreach begins to tilt.

The short public consultation period, which ended on April 14, only heightens the concern. Changes of this magnitude deserve wider debate, legislative scrutiny and careful alignment with existing judicial rulings.

India's digital public sphere has grown precisely because it has allowed a diversity of voices, from professional journalists to ordinary citizens. That openness has always required some regulation. The question now is whether the new rules preserve that openness or narrow it through administrative control.

The answer will shape not only how platforms operate but also how freely citizens can speak, critique, and participate in public life.

KEY HIGHLIGHTS

Context of the News

- Draft amendments to Information Technology Rules released by Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology (MeitY) on March 30, 2026.
- Amendments expand government oversight over digital intermediaries and online content.
- Raise concerns regarding freedom of speech, intermediary liability, and data privacy.

Key Points

- Rule 3(4): Compliance with government advisories/directions made necessary for safe harbour protection.
- Safe harbour (Section 79, IT Act) becomes conditional on executive instructions.
- Potential dilution of Supreme Court safeguards (content removal only via court order/law).
- Expansion of regulatory ambit to include individuals posting news/current affairs.
- Inter-Departmental Committee empowered to review any "matter" (undefined scope).
- Increased data retention obligations for intermediaries.
- Likely rise in self-censorship and over-compliance by platforms.

Static Linkages

- Article 19(1)(a) – Freedom of Speech and Expression
- Article 19(2) – Reasonable Restrictions
- Section 79, IT Act – Intermediary Liability
- Doctrine of Delegated Legislation
- Judicial Review
- Right to Privacy (Puttaswamy Judgment, 2017)

Critical Analysis

Positives

- Strengthens state capacity to tackle misinformation and harmful content
- Enables faster response to national security threats in digital space

Negatives

- Risk of executive overreach and bypassing due process
- Chilling effect on free speech
- Legal uncertainty leading to over-censorship
- Weak procedural safeguards
- Privacy concerns due to extended data retention
- Expansion of delegated legislation beyond parent law

Way Forward

- Ensure conformity with Supreme Court judgments
- Clearly define scope and limits of executive powers
- Strengthen judicial and parliamentary oversight
- Introduce independent regulatory mechanisms
- Ensure transparency in content takedown processes
- Limit data retention and enforce data protection principles
- Provide effective grievance redressal for users

Gang of seven

Large-scale defections have rendered the Tenth Schedule impotent

On April 24, seven of the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP)'s 10 Rajya Sabha members announced their merger with the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). The Rajya Sabha Chairman has accepted their claim of merger, raising the BJP's strength in the Upper House to 113 and the combined strength of the National Democratic Alliance above the halfway mark for the first time. The episode highlights the nature of AAP, the crass opportunism of the turncoats, the machinations of the BJP, and the institutionalised defanging of the anti-defection law. Of the seven, Raghav Chadha, Sandeep Pathak and Swati Maliwal were part of AAP in an organic manner, to the limited extent that it had an identity beyond the whims of its founder, Arvind Kejriwal. For the other four, their exit is as opportunistic as their entries into AAP were. Mr. Kejriwal used to taunt the Congress for losing its legislators to the BJP in several States, as symptomatic of the erosion of its ethical responsibility. But a relentless campaign of anarchy in pursuit of power exposed the true character of AAP as a far cry from its grand claims. The disintegration of its Rajya Sabha contingent is the culmination of the cynicism and opportunism on which AAP thrived, imposing a heavy cost on the democratic institutions of India. It reaped what it sowed.

That is no reason to ignore the brazen misinterpretation – invoked by the gang of seven and accepted by the Chairman of the Rajya Sabha – of the Tenth Schedule of the Constitution, which bars the defection of elected representatives from their original party. The merger exception in the Schedule is clear that a party can merge with another, subject to the concurrence of two-thirds of its legislators. In 2023, the Supreme Court of India elaborated that the legislature party cannot dictate the course of the political party, and the two cannot be conflated. Two-thirds of the members of the legislature party of the original party must accept a merger for it to be valid under the anti-defection law. To turn this around and argue that two-thirds of a party's legislative members can cross over to another party without attracting disqualification is a stretch, and is being challenged in the Court by AAP. The Court's past interventions on similar developments are less than reassuring, sadly. Elected governments have been unseated on the back of large-scale defections, rendering the Tenth Schedule impotent in the recent past. That the Court could not set any deterrence to this open betrayal of popular mandates is borne out by the fact that such acts are being repeated with impunity.

KEY HIGHLIGHTS

Context of the News

- On April 24, seven out of ten Rajya Sabha MPs of the Aam Aadmi Party announced a merger with the Bharatiya Janata Party.
- The Chairman of the Rajya Sabha accepted the merger claim.
- BJP's strength rose to 113 seats, giving the NDA a majority in the Upper House.
- The move has been challenged before the Supreme Court of India over the interpretation of the Tenth Schedule (Anti-Defection Law).

Key Points

- Tenth Schedule (52nd Constitutional Amendment Act, 1985):
  - Introduced to curb political defections.
- Grounds of Disqualification:
  - Voluntarily giving up party membership.
  - Voting/abstaining against party whip.
- Merger Clause (Paragraph 4):
  - No disqualification if ≥ 2/3 members of legislature party agree to merge.
- Core Issue in News:
  - Whether legislature party alone can initiate merger, or if political party consent is necessary.
- Judicial Insight:
  - Supreme Court of India has emphasized that legislature party and political party are distinct entities.
- Authority:
  - Chairman/Speaker decides disqualification cases (subject to judicial review).

Static Linkages

- Presiding Officer acts as a quasi-judicial authority.
- Judicial review upheld in Kihoto Hollohan v. Zachillhu.
- 91st Constitutional Amendment Act, 2003 → strengthened anti-defection provisions.
- Concept of party whip ensures legislative discipline.
- Anti-defection law balances stability vs dissent in parliamentary democracy.
- Linked to basic structure doctrine (democracy, rule of law).

Critical Analysis

Positives:

- May ensure numerical stability in legislature.
- Allows flexibility in exceptional political realignments.

Concerns:

- Misuse of merger provision to bypass disqualification.
- Encourages opportunistic defections (horse-trading).
- Weakens mandate of voters and party ideology.
- Questions neutrality of presiding officers.
- Ineffective deterrence due to judicial delays.

Constitutional/Ethical Dimensions:

- Undermines representative democracy.
- Raises issues of political morality and accountability.

Way Forward

- Clarify "merger" to include approval of political party organisation.
- Establish an independent adjudicatory body instead of Speaker/Chairman.
- Impose strict timelines for decision-making.
- Strengthen internal party democracy.
- Ensure consistent judicial interpretation of Tenth Schedule.

India needs a clear, rules-based framework for petrol prices

INDIA HAS deregulated petrol and diesel prices in name, but not fully in practice. The system still operates in the grey zone between market pricing and government control. As global crude oil prices rise and the rupee weakens, this hybrid system is coming under stress. The result is opacity, windfall gains during good times, and sudden losses during bad times. India needs a clear, rule-based framework to determine pump prices.

Before 2010, India followed the Administered Pricing Mechanism, under which the government fixed fuel prices. These prices had little connection with global crude oil markets. State-owned firms such as Indian Oil, Bharat Petroleum and Hindustan Petroleum sold fuel at controlled prices, often below cost. The government later compensated them through subsidies, upstream support and oil bonds. While this system protected consumers, it distorted price signals and burdened public finances.

Reforms began on June 25, 2010, following the Kirit Parikh Committee's recommendations. Petrol prices were deregulated. Diesel followed in 2014, and daily price revisions were introduced in 2017. On paper, India shifted to market-based pricing.

But in reality, India never fully let go of the controls. Today's system is best described as managed deregulation. Prices are linked to global prices and exchange rates, but government policy — especially taxes — determines the outcome. When crude prices fall, taxes rise, and oil companies retain higher margins, while consumers continue to pay the same high price. When crude prices rise, oil companies absorb losses as they delay price increases under government pressure.

The data tells a clear story. Between 2022 and 2025, crude oil prices dropped from $99 to $68 per barrel. Yet instead of falling, the combined tax collections of central and state governments from petrol and diesel increased from Rs 5.24 lakh crore to Rs 6.31 lakh crore. At the same time, oil marketing company profits surged — Rs 83,000 crore in 2024 and Rs 50,000 crore in 2025. Consumers saw no benefit, as pump prices remained broadly unchanged.

AJAY SRIVASTAVA

Now the cycle is reversing. With crude prices rising amid the Strait of Hormuz crisis and other geopolitical tensions, OMCs are reporting losses — around Rs 20 per litre on petrol and up to Rs 100 per litre on diesel. Retail petrol prices, however, remain around Rs 95 per litre in Delhi. The same system that captured gains silently during low crude prices is now struggling to absorb losses during high prices, setting the stage for an eventual price hike. This is not sustainable.

India should adopt a Fuel Price Transparency Framework (FPTF). Pump prices should be linked directly to oil prices and exchange rates. Oil companies should get a defined margin. Governments should operate within a clear tax band. Prices should be revised regularly. Consumers must be able to see the logic behind prices and trust the system.

Here is how the FPTF would calculate the pump price for petrol in a few steps.

Start with oil prices. If crude is at $100 per barrel and the exchange rate is Rs 93 per dollar, one barrel costs Rs 9,300. Since one barrel contains 159 litres, the base cost works out to about Rs 58.5 per litre. While only about 40–45 per cent of crude becomes petrol, refineries recover the total cost from all products — diesel, LPG, ATF and others. In value terms, the full crude cost is distributed across the product basket, allowing us to estimate petrol cost effectively at this level. In value terms, this allows us to treat one barrel of crude as equivalent to one barrel of petrol for pricing purposes — because the full cost is recovered across the product basket.

Next comes ethanol blending. Petrol in India is blended with about 20 per cent ethanol. With petrol at Rs 58.5 per litre and ethanol at Rs 60 per litre, the blended cost comes to around Rs 58.8 per litre. Add about 15 per cent to cover refining, blending, transport, marketing, dealer commissions and company margins. This brings the cost to roughly Rs 676 per litre.

Finally, add taxes. With combined central and state taxes currently around Rs 28.9 per litre, the final pump price comes to about Rs 96.5 per litre — very close to prevailing prices.

This FPTF makes pricing transparent. Crude cost, exchange rate impact, company margin and taxes are all clearly visible. There are no hidden buffers or arbitrary adjustments. More importantly, it gives the government a ready-to-use tool to handle rising crude prices.

Now, the government may soon announce a hike in pump prices. Let us use the FPTF to estimate how petrol prices would change under different global oil price and rupee-dollar assumptions.

If crude oil is at $100 per barrel and the exchange rate is Rs 93 per dollar, petrol price comes to about Rs 95–96 per litre. This is close to current Delhi prices, so no pricing change is needed. If crude rises to $120 and the rupee weakens to Rs 95, petrol can go up to Rs 108 per litre if taxes stay the same. But if the government cuts taxes by 10 per cent (from Rs 28.9 per litre), the price increase is smaller, and petrol comes to about Rs 106. If crude is slightly lower at $115 and taxes are cut by 15 per cent, petrol can be kept around Rs 102.

If crude rises further to $130, the impact would be greater. Without a tax cut, petrol could reach Rs 114 per litre. A 20 per cent tax cut reduces it to around Rs 109, and a 30 per cent cut can keep it near Rs 106. In simple terms, when crude prices rise, petrol prices also rise — but how much they rise depends on how much tax the government reduces. A rule-based system like FPTF improves efficiency by aligning prices with market signals, encourages fair outcomes by preventing asymmetric gains, and protects oil firms from sustained losses.

Overall, India needs a three-part energy security strategy. First, it should adopt a fuel-pricing framework like FPTF, which links pump prices to crude costs, exchange rates, company margins and taxes. Second, it should secure long-term crude contracts with Russia and other reliable suppliers, without allowing US pressure to decide where India buys oil. Third, it should invest aggressively in exploring domestic sedimentary basins. For a country that imports nearly 90 per cent of its crude, low-cost oil, diversified supplies and transparent pricing are no longer optional. They are essential for India's macroeconomic stability.

The writer is founder, GTRI

Between 2022 and 2025, crude oil prices dropped from $99 to $68 per barrel. Yet instead of falling, combined tax collections of central and state governments from petrol and diesel increased from Rs 5.24 lakh crore to Rs 6.31 lakh crore

KEY HIGHLIGHTS

Context of the News

- India follows a partially deregulated fuel pricing system (petrol–2010, diesel–2014).
- Despite deregulation, prices are influenced by government taxation and informal controls → "managed deregulation".
- Falling crude prices (2022–25) did not reduce retail prices; instead, tax revenues and OMC profits increased.
- Rising crude prices now causing under-recoveries for oil companies, indicating structural issues.
- Proposal: Fuel Price Transparency Framework (FPTF) for rule-based pricing.

Key Points

- India imports ~85–90% crude oil → high external vulnerability
- Current system:
  - Gains during low prices not passed to consumers
  - Losses during high prices absorbed by OMCs
- Tax component ~₹28–30/litre (Centre + States)
- Pricing determinants:
  - Global crude oil prices
  - Exchange rate (₹ vs $)
  - Refining & distribution cost
  - Government taxes
- Ethanol blending (~20%) has limited impact on final price
- FPTF proposes:
  - Transparent formula-based pricing
  - Defined margin for OMCs
  - Taxation within a fixed band

Static Linkages

- Administered Pricing Mechanism (pre-2010)
- Subsidy burden and oil bonds
- Indirect taxes (excise duty, VAT)
- Imported inflation and exchange rate effects
- Energy security and diversification
- Ethanol blending policy (E20 target)

Critical Analysis

Positives

- Promotes market efficiency and transparency
- Reduces policy uncertainty
- Improves fiscal predictability

Negatives

- Leads to price volatility for consumers
- Fuel taxes are major revenue → political reluctance to reform
- Inflationary impact on economy

Challenges

- Balancing consumer welfare vs fiscal needs
- Managing global oil shocks
- Ensuring true deregulation vs hidden controls

Way Forward

- Implement rule-based pricing (FPTF)
- Introduce tax bands instead of ad-hoc changes
- Create price stabilization mechanism
- Diversify import sources
- Increase domestic exploration
- Promote alternative fuels (ethanol, EVs)
- Ensure public transparency in pricing components

In Punjab, on sacrilege law, a dangerous politics

FAIZAN MUSTAFA

THERE WAS widespread objection to Shashi Tharoor's warning about India becoming a "Hindu Pakistan" if the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) returned to power in 2019. But with each passing day, we are moving closer to Pakistan on one issue — blasphemy. This is deeply frustrating for those who teach criminal law, like this writer.

Blasphemy has been abolished by most countries. Only some Muslim countries continue to have it. Why should India follow in their regressive steps? This author had strongly argued before a joint parliamentary committee against the inclusion of the blasphemy law in Section 299 of Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, 2023, but the government preferred to retain this relic of the colonial era.

Religious beliefs should not be enforced as societal norms by the state, as that places an unnecessary burden on citizens' right to free speech. In Punjab, the Aam Aadmi Party government is doing politics through a new law. A special assembly session was convened on April 13 to pass a stringent anti-sacrilege law on the desecration of the Guru Granth Sahib. The new provision goes beyond Section 295-B of the Pakistan Penal Code, which provides that "whoever wilfully defiles, damages or desecrates a copy of the Holy Quran or of an extract therefrom or uses it in any derogatory manner or for any unlawful purpose shall be punishable with imprisonment for life". Unlike the Pakistani law, Punjab's new law provides for a fine of up to Rs 25 lakh and has removed the defence of insanity or unsoundness of mind, which has been on our statute books since 1860.

Recently, Justice Saurabh Srivastava of the Allahabad High Court observed that any assertion that a particular religion is the "only true religion" implies "disparagement" of other faiths and is covered by the blasphemy provision under the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, 2023 (Section 295-A of the Indian Penal Code). Fortunately, on April 10, the Supreme Court stayed the criminal proceedings against Rev. Father Vineet Vincent Pereira, who had been accused of hurting religious sentiments during prayer meetings.

The Preamble to our Constitution guarantees to every citizen "liberty of thought, expression, belief, faith and worship". One is, therefore, entitled to the belief that his religion is the best and can express the same. This freedom of speech cannot be curtailed under Article 19(2) as blasphemy is not included as a ground on which there can be reasonable restrictions.

In ancient Greece, the crime of blasphemy included speaking ill of the gods, disturbing the peace, and dishonouring the principles of government. The arrival of monotheism gave a new impetus to blasphemy. The origin of the Western understanding of blasphemy lies in the 13th century, when it evolved as a crime separate from heresy.

Almost immediately, challenges to the supremacy of God were considered as damaging the secular authority of the state. In passing sentence upon John Taylor in 1671, English Lord Chief Justice Sir Matthew Hale argued that attacks upon religion were attacks upon the law itself and thus blasphemy was treated as treason. In subsequent centuries, the crime of "heresy" in Western countries converted European society into a "persecuting society". One hopes Punjab won't go that way.

Why does the Aam Aadmi Party government not understand that it has to concentrate on more pressing issues of governance rather than the desecration of a religious book? Under the new law, mere accusations will be enough to bring on threats to those accused and judges will not even be able to grant bail due to public protests and threat to the life of the accused. At a time when so many people have been killed on mere allegations of possessing beef, stealing cows, child abduction, rape, theft etc. by the mob, Punjab's law will give new impetus to mobocracy in India.

The writer is vice-chancellor of Chanakya National Law University, Patna. Views are personal

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KEY HIGHLIGHTS

Context of the News

- Concerns over expansion and interpretation of offences related to "hurting religious sentiments" under the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, 2023.
- Punjab passed a stringent anti-sacrilege law focusing on desecration of the Guru Granth Sahib.
- Judicial developments include broad interpretation of religious insult and intervention by the Supreme Court of India to protect free speech.
- Debate centers on balance between public order vs. fundamental rights.

Key Points

- Section 295A (continued in BNS):
  - Requires deliberate and malicious intent to outrage religious feelings.
- Punjab Law:
  - Life imprisonment + fine up to ₹25 lakh.
  - Removes insanity defense (departure from classical criminal law).
- Issues:
  - Increasing criminalization of expression.
  - Risk of mob violence and misuse.
- Judiciary:
  - Acts as a safeguard through constitutional interpretation.

Static Linkages

- Article 19(1)(a): Freedom of speech and expression.
- Article 19(2): Reasonable restrictions (public order, morality, etc.).
- Secularism = Basic Structure (S.R. Bommai case).
- Mens rea essential for criminal liability.
- Insanity defense → McNaughten Rules.
- Rule of Law and Due Process.

Critical Analysis

Positives

- Maintains public order in a diverse society.
- Prevents deliberate provocation and communal disharmony.

Negatives

- Chilling effect on free speech.
- Vague definitions → scope for misuse.
- Encourages vigilantism and mob justice.
- Religion-specific laws challenge secularism.
- Removal of insanity defense weakens legal safeguards.

Constitutional Tension

- Article 19 vs Public Order
- Secularism vs Religious Sensitivity
- Individual Liberty vs Collective Sentiment

Way Forward

- Narrow and precise legal definitions.
- Strict proof of intent (mens rea).
- Safeguards against misuse (screening of FIRs).
- Strong action against mob justice.
- Promote constitutional morality over majoritarian morality.
- Periodic review of colonial-era provisions.

A dark shadow on campus

THE ALLEGED death by suicide of four students at the National Institute of Technology (NIT), Kurukshetra, in a span of two months, has exposed, yet again, the isolation of hyper-competitive academic environments, where distress goes unnoticed until it culminates in tragedy. Despite several progressive interventions in recent years, including the Supreme Court's 2025 directives to institutionalise mental-health support across schools, colleges, hostels, and coaching centres, what emerges is a portrait of systemic crisis, where elite campuses built on unremitting pressure and constant scrutiny often overlook the human cost of failure.

The Haryana Human Rights Commission has taken *suo motu* cognisance of the tragedies and initiated an inquiry. Preliminary findings suggest reasons ranging from academic stress, financial distress, romantic rejection and debt due to online gambling. But NIT Kurukshetra is not an outlier in this crisis. Over the past 15 months, at least five students have died by suicide at BITS Pilani's Goa campus. According to the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) 2023 report, student suicides reached a record high of 13,892, a 65 per cent increase over the past decade. The path to a coveted seat at an IIT or NIT runs through years of hard work and coaching, often begun in early adolescence. Students arrive at institutions already hollowed out, stepping into a system that offers little reprieve. Overlaying all of this is the paucity of seats in premier institutions and an increasingly precarious job market.

The way forward demands both institutional accountability and an empathetic imagination. With peer-support networks, anonymous counselling helplines, and a restructuring of the curriculum, several IITs have begun to demonstrate what is possible. These measures need to be complemented with reforms that address challenges of diversity on campuses, both in terms of gender and socio-economic backgrounds. The conversations must also extend beyond mental-health infrastructure to the anxieties of opportunity.

KEY HIGHLIGHTS

Context of the News

- Multiple alleged student suicides reported in premier institutions such as NIT Kurukshetra within a short span.
- Haryana Human Rights Commission initiated suo motu inquiry.
- Similar cases reported in institutions like BITS Pilani (Goa campus).
- National Crime Records Bureau (2023):
  - 13,892 student suicides (highest recorded).
  - ~65% rise over the past decade.
- Supreme Court of India (2025) directed institutionalisation of mental health mechanisms.

Key Points

- Causes:
  - Academic pressure, competitive exam culture
  - Financial stress and unemployment concerns
  - Social isolation, stigma around mental health
  - Personal factors (relationships, debt, etc.)
- Structural Issues:
  - Limited seats in premier institutions
  - Coaching culture starting early adolescence
  - Inadequate counselling infrastructure
- Institutional Gaps:
  - Poor student support systems
  - Lack of early identification of distress
- Emerging Measures:
  - Peer-support systems, helplines, flexible curriculum
  - Increasing focus on mental health awareness

Static Linkages

- Article 21 – Right to life includes dignity and mental well-being
- Directive Principles – Public health improvement
- Mental Healthcare Act, 2017
- National Mental Health Programme (1982)
- WHO definition of health
- NCRB reports – suicide data
- Role of education in socialisation

Critical Analysis

Positives

- Judicial intervention improving accountability
- Increasing awareness and institutional reforms
- Policy framework exists (Mental Healthcare Act)

Challenges

- Implementation deficit in institutions
- Shortage of mental health professionals
- Persistent stigma
- Exam-centric education system
- Economic/job uncertainty intensifying stress

Ethical Concerns

- Neglect of student well-being
- Pressure-driven meritocracy
- Institutional responsibility vs performance metrics

Way Forward

- Mandatory counselling infrastructure in institutions
- Standard counsellor-student ratio
- Curriculum reforms to reduce excessive pressure
- Strengthening implementation of mental health laws
- Financial and career support systems
- Promote inclusive and supportive campus culture
- Early detection mechanisms for student distress